A New Hope for Europe!  
Culture, Cities and New Narratives

Luca JAHIER  
President of the Various Interests Group of the EESC

In the 7th Century B.C., Sappho was regarded as one of the greatest lyric poets of her time. Described by Plato as Ancient Greece’s tenth muse, Sappho is reputed to have commented: “I declare that later on, even in an age unlike our own, someone will remember who we are”. Today, almost three thousand years later, after the Roman and Byzantine Empires, the Renaissance, Enlightenment, two World Wars and the reunification of Europe, we still remember Sappho. For in Europe, we made the conscious decision to adopt the classical world as our common European heritage. We decided to create a community of Europeans based on a shared history, common values, responsibilities and normative ideas. However, the question that needs asking is ‘what went wrong’?

The Various Interests Group of the EESC did precisely this, at the high-level conference entitled ‘A Hope for Europe! Culture, Cities and New Narratives’, that we organised at the EESC on 20 & 21 June, in partnership with the Culture and Education Committee of the European Parliament and the Centre for Fine Arts, Bozar. Among the questions that we debated were: did we go too far or not far enough? Can Culture help us overcome the systemic, political and identity crises which are currently shaking the European Union? What role can Culture and Cities play in strengthening social and territorial cohesion, in engaging in dialogue and building trust in our complex societies? Can Culture bring Hope, New Narratives and a second Renaissance to Europe?

The decision of the citizens of the UK to leave the EU has brought these questions centre stage. Without doubt, the vote for a Brexit does question the vision, identity and future direction of the EU. Regrettably, the voices of those undermining the intrinsic values of the Union will certainly grow louder and more confident in the foreseeable future.

Within this confusion, it is my firm conviction that the EU and its Member States must allow Culture, which is the foundation and cement of our European identity, to come to the fore as a powerful instrument in its own right. Culture has an enormous untapped potential for becoming a unifying and mobilising instrument in Europe. At precisely this time when European citizens are questioning their common identity more than ever since 1945:

• Now is the moment to firmly place Culture and cultural policies at the heart of the European political agenda and to create a new narrative for our common future!
• Now is the time to invest in the sector and to support the plethora of actors engaged in cultural governance!
• Now is the time to include Culture as a tool of soft power in Europe’s External Relations and to promote Culture as the 4th Pillar of Sustainable Development!

As Jean Monnet wisely stated: “If I had to do it again, I would begin with culture”. For culture gives a direction and a meaning to individuals and societies. It is the very essence of our
Europe III

**Silvia Costa**, Chair of the Culture and Education Committee of the European Parliament:

Europe is now facing so many challenges linked to the migration and humanitarian crisis and the radicalisation of young people. These challenges could be overcome with more culture and more education. We therefore need to put these at the centre of the agenda of the Juncker Commission. Without culture, we have no future.

**Luca Jahier**, President of the Various Interests Group of the EESC:

The yearning for what is beautiful, true and good needs to be nurtured by the quiet force of culture if our continent is to move forward once again and find a new narrative in which we can all believe.

**Paul Dujardin**, Chief Executive Officer and Artistic Director of the Centre for Fine Arts (Bozar):

Culture should become the fourth pillar of the EU’s sustainable development policy. Artists can bring a new narrative to Europe and contribute to the European project!

**Nymand Christensen**, Deputy Director General of DG Education and Culture, European Commission:

Culture is the very heart of the European project. Culture is what unites us, and we are united in diversity.

humanity, driven by emotions, making us see, feel and think differently, in effect determining our perception of the world. Culture, Civilisation and Art are intertwined, engaged in a dialectic relationship, bouncing off each other, absorbing external influences and constantly evolving. Nonetheless, throughout history, Culture has also been employed as a political instrument. The case of the Florentine Medici family in my own country, Italy, being one of the most famous examples. Culture is able to do this because it is closely tied to the concept of the demos, the people. Membership of the demos implies common identity and loyalty to a collective political entity, where there are those who belong and those who are outsiders.

Within this context, on 20 & 21 June we sought to explore four very concrete dimensions, namely:

- **Culture as a vehicle of economic growth**
- **Culture as an instrument for reconverting cities and territories**
- **Culture as a tool for integration and inclusiveness**
- **Reshaping European identity within Europe and Beyond.**

The conference also provided the opportunity to publicly launch the study commissioned by the EESC, at the request of the Various Interests Group: ‘Culture, Cities and Identity in Europe’, written by Culture Action Europe and Agenda 21 for Culture – UCLG. This excellent study was very well received by the participants at the event. (see article page 3)

Before ending this Editorial, I would like to recall the words of the English writer G.K. Chesterton: “The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder”. For in our hearts of hearts, we yearn for the beautiful, the true and the good, a force that imbues all of us with an immense creative power and which can stem the horrors of the violence assailing much of Europe - the murderous insanity of terrorism, or the assassination of Jo Cox, the young and talented British MP to whom I dedicate our conference. It is this yearning for what is beautiful, true and good that must be nurtured by the quiet force of Culture, if Europe is to move forward once again and find a new narrative in which we can all believe.

Together, let us ensure that this ‘soft’ force of Culture is able to multiply and to positively contribute to Wellbeing, Progress and the Europe of Tomorrow! Let us empower Culture and all those actors whose pure energy is already driving new models of cultural governance and new models of society. For today, this is what European citizens are calling for!
In the frame of the conference on culture, the Various Interests’ Group organised a Concert for Hope at the EESC, in collaboration with EMMA FOR PEACE.

Founder and President of EMMA for Peace Paolo Petrocelli: “EMMA for Peace (Euro-Mediterranean Music Academy) is an international non-profit umbrella organization for music diplomacy and education. EMMA for Peace brings together music institutions, universities, and philanthropic foundations interested in music and the promotion of peace in the Mediterranean, Middle East regions and beyond. World-renowned artists have joined EMMA to help music become an instrument of understanding, awareness, and collaboration toward a peaceful future. EMMA’s goal is to create a conversation and to share musical excellence among international musicians of the highest level and students and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds across Europe, the Middle East and beyond. It uses music as a tool for peace in places torn apart by war, bringing the best talent from the world’s concert halls and academies to refugee camps and other deprived areas where music education is otherwise inaccessible. EMMA for Peace has organized and promoted more than 30 projects in 3 years (concerts, workshops, masterclasses, talks), around 15 different countries, involving more than 1000 students and young talents.”

Culture, Cities and Identity in Europe

In the framework of the conference A Hope For Europe! Culture, Cities and New Narratives, a study was commissioned by the Various Interests’ Group to examine culture thematically in terms of its use as a vehicle for economic growth, a tool for reconverting cities and territories, for integration and inclusiveness and as a pillar of European identity. Attention was drawn to the processes by which culture and urban/territorial regeneration go hand in hand. The study was written by Culture Action Europe and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG-Agenda 21 for culture).

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CONCLUSIONS OF THE CONFERENCE
‘A HOPE FOR EUROPE’

Overarching principles

• Culture has a key role to play as a unifying and mobilising force, able to create a powerful new European narrative, to restore confidence and to reconnect Europe with its citizens;

• To this end, Culture must be placed at the centre of European policy-making and recognised as an pivotal instrument for sustainable growth, development and employment in Europe and as a significant tool for territorial cohesion, social inclusion and innovation;

• For Culture to be able to play its role as an enabler and multiplier of dialogue, trust and opportunities, it must be approached holistically, developing effective ecosystems and recognising economic, social, political and cultural interdependencies;

• Partnerships, networks and public-private-civic initiatives which are central to current cultural governance, must receive the necessary political support and financial resources;

• Culture should be officially recognised as the 4th pillar of sustainable development and adequate resources be made available to enable Culture to become an effective instrument of ‘soft power’, in the EU’s external relations.

Culture as a Vehicle for Economic Growth

• National, European and international public authorities must fully understand and promote the double contribution of Culture: its intrinsic and its market values. Both the aesthetic and economic dimensions of Culture are integral parts of the same system and integrated investment must be made into the entire system;

• Within this context, it is imperative to value and to effectively measure the significant economic contribution of Culture to Europe’s economy. International organisations must urgently take steps towards identifying and harmonising common systems of measurements of the economic contribution of Culture;

• Steps must also be taken to prepare the management of the cultural sector for the opportunities and challenges which will result from advances in ICT in the foreseeable future.

Culture as an Instrument for Re converting Cities and Territories

• It is imperative to recognise the potential of Culture to foster economic and social development and to incorporate Culture into European and national cohesion policies and strategies;

• Cities and territories must be actively encouraged to shape their own future, by investing in Culture and subsequently re investing cultural benefits into cultural ecosystems;

• Within this context, it is necessary to learn from exchanges, networks and best practices, using the regeneration of cities to generate a virtuous circle of social capital and vice versa.

Culture as a Tool for Integration and Inclusiveness

• Culture has a pivotal role to play in eliminating stereotypes, overcoming prejudices, promote tolerance and actively promoting inter-cultural dialogue. Moreover, Culture can have a multiplier effect, building greater mutual understanding, respect and dignity;

• Central to this process, is the creation of linkages between education and Culture, notably involving children and young people. Concrete examples encouraging cultural exchanges among the young, such as an Erasmus for Culture or a European Voluntary Service should be explored;

• Local grassroots initiatives, partnerships, networks, public-private initiatives and Artists exchanges among the young, such as an Erasmus for Culture or a European Voluntary Service should be explored;

Reshaping European Identity with Europe and Beyond

• Culture can directly contribute to building new positive narratives of Europe, it can act as a lever for hope and help to combat fear, both within Europe and beyond;

• To this end, the EU should give full political and financial support to the EC proposals for Culture to become an effective instrument of ‘soft power’, in the EU’s external relations;

• Finally, it is imperative to change the paradigms surrounding Culture and to begin the process of recognising Culture as the 4th pillar of sustainable development. Culture should be valued as the link which gives sense to the other pillars, providing a long-term perspective, identity, direction and bringing all pillars into a circular and interdependent relationship.

EU Strategy on Cultural Diplomacy

Culture is a universal language building bridges between people. Culture brings society together; it fosters dialogue, progress, innovation and economic growth. It is a powerful tool supporting citizenship, female empowerment and good governance in peaceful times as well as in troubled post-conflict situations.

On 8 June 2016, the High Representative Federica Mogherini and the European Commission presented a new Strategy for international cultural relations. Increased cultural cooperation and direct communication between people will help make the EU a stronger global actor. The aim of the strategy is to bring EU action and programmes which are currently fragmented together in a coherent approach and to strengthen the EU’s position in the world, foster intercultural understanding and help us build long-term relationships based on trust. Two issues are key here:

First, culture and creative industries (which create jobs and growth) are a key part of Europe’s current and future economic performance. Creative industries are responsible for 2.6% of the EU’s GDP and represent more than 7 million jobs in the EU.

Second, culture will make Europe a stronger global actor. Culture can shape the EU’s policies by promoting our values and cultural heritage, and is a vehicle for promoting mutual understanding, respect for human rights and freedom of expression. Cultural diplomacy should be considered in unison with other initiatives such as the Global Strategy and the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, and enhanced cross-cultural dialogue will be key to its success.

Today, we are talking about a new cultural renaissance in Europe. Do we need a new one and how can we make this happen? Today, we have a crucial cultural heritage and unique masterpieces of different aspects of culture. The problem is getting them known and recognised, and simply making culture a real priority for Europe and making the Union a permanent cultural platform. This is why we strongly support the Commission’s intention to propose that the European Parliament and the Council of the EU name 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage.

The European Union is also a cultural product and we should preserve it. It is often suggested that Jean Monnet said “If I had to do it again, I would start first through culture.” The cultural unity of Europe underpins the European venture.

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On 1 July, commemorations took place on both sides of the Channel, to pay respect to the 1 million British, French and German young men whose death or injury at the Battle of the Somme collectively symbolised the horror, anonymity, ruthlessness and total futility of the Great War. Five months of carnage for an advance of five miles for the British side. The highest number of casualties in Britain’s entire military history. The total absence of humanity. Ironically, out of this furnace of hell came some of the most eloquent and moving poetry and prose of the 20th Century. Indeed, what is perhaps less known about the First World War, is that more writers and poets fought in it, than in any other battle in history.

So how does the Europe of 1916 square with that of 2016? I would say that we have done well. Europe is today the most prosperous continent on the globe, governed by democracy, liberty and the rule of law. We have been at peace for more than 70 years. We are the envy of so many other nations and citizens. Unfortunately, it is precisely this positive historical perspective that we have lost sight of over the last ten years. It is as if with Europe united, we are now imploding, actively seeking out divisions and purposefully burying the opportunities, optimism and hope that we worked so hard to erect over the last six decades.

Like many European citizens, I am personally deeply affected, disappointed, ‘wounded’ by the result of the UK Referendum. Overnight, forty-three years of cooperation, dialogue and trust simply evaporated. Unfortunately, the Brexit debate channelled the multiple frustrations, fears and anger of UK citizens, with Euro sceptics now hoping for a Referendum in France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria, Hungary and Poland. How short is our memory! Nonetheless, the will of UK citizens must be respected and to question the outcome of the Referendum would only deepen the gap between Citizens and political Institutions. For the next few months, the key determinant will without doubt be UK public opinion: how it will develop and how it will be expressed by the British political class.

At the European and also Member State level, it is imperative that the 27 Member States seize the momentum and demonstrate that the EU can drive the agenda and bring concrete and positive results for sustainable growth, quality jobs, security & terrorism, refugees & migration. In the longer-term, to demonstrate that Europe can care for its citizens and that at times this means that Europe should do more and that at other times, it should do less. Similarly, today, we need a Europe which is mature enough to recognise that our future can only be that of a differentiated and multi-speed body. It would be politically naïve to continue to believe in a single objective or model for the EU, realised at the same time and in exactly the same way by all Member States. However, it is also crucial that at the national level, the benefits and opportunities of EU membership are effectively communicated by national authorities and local actors, allowing citizens to make informed decisions.

As Winston Churchill stated in 1946 in Zurich, when asked what could be the remedy from saving Europe from “infinite misery”: “It is to recreate the European fabric… and to provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, safely and freedom. Therefore I say to you, let Europe arise!”. But in 2016, who is to recreate this European fabric? It is my firm belief that today more than ever, civil society, local authorities, cities, regions and citizens must demonstrate their solidarity with each other and notably with their counterparts in the UK. Why not launch city-city cooperation EU-27 to UK: Amsterdam with London, Milan with Manchester? Why not set up Erasmus-style exchanges across Europe for farmers, craftsmen, young workers? Why not propagate a European voluntary service? Why not provide the opportunity within the EESC, for an EU-wide debate on the priorities of civil society for the EU, by launching a citizen’s State of the Union already in September? Why not encourage all European citizens to taste the fruit of sixty years of peace, cooperation and dialogue?

Dear friends, in the endless cycle of human history, when we can only make sense of our present and future by remembering our past, allow me to recall the thousands of graves of British soldiers scattered throughout Normandy, Sicily, Crete. Young men who died so that we ‘Europeans’ can be free and united. United in 1945, united in 2016, united as citizens in our hopes, dreams and future!
Love hate to Agreement, bananas to Benefits, confusion to Certainty, Courage depression to Defiance, complacency to Determination,

My motto to those who supported REMAIN or now regret their leave vote is: The ABC of BREXBACKIN
“We must turn despair to Determination, depression to Defiance, complacency to Courage, confusion to Certainty, anger to Agreement, bananas to Benefits, hate to Love”

The UK needs 12-16 weeks to order its affairs. In the meantime, door-slamming reactions from the EU can only be counterproductive.

The UK has followed Ireland, France and the Netherlands in rejecting the EU in a referendum. As in those countries, the result was unexpected, the government unprepared and the situation unresolved by the outcome.

Overall, 51.9% voted to leave the EU and 48.1% voted to remain. But in hardly a single community was that the actual result. In most communities two thirds voted one way and one third the other in a ballot which ripped Britain limb from limb. As was said with grim humour when Wales defeated Northern Ireland 1-0 in the European football championship on Saturday, ‘this is the second time in three days that Wales has knocked Northern Ireland out of Europe’.

The reasons for the vote were many and varied, and the result cannot be said to represent the settled will of the UK’s citizens. The vote was highest in the areas where income is lowest, and lowest among people whose educational achievement is high. The old and tired sought to restore a more glorious past, the young and energetic to help build a European future. Gibraltar voted by over 95% to stay; Scotland, Northern Ireland and London also declared decisively their desire to remain. Rather than a reasoned rejection of EU membership it was a cry of anguish against inequality, against the ravages of the globalisation of markets, against the all-too-apparently uncaring nature of the governing elite. The people were asked ‘Ça va?’; a majority replied – à la révolution française – ‘Ça ira’.

Retribution followed fast and mercilessly. Currency and stock markets quickly de-valued the UK. The governing elites in the UK and the EU had a weekend writhing in pain. The prime minister, who campaigned to stay in, knifed his opponents in the gut by declining to invoke Article 50, knowing that intellectually they are unable to justify their arguments even to themselves. The leaders of the campaign to leave retreated rapidly from their promises to the people that they would halt immigration and spend more on health provision. The 48% who voted to stay launched a petition which has gathered over a million signatures every day since the vote. Scotland – without whose agreement Article 50 cannot legally be invoked by the UK – said that while England and Wales may leave, it intends to remain. Even in London, a campaign for an independent city-state has sprung up.

In Brussels, the presidents of the three main institutions declared Cameron’s renegotiated terms null and void and shouted collectively the equivalent of Oliver Cromwell’s appeal to England’s Rump Parliament in 1652: “You have been sat here too long for any good you have been doing. Depart and let us have done with you! In the name of God, go!” The UK Commissioner – a decent but diffident man – took them at their word. Council President Donald Tusk issued his normal invitation to heads of state and government to attend the European Council with an agenda which reserved Day Two for discussion among 27 rather than 28 member states. The foreign ministers of the six founding countries met the following day and issued a statement in similar terms. For them, the UK was deemed already to have invoked Article 50. Only Angela Merkel took a more considered line and said that the request to leave need not be immediate and there was no reason for negotiations on a withdrawal to be nasty.

Hasty initial reactions have poured fuel on the fires which now rage in London and Brussels. Britain’s Conservative Party seems incapable of governing the country and will almost certainly dissolve parliament. Its Labour Party immediately indulged in bitter recriminations against its leader Jeremy Corbyn, who voted against remaining in the EU in the UK’s 1975 referendum and campaigned half-heartedly at best to persuade Labour’s voters in northern England to back Cameron. The door-slamming of the federalist fathers in the six founding states is unlikely to meet with asse nt in Budapest, Warsaw or Copenhagen, so the European Council will have a fissiparous flavour.

Only time will tell how this pans out. The UK needs 12-16 weeks to order its affairs. If the EU respects the rule of law it will abide by the letter of Article 50. In return, the UK may never invoke that treaty article.
A reflection on the UK Referendum outcome

The question on the UK Referendum ballot paper was: Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?

There were only two options; one to Remain and the other to Leave.

There were two legal assumptions to this question.

First, that the country whose population was being consulted was the UK as a whole (and not separate devolved or other entities) - even though the vote itself was counted and verified by smaller, administrative units. Therefore the first assumption is that the vote was intended to be binding on the whole country, whatever the outcome and that by participating in the vote, everyone (including the political parties) accepted this principle. If Scotland thought otherwise, it should therefore have questioned the legality of the referendum terms in the national or EU courts, beforehand, before taking part in it.

Secondly, there was no legal or other requirement that the vote had to achieve any threshold, so that a simple majority (even of one vote) was to be accepted as final. There are many instances, when national ballots require (e.g. on major constitutional issues) a much higher threshold, but none was selected and therefore the second legal assumption is that by participating in the vote, the people and the political regimes chose also to accept the outcome, whichever way it went and by whatever margin.

What is most significant and cannot be overlooked, is that despite serious warnings of possible economic disaster, the threat of a big increase in taxation and the loss of State pension protections, letters from major employers to their staff urging them to vote to remain and trades-unions doing likewise, alongside the advice of all mainstream political parties and the vast majority of economists and institutions, plus an intervention from no less a personage than President Obama, the British people still voted to leave.

To the astonishment of many including myself, the wishes of the Establishment were therefore disregarded. This is very unusual in politics and those who seek to vilify and disrespect those voters who chose this path (for whatever reason) should take a calmer and more mature look at themselves and their understanding of democracy.

Furthermore, people with limited access to public resources, for example to housing and schools are largely neither racist nor uncharytable. If lies were told (perhaps by both sides) it begs the question why these were not prop-erly refuted to the satisfaction of the public, in the many weeks and months before the referendum, in what, after all, is a very open and democratic society. The principle of un-controlled free movement of EU nationals was effectively rejected by the majority in the vote and remains an unresolved issue for negotiation.

Ironically, the EU, which had been criticized during the campaign for being anti-democratic, appears to be showing more acceptance of the public will as reflected in the referendum result, than British politicians themselves, who seemed unwilling to accept political responsibility for starting the Article 50 procedure, until a new Prime Minister is elected. Part of the motivation to leave was to take back sovereignty, disengage from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and become more self-governing. But the further irony is that the British now appear to be led, for the present at any rate, by a Government (and an official Opposition) that is paralysed. This political vacuum and resulting uncertainty may do as much, if not more immediate harm to British economic interests, as the referendum vote itself. Meanwhile, until and unless the Article 50 procedure is invoked (and completed), the UK remains a Member State and retains its rights and obligations, including financial contributions.

There is some confusion between access to the Single Market (which would normally involve agreeing to the famous four freedoms (of goods, services, people and capital) and simple trading access for goods, to the market of the EU, possibly under World Trade Organisation rules, with or without (reciprocal) tariff or non-tariff barriers that apply to many countries outside the EU and the EEA. Contrary to expectation, this might be done quite quickly and should be tackled first.

It is also not necessary that all parts of this complex negotiation should take place in one package or Treaty, but can be achieved in stages. The more pragmatic and amicable the atmosphere of this negotiation, the more likely that markets will calm and stormy waters will abate (for both sides).

It is certainly within the competence and experience of both mature national and EU politicians and their teams of experts, to arrange an orderly withdrawal. This could include safeguards for existing rights and obligations of people living in other countries and businesses that have already invested on the basis of existing rules, thereby enabling systematic disengagement which would also serve to calm the economic fall-out on all sides.

The remaining issues such as those of Scottish independence are not necessarily relevant to this negotiation. Scottish independence is a separate domestic matter for the UK Government to resolve.

It is an essential part of democracy that when people vote, they are fully entitled if they wish, to vote for an uncertain future which may or may not be more prosperous in the short and longer term. What is not clear is precisely what deal both sides (British and EU politicians) will eventually regard as acceptable and whether the outcome will, in reality, be a partial reversal of the original result, with consequent implications for democracy particularly in Britain.

There is also the possibility of a ‘third’ way, perhaps by means of a further Treaty outside the scope of EU Law, to keep everyone happy, including all the people of Europe in both Britain and the other 27 Member States. If not, it is difficult to see how, if Britain leaves, the founding Treaties could continue to apply without significant revision, for instance to re-allocate voting power, and re-arrange financial contributions. This will likely, at some stage, involve obtaining the agreement or consent of the peoples of Europe in the other 27 Member States and therein lies the risk of opening Pandora’s box.

If the EU can adopt a spirit of calm pragmatism and the will to retain both friendship and the closest co-operation with the UK, especially in trade and security matters, then it will show the world how great a democracy it really is.

The stage is set for genuine leaders to step forward in Europe and show the way towards continued peace, prosperity, progress and friendship.
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CECOP-CICOPA Europe is the European confederation of cooperatives in industry and services. Founded in Manchester in 1979, with 26 members in 15 European countries, it includes organisations that promote cooperatives and national confederations or federations of cooperatives representing 50 000 firms and employing 1.3 million workers.

CECOP-CICOPA Europe is the mouthpiece of:
• 35 000 WORKER COOPERATIVES: their chief characteristic is that the majority of employees are members-owners;
• 12 000 SOCIAL COOPERATIVES: these employ 270 000 workers and specialise in providing services of general interest (social, welfare and educational) and in integrating, through work, disadvantaged and marginalised workers (people with disabilities, the long-term unemployed, former prisoners and drug addicts, etc.);
• 2 000 WORKER-OWNED ENTERPRISES (very common in Spain, where they are known as sociedades laborales): these are not cooperatives as such, but are very similar in that the partners are the workers who control the company;
• 1 000 COOPERATIVES OF SELF-EMPLOYED WORKERS (craft workers and professionals): these are cooperatives of self-employed producers of goods or services.

Evangelia KEKELEKI (EL)
Member of the Various Interests Group

Debate on the Migration maze at Europe’s Borders: EESC defends an EU approach

At the invitation of Skaï radio (Greece), Evangelia Kekeleki took part to a lively debate at the European Parliament on 14 June.

Mrs Kekeleki highlighted the fact-finding missions led by the EESC in eleven Member States and in Turkey, whose conclusions showed the importance of civil society support to best manage migration flow and migrants’ integration.

She also underlined the current absence of a common asylum policy and repeated the EESC call to the EU to create a genuine asylum policy.

She declared: “We are in a battle against the tragedy of the refugees’ crisis. But this is a common battle that all 28 Member States have to do together and not against each other. We must show our solidarity with the refugees and with the Member States most severely hit by the crisis.”

Members of the European Parliament took part to the debate with Mrs Kekeleki, ranging from all sides of EP political groups: Dimitrios Papadimoulis (European United Left - Nordic Green Left), Eva Kaili (Socialists and Democrats), Miltiadis Kyrkos (Socialists and Democrats), Georgios Kyritsos (European People’s Party), Sofia Sakorafa (European United Left - Nordic Green Left).

On 13-16 June, Group III member and European Disability Forum president Ioannis Vardakastanis (EL) participated in the Civil Society Forum and the 9th Conference of States Parties to the UNCRPD, in New York, USA.

Background
In 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted the most recent Human Rights Convention called the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). On 30 March 2007, the Convention was open for signing by the member states of the UN and 82 member states did so.

Today, 165 member states of the UN have ratified the UN CRPD, including 27 out of 28 members of the European Union and of course the European Union itself. It needs to be clarified that this Convention is not a declaration; it is a legally binding instrument.

From 2008, an annual meeting of the member states which have either signed or ratified the CRPD has been held in NY in the headquarters of the United Nations. It is called the Conference of States Parties, and brings together not only the States Parties themselves, but also civil society organisations, disabled people’s organisations and other stakeholders from around the world.

Leaving no one behind
This year the 9th Conference of States Parties was held in NY on 14-16 June, preceded by the Civil Society Forum and the high-level discussion which followed up on the High-Level Meeting on Disability and Development held by the President of the General Assembly of the UN on 13 June. The 9th Conference of States Parties to the CRPD, which took place on 14-16 June 2016, focused on “Implementing the 2030 development agenda for all persons with disabilities: Leaving no one behind”, and one of its three subtopics: “Enhancing accessibility to information and technology and inclusive development”. ICT is one of the main drivers of accessible and inclusive education. Arguably, this applies even more for low income and rural areas, where in many instances public spending on education is low and new technologies enable access to education for persons with disabilities.

Revitalize partnership
“Ten years have passed and today we celebrate the existence of CRPD,” said Mr Vardakastanis. “But we are here to think and to rethink whether or not, ten years on, the partnership that brought about the CRPD is still in place. Do we need to revitalize it? We believe that we need to revitalize this partnership, in light of the 2030 Agenda on SDGs.”

Professor Rudolf Kropil, Rector of the Technical University in Zvolen, was re-elected as SRC President. Two years term for the re-elected President. Rudolf Kropil named as priorities of his present Presidency an increase of higher education finances from public sources, permanent quality enhancement of higher education and improvement of higher education position in national and international environment.
As is well known, the European Commission created the so-called REFIT platform following a proposal from its vice-president, Mr Timmermans. The aim is to assess the effectiveness and transparency of existing European legislation. The platform comprises 18 “stakeholders” – experts drawn from both the European social partners and civil society organisations – as well as one representative from the Committee of the Regions and one from our own European Economic and Social Committee.

Initially, the European Commission did not request an opinion from our Committee regarding the initiative. This quite rightly sparked much discontent and mistrust among many of our members. There were fears of a “dual purpose”, i.e. that the platform would serve as a kind of alternative to our Committee. Some also believed the initiative risked “dismantling” existing European legislation, including on social rights and consumer protection.

Following a consultation with the Commission vice-president and his promise to request an opinion from the Committee on the functioning of the platform, the Bureau decided to appoint a representative to the platform. Three Committee members were designated accordingly. They will take it in turns to represent the Committee over 5 years. The members in question are Bern Dittmann (Group I), Denis Meynent (Group II), and Ronny Lannoo (Group III). They were chosen as they had acted as rapporteurs for previous opinions on the creation of the platform. The work of the REFIT platform has now begun, with our colleague Bernd Dittman acting as our first representative. The platform has been tasked with assessing 16 main topics. Specific European regulations on each of these topics will be assessed. A rapporteur will draw up an opinion together with stakeholders, which will then be forwarded to the European Commission. The Commission must give a reasoned response indicating the extent to which the proposals are being taken into account.

Our Committee’s representatives will not act as rapporteurs. The guidelines for their position within the platform will be determined by the broadly approved opinions on the relevant issue already adopted by the Committee. Our representatives will also keep the Committee Bureau systematically updated on the work of the platform.

In the meantime, at the plenary session of 26 May, the Committee adopted an opinion on REFIT and on the platform by a very large majority. In it, rapporteur Denis Meynent set out a number of the Committee’s key decisions and recommendations. These include the following: the opinion underlines, inter alia, the need for proper, effective, consistent and transparent European legislation without undermining the necessary protection of citizens and businesses. In doing so, the role of, inter alia, the social partners and the Committee must be respected, as provided for in the Treaties. Impact assessments on each (draft) regulation remain necessary, as do the representative consultations. The EESC would like there to be an annual review of the REFIT programme and the REFIT platform. The composition of the platform should also be adjusted. A representative of SMEs is currently lacking, among other things. In view of its importance, the EESC also wishes to have its representation increased from 1 to 3 members. In the EESC’s view, the practical transposition of directives in the Member States also remains very important.

The EESC will continue to systematically assess the work of the REFIT programme and the REFIT platform. It calls on the Commission to take into account the EESC’s opinion on this subject adopted by an overwhelming majority.

A discussion on how to improve European legislation to the benefit of the public, business, consumers, employees and the environment has been taking place for some years now, in the European Union. Smart or Better Regulation seems to be the task of all European institutions and Member States nowadays.

As part of the Better Regulation policy, the European Commission is running a Regulatory Fitness and Performance Programme (REFIT). According to the Commission, the aim is to reduce regulatory costs, thus contributing to a clear, stable and predictable regulatory framework.

Following its decision of 19 May 2015, the European Commission launched the REFIT platform, which is part of the REFIT Programme. It aims to conduct an on-going dialogue with Member States and stakeholders on improving EU legislation. According again to the Commission, the main task of the REFIT Platform is to support the simplification of EU law and to reduce the administrative burden, for the benefit of civil society, business and public authorities.

Although consumer organisations support the efforts of the Commission to improve EU legislation, we are deeply concerned at the Better Regulation Policy, the REFIT Programme and the REFIT Platform.

It is crucially important that the objectives of Better Regulation, the REFIT Programme and the REFIT Platform stick to what the European Union politicians and senior officials assure us: improving EU legislation for the benefit of all of society. This policy should not end up diminishing legislation, through trying to reduce the regulatory and cost burden for businesses. An examination of burden and costs should go hand in hand with the benefits of the legislation for citizens, consumers, employees and the environment. The starting point for any REFIT work must clearly be that European legislation is not a burden or a cost for businesses that should be reduced but an essential guarantee of protection, promotion and legal certainty for all European stakeholders and citizens. European legislation is the basis for the existence and the enabler of the Single Market, the passport for businesses to access a market of 500 million consumers and an important innovation driver.

It is too risky to engage in the rhetoric of looking negatively at legislation and of putting costs for businesses above all other considerations. It is unacceptable to describe law or regulation as a burden “per se”. According to the EESC President, Mr Georges Dassis, “Better regulation should not mean no regulation”.

Better Regulation is, in itself, a huge bureaucratic machine. The current consultation process focuses solely on business, thereby risking weaker consumer protection. It includes numerous tests, consultations and evaluations resulting in an excessively-long procedure. We are in danger of causing “paralysis by analysis” of consumers being under-represented in the whole process because consumers’ organisations do not have the necessary resources to cope with the lengthy procedures, while corporate interests who have the money will be the only ones to keep up.

The REFIT Programme should modernise legislation in order to increase the level of consumer protection. It should take into account the need to improve enforcement in all Member States, to address gaps in consumer protection, for example in the case of remedies, to ensure a clear interplay between cross-sectoral and sectoral legislation, avoiding inconsistencies and overlaps. We are not happy that the Commission’s proposal on on-line purchases of tangible goods (for which further changes are anticipated to come under the consumer law REFIT initiative) undermines consumer rights in many Member States. We consider that this proposal, together with the Commission’s unjustified insistence on maximum harmonisation do not send the right message to consumers to ensure they support the Better Regulation policy and all its components.

As for the REFIT Platform, it should not become a forum working in parallel with the EU legislators, which would neither interfere with the democratic process as enshrined in the treaties nor substitute political will and decisions.

Unfortunately, all suggestions that have been put to the platform for consideration come from businesses. This shows that the platform risks delivering a unilateral and one-sided outcome.

Consumer organisations call on the European Commission to be fully transparent about the recommendations made by the REFIT Platform, about any deviating opinions within the platform and about how the Commission plans to take into account these recommendations. The platform should not become a substitute for the consultation of the social partners and nor should it undermine public consultation processes and due legislative process.
At its plenary session on 25–26 May 2016 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.

Overview of our Members’ Work in the EESC

Ariane RODERT (SE)
Vice President and Member of the Various Interests’ Group

Innovation as a driver of new business models – INT/778

Europe is facing complex challenges calling for renewed social and economic models. To deliver growth, progress and wellbeing in Europe, a shift towards an innovation-based economy is needed.

In this context, innovative concepts and business models are emerging, indicating a shift from traditional innovation to innovation taking technical, environmental and social perspectives into account with a focus on people’s lives and welfare.

The EESC therefore considers that

- the European Commission should develop a policy framework to support these new business models emerging;
- it is crucial that Member States and the European Institutions fully recognise and promote "fairer" business models, which are centred on delivering innovation for social development by integrating social impact measurement in parallel to reporting economic progress;
- the Commission should fully integrate the principles of the Social Investment Package and its connection to social innovation when developing the European Pillar of Social Rights, since many of these new business models are a concrete expression of these principles;
- Member States and the Commission must ensure that social innovation is fully mainstreamed in innovation programmes;
- Member States and the EU institutions must mainstream the principles of innovation in enterprise policy to ensure an enabling culture which promotes, welcomes, rewards and disseminates innovation;
- the EU must put greater focus on supporting and protecting SMEs, in particular, social economy enterprises, microenterprises and family businesses, and all types of start-ups in innovation policy initiatives to improve the conditions for sustainability and replication/scaling.

Gabriel SARRÓ IPARRAGUIRRE (ES)
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

European Border and Coast Guard – SOC/534

The European institutions should ensure that Schengen is able to function and that all Member States apply the Schengen rules in the same way. The EESC disagrees with the Commission’s proposal to establish mandatory and systematic checks of EU citizens at the external borders, as this constrains the exercise of one of the fundamental freedoms.

For Schengen to function smoothly, the external borders, which are common borders, should be managed jointly by the EU and Member States.

The proposal to strengthen Frontex’s mandate should go hand in hand with more transparency regarding the Agency’s governance and actions, as well as more accountability. The EU must ensure improved cooperation between the border agency and national authorities.

The EESC in favour of the Commission having the ability to decide to deploy the Agency at the external borders, but only in emergencies and following transparent procedures to keep European legislators (Parliament and Council) directly informed.

There must be better coordination between the various agencies and institutions with responsibilities for border control, coastal surveillance, maritime security, rescue at sea, customs and fisheries, but each should continue to fulfil its respective mission. The EESC therefore proposes that the regulation refers to a European Border Guard, and that the term "coast" is omitted.

Jorge PEGADO LIZ (PT)
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

Sharing economy and self-regulation – INT/779

The Opinion presents a list of characteristics which make it possible to define the sharing economy model and to distinguish between genuine practices that require special arrangements and those that are sometimes wrongly described as such merely to get around regulations that should apply to them. It also highlights the social and environmental dimensions of the sharing economy, which have the potential to strengthen solidarity between people, boost local economies, create jobs, rationalise household consumption by pooling the use of certain goods, reduce energy footprints and promote more responsible and sustainable consumption. The EESC urges the Commission to undertake policy measures in order to ensure that the numerous varieties of the sharing economy and the different ways it operates are supported, implemented, and gain credibility and trust at EU level and in the various Member States.

Cristian PIRVULESCU (RO)
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

European Border and Coast Guard – SOC/534

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Ask Lavbjergh ABILDAARD (DK)
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

European Accessibility Act – SOC/527

The EESC proposes a gradual expansion of the scope of the proposed directive in order to cover payment terminals, hospitality services, insurance services, electronic magazines and newspapers, as well as the physical premises and websites allowing access to products and services otherwise covered by the directive. It also encourages all parties concerned to broaden the interpretation of the legal base of the proposal and to include transport infrastructure and vehicles not otherwise covered by EU regulation regarding accessibility explicitly in the scope of the directive in order to avoid unintended regulatory gaps. One of its recommendations, is to include a specific provision stipulating that, from the entry into effect of the Directive, its obligations are only to apply to new products or services. This will avoid losses incurred from investment in accessibility that has already taken place. The EESC also proposes the introduction of an EU-wide accessibility labelling scheme as a means of ensuring that persons living with functional limitations are able to find reliable and easily available information about the accessibility of products and services.

Gabriel SARRÓ IPARRAGUIRRE (ES)
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

Fishing authorisation – NAT/674

The EESC supports the objectives pursued by the European Commission in this proposal and therefore considers it necessary to review the existing regulation, in order to promote simplification, increase transparency, improve governance, guarantee effective monitoring of the enforcement of rules, reaffirm reciprocity with third countries and preserve the millennium-old fishing culture, while ensuring its sustainability.

However, the Committee believes that as it stands the proposal is liable to place an excessive administrative and bureaucratic burden on the European Commission, Member States and operators which, in the absence of the necessary technical, material and human resources, would undermine the intended simplification exercise and lead to negative socio-economic consequences for employers and workers in the fisheries sector.
OUR GROUP’S STRENGTH

The Consumers and Environment Category met on 7 June 2016. The morning was dedicated to discuss financial matters, such as debt collection co-regulation forums, over-indebtedness and foreign currency loans. The afternoon focused on the transparency of vehicle emissions tests. The category welcomed several external speakers from the European Commission, Consumers and Environmental associations, and industry.

The Farmers’ Category met in the morning of Wednesday 15 June 2016 and was chaired by the spokesperson Mr John Bryan (IE). The first discussion panel focussed on “Main challenges related to CAP post-2020” at the presence of Mr Yves Madre (Farm Europe) and the rapporteur of the EESC ongoing own-initiative opinion NAT/682 “The main underlying factors that influence the CAP post-2020”, Mr Simo Tiainen (GR III). The second thematic debate centred around “Agricultural trade negotiations: state of play” during which a presentation was made by Mr Breffni Carpenter, Agriculture Counsellor at the Permanent Representation of Ireland to the European Union, followed by an update by the rapporteur, Mr Jonathan Peel, on the own-initiative opinion NAT/679 “Role of Agriculture in Bilateral and Regional Trade negotiations in the light of the Nairobi WTO Ministerial meeting” and a Q &A session with the Category members.

Mr Krzysztof Michalkiewicz, Secretary of State, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of Poland, Co-Spokespersons, Krzysztof Balon and Alain Coheur

The Social Economy Category met for the entire day of 29 June for a high level meeting. Following a morning session dedicated to internal issues, in the afternoon, the Category welcomed government representatives from Poland, Slovakia, France, Spain and Luxembourg, in addition to Mr Jens Nilsson, MEP and co-President of the Social Economy Intergroup of the European Parliament and the European Commission. These discussions focused on concrete policies that could be developed at the national and European level, in order to promote the further development of the social economy.

For more details, please consult the web pages: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.categories

Mr Krzysztof Michalkiewicz, Secretary of State, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of Poland, Co-Spokespersons, Krzysztof Balon and Alain Coheur

GROUP III wishes you happy summer days

Editors of this edition: Chloe Lahousse, Susanna Baizou Fausta Palombelli, Enrica Nardello, Irina Jancova, Brigitte Carmosin & Sander Kashiva
Editor in Chief: Marc Beffort
THE EESC IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONTENT OF EXTERNAL WEBSITES

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

When you come out of the storm you won’t be the same person that walked in. That’s what the storm is all about

Haruki Murakami

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