The voice of Group III
Various Interests
December 2016

“‘We learn from history that we do not learn from history’”,
said Hegel

Indeed, the number of border fences has been on the rise for years in Europe and the discussion about abolishing Schengen and reintroducing border controls within the EU is not over. While Britain is paying France £12 million over 3 years for a 5 meter high fence in Calais, Austria has replaced Europe’s once-lauded policy of freedom of movement with new border controls.

Across the world, building walls has become the political strategy favoured by nations convinced that barriers are the only way to deal with difficult neighbours. These physical walls come along with many other walls, in the shape of protectionism in trade relations and the growing limits of freedom of movement for citizen and residents, one of Europe’s main acquis.

But walls do not work as permanent solutions to tough problems. Building a wall is like postponing difficult policy decisions, which is why, ultimately, they always fall.

As civil society organisations, we must step up our actions and reflect seriously on what more we can do to prevent this rise in populism, fear and anti-establishment, anti-elite and anti-globalisation attitudes which are re-erecting walls throughout Europe, both figuratively and physically. We must reinstall a sense of optimism in the debate!

In our work, our dialogue and our actions we must seek a Europe of positive results, particularly in areas that are a source of concern for citizens: unemployment, social dumping, climate change, migration and security. We must also engage more with young people and ensure that their voices are heard.

2017 marks the 60th anniversary of the signature of the treaty of Rome, which was intended to open doors and build bridges, to give people new hope after the devastation of wars. Therefore, for next year, I wish we will engage more in opening gates instead of closing them, in building bridges, in dialogue and in hope, open society, open world. We have to hold on to the image of the fall of the Berlin Wall, of tearing down walls, instead of the image of barbed wire and barriers.

The world is full of walls that don’t work. For centuries, walls have not worked, and ultimately, they always come down.

After all, walls are not only a tremendous waste, but they also cause pain. Let us invest in a cooperative and shared future, rather than in divisive fear and hate.
On 27 October, the Various Interests’ Group held an extraordinary meeting in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. The main part of the meeting consisted of a conference on “The Role of Civil Society in the European Energy Union”. The main focus of the conference was on how to ensure a secure, affordable and sustainable energy policy within the European Union.

The keynote speakers at the conference were Maroš Šefčovič, Commission Vice-President for Energy Union and Vojtech Ferecz, State Secretary of the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic. The conference also brought together 11 speakers from further afield, including representatives from ECOSOC, Group III, the Slovak universities as well as non-government institutions. Mr Šefčovič presented the package of measures that has been adopted with a view to implementing the European Energy Union. He also gave a presentation of the future development of energy policy within the European Union, in particular the measures that have already been developed on renewable energy, market design, energy union governance and energy efficiency. In line with these measures, he provided an overview of a new legal framework for achieving the EU 2030 renewable target in a cost-effective way.

The speakers presented various aspects of European energy policy, including its efficiency, energy security post-COP21, the factors behind CO2 emissions in Slovakia compared with other countries and the role of consumers in the energy transition. The broad-based presentation by the individual speakers was followed by a constructive and fruitful discussion on various aspects of the European Energy Union as well as existing and future energy policies and the future of the European Energy Union as a whole.

Three words come to mind: Future, Citizens and Sustainability. What at first appears to be quite a technical subject, is actually one of the most inter-connected European policy areas. Think of the sectors of transport, infrastructure and industry, the role of the environment, agriculture, research and development, of innovation, competitiveness and regional development.

It is exactly this interconnectivity which makes the European Energy Union an immense opportunity. Now is the time to make the Energy Union a positive instrument for European cooperation, cohesion, solidarity and trust.

Indeed, I believe that the European Energy Union could and should become the equivalent of European Coal and Steel Community in the 3rd Millennium, because the Energy Union has the potential to bind us together around a vision with clear objectives. Without doubt, it will lead to the modernisation of our economies, drive investment ventures and employment opportunities, push us into the digital labour market, innovation-driven jobs and growth. It will force us to find synergies between policy areas and actors at the local, regional, national and European levels. One only needs to look at the figures: By 2030, it is expected that 18 million Europeans will be employed in the low carbon energy industry.

With all of these benefits, should energy and wider climate policies still be perceived as a socio-economic ‘cost’? Certainly, there is an investment ‘cost’. In fact, for the EU’s Energy Union there is an investment gap of 200 billion Euros per year! We will definitely need more investment, notably private. But I also hope that national and European politicians will have the courage to pursue the green revolution to its logical conclusion. That is to say that in order to have ‘secure, sustainable, competitive and affordable’ energy, it must be accepted that natural gas still remains only a transitional source of fuel. Firstly, because it is more polluting than renewable energy sources. Secondly, because the availability of gas is finite. Thirdly, because by using it, we continue our energy dependence.

The very first step must be to rapidly reduce the number of citizens living in energy poverty, which today is 11% of our population. As we all know, the poorer the consumer, the more energy they use. We must therefore tailor the design of the energy market, increase market choice and clarity on energy prices and costs.

What is certain is that to deliver a European Energy Union we need to build trust. Trust is built on a sense of ownership. Citizens are concerned as consumers and empowered through civil society organisations. These are the organisations which will assist citizens and consumers to organise themselves on the energy market. They will welcome a chance to have their say in their future, in the fight against climate change, as promised in the Paris Agreement.
Energy security in the post COP21 era

Western Europe is on trial in the court of international public opinion. The EU was the driving force behind the Kyoto Agreement almost twenty years ago. Most of the progress since then in fighting life-threatening climate change has also been thanks to Europe. Our excellence in science, in design, in engineering - and our excellence in progressive politics - have allowed us to show the way. But the EU was slow to ratify COP21; both China and America beat us to it. And the EU looks increasingly unable to muster the courage to continue to lead.

This is not a criticism of the good work of the Commission or the impressive efforts of Slovakia’s EU Presidency in Council. It is a condemnation of Member States who make commitments which they fail to keep. All are signed up to UN commitments; some obstruct the policies which would deliver them. Increasingly our member states think in terms of national advantage; increasingly they fail, as the magic of cross-border co-operation is lost.

The burning of fossil fuels for energy accounts for some 26% of total global greenhouse emissions. If we keep burning fossil fuels we will fail to restrain a rapid rise in average global temperature. And if we invest now in massive new distribution systems for gas we will delay the day when we kick our dangerous addiction to it.

Our biggest challenge is our dangerous dependence on Russia for gas. If the Russians turn off the gas taps, we have a maximum of 90 days’ supply to keep homes heated and machines running. But finding alternative supplies of gas is using yesterday’s thinking to solve today’s challenge. Remember Einstein: ‘you cannot solve problems with the same intelligence which created them’.

Many of us in the EESC believe that the way to reduce our dangerous dependence on Russia for gas and to meet our goal of limiting climate change - is to build a network of electricity interconnections across Europe. Taking renewable energy from the places it is in great supply to the places where demand for energy is high; using smart systems to balance supply and stabilise the grid.

Thanks to a fall in costs to levels unthinkable five years ago, electricity from renewables will grow by 45% from 2015 to 2021. Within four years renewable energy sources will produce 28% of total electricity production - the equivalent of total electricity production in the US and EU combined.

The cost of renewable energies will continue to fall, says the International Energy Agency (IEA). And if we can overcome the challenge of intermittency by building large scale HVDC smart grids to balance demand and supply then a clean sky is the limit.

Here in Europe we must work to raise awareness of the connective capacity of cross border electricity cables. And just as peace in Europe was built on coal and steel, a wider peace can be built on shared energy. Wind from the north sea, sun from the Mediterranean, hydro from the mountains in between.

The IEA warns that the centre of gravity for renewable energy growth is moving to emerging countries. This should be a warning to us, that this is an area in which Europe must not be left behind.

Can all citizens afford energy change?

In Bratislava Group 3 members of the EESC discussed ‘The role of civil society in the European Energy Union: Ensuring secure, sustainable, competitive and affordable energy’.

In his opening speech President Jahier challenged the delegates to consider a future where energy is secure, sustainable, competitive and affordable.

We are in a time when the way we use our energy yields consequences which is causing huge changes in the earth’s temperature to the point where the very existence of the planet as we know it is in danger. Despite everybody’s efforts, carbon emissions remain far too high. Some are arguing that we have gone past the point of no return and now can only manage the consequences that extreme temperatures will bring to the planet.

Alternatives to fossil based fuel include wind, solar and controversially nuclear power. Each of these is problematic, not least because they have still to convince the general public that they can become a real alternative.

The discussion on this topic revolves around people who deny it is happening; people who believe fully, based on good science that action to curb carbon emissions is long overdue and that we are fast loosing time if we are to have any hope of resisting such consequences and then there are the citizens, who by and large are waiting for someone to deliver a working alternative, that is cost effective and practical. Their concerns are mainly based on the lack of clear information coming from Government leaders. They are confused by the opposition to wind and solar power energy. They are concerned that the need to change their living systems will cause considerable hardship because of cost and loss of well-being. Unfortunately for the huge populations across Europe who are classified as living in poverty - over 20 million people, there is outright fear that they will simply not be able to afford the changes proposed.

And yet failure to resolve the energy problem will firstly impact on the poorest of the poor.

Of course the EU is cognisant of the perilous situation that the provision of sustainable energy is in. Toni Vidan in his Presentation demonstrated the objectives of the Energy union as stated in their “Framework Strategy for a Resilient Energy Union with a Forward-Looking Climate Change Policy, COM(2015)080 final. In that document they say: “citizens should be at its core, where they take ownership of the energy transition, benefit from new technologies to reduce their bills, participate actively in the market, and where vulnerable consumers are protected.”

The aspiration of citizens at the core of energy provision will have to be central if there is to be a successful transition to a better way.
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE OCTOBER PLENARY SESSION

Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

Mindaugas MACIULEVICIUS (LT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Space Strategy for Europe” – INT/809

Jorge PEGADO LIZ (PT) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Business Insolvency” – INT/810

Mihai IVASCU (RO) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Council Directive amending Directive 2016/1164/EU on rules against tax avoidance practices (ATAD) regarding hybrid mismatches” – ECO/422

Michael McLOUGHLIN (IE) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Proposal for a Council Directive on a Common Corporate Tax Base (CCTB)” – ECO/419

Reine-Claude MADER (FR) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “EU Regulatory Framework for Financial Services” – ECO/425

Carlos TRIAS PINTO (ES) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the economic policy of the euro area” – ECO/423

Luca JAHIER (IT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations” – REX/480

The full listing of membership of the above study groups for the new work may be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.group-3-new-study-groups
On 15 November 2016, the European Sunday Alliance organised its third European conference, this time on “Work-Life-Balance 4.0 – Challenges in a time of digitalisation” at the EESC. Over the course of the day, over 100 participants discussed the impact digitalisation will have on all aspects of our lives and how to achieve a healthy work-life balance.

The event concentrated on the impact of digitalisation on traditional non-working periods – e.g. weekends (especially Sundays) and evenings, which are of great importance for family and social life – with regard to changes in working structure, individualisation and team-based work. It also focused on new forms of employment (telecommuting, freelance work, crowd-employment, the sharing economy and collaborative working) and the consequences, challenges and opportunities for more equal distribution of work/income/participation in social life.

Luca Jahier, president of Group III at the European Economic and Social Committee, opened the conference together with the Members of the European Parliament Evelyn Regner (S&D), Thomas Mann (EPP) and the key-note speaker Günther Oettinger, European Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society.

In his speech, Mr Jahier addressed the transformation and future of work and societies in Europe as a result of digitalisation. He reminded participants that it would be impossible to stop the evolution of technology but that it would be necessary to examine how these developments can be used for the benefit of employers and employees.

“It is impossible to stop the evolution of technology, but it is crucial to examine how these developments can be used for the benefit of employers and employees.”
On Thursday 1 December, members of Group III representing the liberal professions met in a WORKSHOP on Liberal Professions in Europe, chaired by Arno Metzler, Vice-President of Group III. The event also brought together representatives of organisations representing the liberal professions in several Member States (Austria, Germany, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Belgium, the Czech Republic and Spain) and a number of other European professional organisations.

After a general introduction on the economic and social value of the European liberal professions, the issue of a joint European understanding of “liberal professionalism” was addressed from a legal point of view. Core values were also discussed, including ethics, public values and forms of execution (professional partnerships, independent or employee status, capital restrictions, integrity and professional independence).

In the second part of the workshop, the personal, social and economic situation of the liberal professions in Europe was discussed. The workshop reviewed figures, the economic contribution of the liberal professions to the EU’s GDP (12.8% on average), its gender ratio (55%) and the basis of the sector’s income levels, its market shares and the development of new services in the 4.0 society.

Luca Jahier, Group III President, urged the representatives to overcome their divergent structures in Europe, in order to use their economic weight more efficiently, and to adopt a joint stance to bolster Europe (civil society and the single market) and the liberal professions.

Arno Metzler thanked Angela Niebler (MEP) and Thomas Mann (MEP) for their support in establishing a permanent platform for the liberal professions in the EESC, as had already been done for the social economy.

Participants agreed on the urgent need to come up with a common definition of liberal professions at European level in order to voice their concerns at the same time as raising awareness of their social and economic contribution in the EU on the part of legislators and the general public. More work needed to be done on the platform, in close collaboration with stakeholders.

All the participants were counting on the support of Group III, which would dedicate a board meeting in Malta to the theme of ethics and a major event on the liberal professions in 2017. The objective was to promote the new common platform, which would allow the liberal professions to develop a positive approach towards Europe, a common strategy and an action plan at EU level.

There was not enough time to address the following issues and they were therefore deferred until the next meeting: young professionals, underemployment, poverty in old age, professional insurance, work-life balance, recruiting the next generations and new professions.

On 6 October, Group III members Alain Coheur, Ariane Rodert and Miguel Ángel Cabra de Luna were invited, as part of the Committee’s “Going local” initiative, to speak at a seminar in Lisbon, Portugal. The seminar also featured some Portuguese keynote speakers and was organised by the União Distrital das IPSS de Lisboa (Lisbon Union of Social and Solidarity Institutions) with the aim of helping Portuguese social actors to understand the current role of social economy in Europe, its European legal framework, the opportunities and instruments for social investment for social enterprises and examples of the success of social institutions and enterprises. The seminar was chaired by Group III member José Leirião.

In Portugal, social and solidarity institutions are gaining more visibility and are an increasingly important part of the Portuguese economy. This sector currently accounts for 5.5% of total employment and was the only sector that continued to create jobs even during the financial crisis post 2008. As such, this area of the economy can be said to act counter-cyclically.

The objectives of the seminar were fully met and the institutions are now better prepared to promote entrepreneurship and social innovation and to generate new solutions outside of the traditional financial sources with a view to resolving important and complex social problems. It also contributed to strengthening options for social investment through the use of bonds and financial instruments that match specific needs of the social economy sector.

The seminar was also an opportunity to qualify those involved in the eco-system of social innovation and entrepreneurship projects by improving the levels of response of social economy entities, thus contributing to their economic and financial sustainability.
the legislative process itself. The Committee agreed with this approach, voting almost unanimously to adopt the opinion.

What are our key findings?

First and foremost, “European legislation is an essential factor in integration, not a burden or a cost to be reduced. On the contrary, when proportionate it is an important guarantee of protection, promotion and legal certainty for all European stakeholders and citizens”.

EU law must provide clarity and certainty

Of course, unnecessary regulatory burden must be avoided. It is quite obvious that excessive regulation has a negative effect on economic dynamics, the capacity for innovation being a major driver of economic growth.

Let me be quite clear about this: the Committee is in favour of a regulatory environment that is conducive to investment in research and innovation.

The Committee therefore found that regulatory costs must be proportional to the benefits they generate.

At the same time, European politics must pursue the objectives of the Treaty and be in line with the values of the Union. This is the fundamental purpose of any EU regulation. Everything else is of secondary importance.

The EESC believes that the community method is “future proof”. The Community method is characterised by the sole right of the European Commission to initiate legislation, the co-decision power between the Council and the European Parliament and the use of qualified majority voting in the Council.

The Committee has an important role to play in this political process. It serves as a sounding board between the co-legislators and organised civil society in the Member States.

COP 22 in the Central Atlas Mountains

Following the preliminary meetings which took place in June (Rabat) and July (Tangier), Morocco’s communities have begun to organise regional events in preparation for COP 22 in Marrakech. As part of the COP ATLAS, held in Beni Mellal on 18-19 October, the organisers invited Michel Dubromel, one of the EESC’s three representatives during COP 22.

Mr Dubromel was once again responsible for setting the scene: his speech addressed the different stages of the process which has led us from the Paris Agreement to COP 22. Following ratification by the key states, the agreement entered into force on 4 November, i.e. before the start of COP 22.

“Following on from the political engagement phase, we are now entering the action phase, involving new participants that will take on part of the implementation effort in their respective fields. When this phase is launched at all levels, we will reiterate certain important points that are conducive to effective implementation. A solution agenda exists, but we will need to ensure global coherence and transparency in our efforts, particularly those related to fossil fuel subsidies. Funding will be necessary at all levels to begin the transition, and the Paris Agreement remains very vague on this issue. The same is true of state contributions to reduce emissions: it remains to be specified what action they will commit to, over what time frame, using what verification mechanism, and so on. The general impetus of all those involved should not distract us from one essential point: we are not there yet. Our current trajectory is an increase of 3 °C and we know that our ecosystems cannot cope with a temperature increase of more than 1.5 °C. We still have vast amounts to do. At the time of implementation, civil society will take its rightful place in the action programmes which are decided upon/committed to in Marrakech.”

Women are the real pioneers of rural development!

The COPA (Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations) Women’s Committee has launched its 4th European Innovation Award for women farmers. The title this year is Women farmers as drivers of innovation and green growth in the European Union.

Five winners, coming from Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden were selected, showing a small part of the great work European farmers have.

On 12 October, in a ceremony hosted by Austrian Member of Parliament Elisabeth Koestinger at the European Parliament, Miahil Dumitru, Deputy Director-General of DG Agri, presented the prize to the five winners for their outstanding projects, which went to Italy.

The EESC itself has been working on a range of opinions on these topics. Group III Member Tom Jones presented his opinion on Rural Development Programmes – Sticking plasters or Green shoots of Recovery?, which highlights the important role or rural areas for all citizens as providers of secure food, timber, mineral and water supplies and much more, and comes up with long-term sustainable proposals in the areas of entrepreneurship and employment, the environment and social inclusion. Former EESC member Daniela Rondinelli, now a member of President Dass’s cabinet,
Reine-Claude Mader stands down as chair of CLCV

Reine-Claude Mader has decided to stand down after thirty years championing consumer rights at CLCV (consumer, housing and quality of life association). Having served as chair of the organisation for 12 years, she will not seek a new term-of-office. The consumer association, whose conference is due to be held on Friday, should choose as her successor Jean-Yves Mano, the former deputy to the mayor of Paris Bertrand Delanoë with responsibility for housing, and former socialist party senator for Paris (2001-2004), who was a CLCV activist in his youth.

Reine-Claude Mader occupies a unique place in the consumer movement, which she joined some fifty years ago. “I’ve fought all the battles” proclaims the pioneer of banking consumerism, who started out by participating in the Scrivener working groups on consumer credit protection. “Everything had to be built from scratch”, continues Mader, who has always advocated taking a pragmatic stance, “I am not against banks. The banking industry is key to the country’s development. But that does not give them all the rights”.

Luca Jahier (IT)
President of the Various Interests’ Group

Joint EESC-ILO Conference on “The Future of Work”

On 15 November, the EESC and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) organised a two-days high-level dialogue on the future of work, bringing together more than 300 representatives of social partners and civil society in Europe. The main objective was to map out the main drivers of change which are transforming jobs and the economy in Europe. The president of Group III moderated a panel on “Work and Society”.

During his speech, Mr Jahier noted that as the digital platform economy grows, work units tend to become smaller and more dispersed and locations more disconnected from communities, with clear implications for workers’ social networks and identities. Clearly, the policies that we set today will and must set the course for tomorrow; that is why Mr Jahier called for greater political and financial support for social investment, social innovation, social enterprises and the wider social economy, emphasising the pivotal role of economic and social actors, as well as civil society as a whole, in designing and implementing the social and labour conditions and solutions of tomorrow.

Lidija Pavic-Rogosic (HR)
ODRAZ (Sustainable Community Development)
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

First meeting of the EU-Chile Joint Consultative Committee

The first EU-Chile JCC meeting was held on 4 and 5 October 2016 in Santiago de Chile at the premises of the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

On the first day, some 100 representatives of Chilean civil society organisations, the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the EU Delegation were present at the inaugural event, along with ambassadors from several EU Member States. Introductory speeches were given by Ambassador Milenko Skoknic, General Director for Foreign Policies of the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and EU Ambassador to Chile, Stella Zervoudaki.

In her opening speech, JCC co-president Lidija Pavić-Rogošić welcomed the establishment of the EU-Chile JCC, which would strengthen ties between EU and Chilean civil society organisations. “By setting up the JCC, the last provision of an Association Agreement signed back in 2002 has now been implemented. So, in a sense, not only did we set up the JCC, we also completed something that was set out to be done 14 years ago”.

“It was a long way, but I am convinced it will be a fruitful process”, concluded Ms Pavić-Rogošić in her speech.

The JCC has important challenges ahead and is committed to tackling them. Paramount among these challenges is the modernisation of the AA. Since 2002, agreements have become deeper and more comprehensive and it is time to do the same with the EU-Chile Agreement. Members of the JCC are looking forward to a new agreement that will deepen political dialogue, especially in multilateral fora, improve and extend trade relations, integrate the issue of sustainable development in all its components and update our cooperation links through more suitable approaches, such as triangular cooperation with third countries. “We hope to be able to provide civil society input to the negotiations”, said Pavić-Rogošić.

The JCC members affirmed their commitment to serve as a constructive mechanism that will contribute to strengthening ties and developing policies that are in line with the interests of organised civil society.

Reine-Claude Mader (FR)
Association Consommation, Logement, Cadre de vie
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

Reine-Claude Mader stands down as chair of CLCV

Reine-Claude Mader has decided to stand down after thirty years championing consumer rights at CLCV (consumer, housing and quality of life association). Having served as chair of the organisation for 12 years, she will not seek a new term-of-office. The consumer association, whose conference is due to be held on Friday, should choose as her successor Jean-Yves Mano, the former deputy to the mayor of Paris Bertrand Delanoë with responsibility for housing, and former socialist party senator for Paris (2001-2004), who was a CLCV activist in his youth.

Reine-Claude Mader occupies a unique place in the consumer movement, which she joined some fifty years ago. “I’ve fought all the battles” proclaims the pioneer of banking consumerism, who started out by participating in the Scrivener working groups on consumer credit protection. “Everything had to be built from scratch”, continues Mader, who has always advocated taking a pragmatic stance, “I am not against banks. The banking industry is key to the country’s development. But that does not give them all the rights”.

Luca Jahier (IT)
President of the Various Interests’ Group

Joint EESC-ILO Conference on “The Future of Work”

On 15 November, the EESC and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) organised a two-days high-level dialogue on the future of work, bringing together more than 300 representatives of social partners and civil society in Europe. The main objective was to map out the main drivers of change which are transforming jobs and the economy in Europe. The president of Group III moderated a panel on “Work and Society”.

During his speech, Mr Jahier noted that as the digital platform economy grows, work units tend to become smaller and more dispersed and locations more disconnected from communities, with clear implications for workers’ social networks and identities. Clearly, the policies that we set today will and must set the course for tomorrow; that is why Mr Jahier called for greater political and financial support for social investment, social innovation, social enterprises and the wider social economy, emphasising the pivotal role of economic and social actors, as well as civil society as a whole, in designing and implementing the social and labour conditions and solutions of tomorrow.
Wallonia has recently been under the global spotlight because it took a stand against CETA. Some would have us believe that it acted alone and that its parliament intervened at the last minute, without understanding the ins and outs. That is not the case. The Parliament of Wallonia was one of the few to take a position, which it did on the basis of an in-depth analysis of the draft trade agreement, prepared over nearly two years, with the participation of numerous experts and in dialogue with civil society, mobilised in large numbers to relay the concerns of organisations and citizens. Citizens across the EU raised concerns in a number of countries and on a number of occasions, but were all too often not heard, or even ignored. On 2 October 2015, the Parliament of Wallonia formalised a resolution backed by a very large majority, tabled it and presented it to the Commission, exposing the problems posed by the agreement in clear terms.

The Parliament of Wallonia did its democratic duty, within the Belgian and European frameworks which confer it this prerogative, to convey the worries and hopes of citizens. We should be celebrating its efforts. The comments made by Wallonia are those of civil society, the clarifications of the treaty’s terms are found in a joint “interpretative instrument” as provided for in Article 31 of the Vienna Convention, which stipulates that instruments intended to clarify the intentions of the parties are binding. A correlation table of the legal provisions in CETA and the instrument guarantees this interpretation.

What were the main clarifications put forward by the interpretative instrument:

- Private arbitrage – settling disputes between States and investors – has been replaced by a public court composed of completely independent judges – similar to those at the CJEU – and appointed by the Council at the Member States’ proposal. In addition, they are subject to a strict code of conduct to prevent any conflict of interests before, during and after their terms of office. Member States can contest the decisions of the court before an appeal court which offers the same guarantee of independence. A system will also be introduced to give SMEs access to the mechanism.

- Member States can continue to legislate with a view to increasing their standards on protecting and promoting public health, social and education services, environment, ethics, consumer protection, privacy, data and cultural diversity, without having to worry about paying damages to a company which claims to have had its profits damaged.

- The benefits are equally numerous when it comes to public services and services of general economic interest which will be protected and will not be brought into competition with the private sector. No one can force privatisation on a public service. A Member State can renationalise a service which is open to private operators without fear of redress before the dispute settlement mechanism, and Belgium will retain the right to define and protect new services in the general interest.

With regard to agriculture, Wallonia obtained the power to activate the safeguard clause in the event of market imbalance; activation was only originally permitted on the Canadian side. The clause can be invoked even if the imbalance concerns only one single product. In addition, the interpretative declaration reaffirms a series of elements lacking definition in the body of CETA: the exclusion of all imported beef containing hormones, full compliance with EU legislation with regard to GMOs and a guarantee on applying the precautionary principle as defined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. It will also be possible for new geographical labels to be added at a later date. Imported products will therefore have to meet our health standards, both Belgian and European, to the letter.

- The text also explicitly refers to international standards on sustainable development, climate change (the Paris Agreement) and the protection of workers (ILO conventions). Belgium and its regions therefore reserve the right to lay down ambitious standards in those areas. Both Belgium as a whole and Wallonia as a region will retain the option to make the awarding of public procurement contracts dependent on social and environmental clauses, and social dumping is explicitly prohibited in the text.

Wallonia did not lead this fight only for its own benefit, but also to address shared concerns and in favour of a progressive Europe which is true to its original aspirations and the expectations of its people.

For the Walloon members of the EESC, the only EU institution which represents the interests of civil society, we hope that in the future treaties will no longer be drawn up in secret but instead on the basis of democratic debate, as that is the only way that Europe will regain the trust of its citizens.
Trade is good. Fair and transparent trade is even better. We do it all the time. Trade has existed throughout recorded human history and evidence reveals prehistoric trade routes in many parts of the world. Trade originated with human communication in prehistoric times. Trading was the main facility of prehistoric people, who bartered goods and services from each other before the invention of modern-day currency. Peter Watson dates the history of long-distance commerce from around 150,000 years ago.

It becomes a little bit complicated and trickier when we look at large-scale international trade agreements. The question of whether foreign trade promotes peace and development or creates uncertainty has been debated for a long time. The history of free trade agreements, the secrecy around the process of negotiations and the leaked information of the actual agreement suggest tremendous potential for distrust and suspicion.

The last example is the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, known as CETA. It required all EU Member States to endorse it. 28 EU states approved the deal on 28 October when a consensus was reached. In a nutshell, the main benefits will be the following:

- The deal removes 98% of tariffs for industrial goods and officials hope it will generate an increase in trade worth $12 bn (EUR 10.9 bn) a year, providing European exporters with a clear advantage over their competitors, with an expected saving of around EUR 470 million per year. Most of the remaining customs duties will be eliminated over the following seven years.

- Limitations on accessing government procurement will be abolished at all levels of Canadian government, including provinces, regions and cities.

- Regulatory cooperation between standard-setting bodies will be set up in various sectors such as electrical goods, electronic and radio equipment, toys, machinery and measuring equipment, considerably reducing costs for businesses and consumers.

- IP rights will be set on a more level playing-field between the EU and Canada and better protection will be given to European innovations, artworks and brands against illegal copying.

- Trade in services will be liberalised, particularly in key sectors such as financial services, telecommunications, energy and maritime transport, leading to an expected increase of European GDP of approximately EUR 6 billion.

- Mobility of key company personnel and service-providers will be facilitated between the EU and Canada and mutual recognition of qualifications in regulated professions will be implemented.

However, some EU citizens on the ground did not accept the agreement in these terms. The Walloons were not the only people who opposed CETA. 3.4 million citizens from across Europe signed a petition against CETA and there are more than 2,000 “TTIP & CETA free zones” in Europe. This is not just a small, defiant region, but rather a movement of concerned citizens. Their voice should not be ignored. We need to take the concerns of people seriously and negotiations need to be transparent. This was probably the first mistake that was made at the very beginning on the European Union side of the negotiations, i.e. not recognising that there was such interest among people and that people had a wish to be informed from the outset.

As such, there is a clear need to develop a better way to handle free trade agreements where national governments are involved and the voice of organised civil society is heard. The EU has to learn another lesson from the debacle, namely the need to be transparent, especially given the ongoing free trade negotiations with the United States. The dark age of secret negotiations of trade and investment agreements is over and transparency and democratic principles should be respected throughout the whole ratification process.

Discussions around CETA showed that there is a fundamental problem in communicating about trade. It is an illusion to believe that in the current connected and globalised world we can stop trading and close our markets. We cannot stop technological changes, innovation and automation. What we need today is to shape trade liberalisation according to our values and adapt it to the expectations of European citizens. Negotiating trade agreements is the responsibility of the European Union because the leverage of giving access to the large EU market gives us better access to foreign markets. However, the Member States, together with the EU, should work more on the implementation of trade agreements and develop adjustment policies which correspond better to the challenges of every Member State in terms of social policy, infrastructure and innovation. The benefits of trade are diffuse and they are not felt immediately; the losses resulting from opening up trade may be sharp and directly felt. Therefore, Member States have to focus on carrying out impact assessments and mitigation policies before implementing trade agreements. It is also of joint responsibility of the EU and the Member States to explain and bring the opportunities created by trade agreements closer to SMEs and enable them to benefit from those trade agreements. EU Member States should reconnect with their citizens by presenting and explaining trade agreements, including their values, potential benefits and challenges so that organised civil society can play an instrumental role in this debate.

Lessons from CETA should be learnt properly and quickly. This is the EU decision-makers’ chance to reboot the EU’s trade policy by negotiating the next trade agreements in a transparent and democratic way. This will mean including governments, parliaments and the public as early as and as broadly as possible. If they do so, they may actually be able to enjoy the support of citizens across Europe.

We should not forget that when you negotiate such a comprehensive deal, you must allow all of those who will be affected to have their say. That is how democracy works.
as a member of the EU. However there is no similar mechanism that would apply after the accession of Member States. The Juncker Commission has chosen the rule of law as one of its priorities in its political guidelines, so it should revert to this debate and engage in a structured dialogue with the EP, the Council and the EESC.

The EESC believes that the EC together with the EP and the Council should consider adopting a new European mechanism on the rule of law. The idea is to prepare a proposal to improve European governance with establishment of a “policy coordination cycle” regarding the rule of law and fundamental rights, which would be similar and complementary to the European Semester.

The main aim of this information report is to discuss experiences and possibilities for regular access to the EU associated with labour migration. The EU approach to legal labour migration has, to date, been very fragmented and limited. The EESC considers that European immigration policy should take a strategic medium and long-term view and focus on providing a holistic and comprehensive approach to open and flexible legal channels for entry into the EU. The EESC strongly believes that EU labour migration policy should be linked to the EU’s labour market policy. Consequently, this would require the involvement of the social partners in helping to manage the procedures for access and admission.

The EESC therefore proposes that the EU promotes, in dialogue with third countries, a new generation of mobility partnership that includes flexible systems for mobility and legal procedures for labour migration to the EU.

The labour market integration of third-country nationals should be supported by pre-departure and post-arrival training and skills-development programmes, as well as, specific job search support services. The non-recognition of diplomas and qualifications reduces the potential pool of qualified migrant workers from which EU employers can fill their vacancies, not to mention that this constitutes a crucial obstacle towards achieving the objectives of an EU labour migration and labour market policy. Therefore an effective recognition of diplomas and qualifications through formal and non-formal learning needs to be developed.
The 2030 Agenda represents a breakthrough in multilateral cooperation, in the sense that it puts social and human development on a par with economic progress, and sees these three dimensions as a whole. Whereas the MDGs addressed primarily developing countries, this new Agenda is a transformational and universal agenda for all countries, and promotes a new, inclusive and participatory method of decision-making.

The EU showed significant leadership in the process leading up to the adoption of the new SDGs. The opinion stresses that the EU needs to hold up its credibility both internally and externally, when it comes to implementing the Agenda and its 17 goals. Pointing to the universal and indivisible nature of the Agenda, the opinion underlines the importance of an EU response at the highest level, providing a robust base on which an overarching EU strategy should be founded. The opinion also calls upon civil society in Europe and worldwide, to play its role in monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and in bringing the debate on the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals to the capitals.

The EESC notes that the main cause of slow administrative procedures applicable to the practice of aquaculture, and the unavailability of locations, is the complex implementation of EU environmental legislation, mainly the Water Framework Directive, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and the rules on the Natura 2000 network by the public administrations of Member States and their regions. These obstacles are occurring mainly in public administration departments in Member States that were not involved in drawing up the multi-annual national strategic plans for aquaculture and, consequently, are not aware of them. The active involvement of these departments in implementing the strategic plans is therefore required.

The strategy is extremely ambitious and implies that achieving the EU’s climate and energy targets depends on implementation by the Member States. The EESC recommends that the annual State of the Energy Union report should contain a specific section providing an update on progress made. The EESC also believes that Eurostat should prioritise work on collecting a more comprehensive data set, particularly on energy used in heating.

Furthermore, the EESC believes that it is important for consumers to be involved and once again calls for the proposal for comprehensive European energy dialogue to be further developed and for citizen participation to be incentivised.
The EESC:

- supports the Commission’s proposal, considering it to be timely and its content to be well-argued and developed. Attention is drawn to the extension of the expected benefits by applying the proposal to all stakeholders - consumers, businesses and national authorities - as set out in the proposal;
- is deeply concerned that regulating all these matters may affect the fundamental rights and their application by the Member States;
- urges the Commission and the Member States to ensure that the common procedural standards set out in Article 8 of the proposal are applied effectively, in accordance with the principles governing good administrative practice;
- calls on the Commission to launch the coordination with the Member States needed to implement the measures set out in the present proposal, and to extend the scope of the coordinated actions.

The EESC supports the initiative taken with the pilot project launched by the Commission in late 2011 to set up a financial expertise centre for consumers and end-users of financial services that would allow them to be involved in framing EU policies on financial services and ultimately help to restore confidence in Europe’s financial system.

The EESC notes that two NGOs, Better Finance and Finance Watch, are eligible for the operating grants provided by the European Commission through open calls for proposals, and that their activities were evaluated as broadly positive in 2015.

The EESC points out that the legitimacy of these organisations must derive from their membership, their governance, and also from what they do to make the technical details of financial legislation and financial tools comprehensible to the general public.

The EESC notes that despite efforts in relation to communication and visibility, including articles published in the financial press and organisation of conferences, Finance Watch and Better Finance are still largely unknown among the general public and national consumer associations, which ought in fact to receive their newsletters directly.

The EESC calls for a fair balance that will further the concept of a stable and sustainable financial system that looks to the long term.

The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee’s website: http://dm.eesc.europa.eu/EESCDocumentSearch/Pages/opinionssearch.aspx
The Social Economy Category held its 3rd meeting of the year on 28 November 2016. Co-Spokespersons Messrs Balon and Coheur highlighted recent developments and forthcoming initiatives in the sector, after which representatives of DG ‘GROWTH’ and DG ‘Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion’ gave an overview of EC actions in the social economy. In particular, the EC representatives informed the Members of the Category on the final report of the Expert Group on Social Entrepreneurs (GECES), which was adopted by unanimity on 14 October. This was followed by an exchange of views on the external dimension of the social economy, involving Mr Cabra de Luna, rapporteur of the EESC own-initiative Opinion The External Dimension of the Social Economy and Ms Véronique Wemaere, Director of Solidarité Socialiste (Sol Soc), which is very active in promoting the social economy in Africa. Finally, a session on developments in the social economy at the national level took place, with presentations by Members on the situation in Portugal, Romania and Spain.

The Consumers and Environment Category had its 3rd meeting of the year on Thursday 1 December 2016. First, the progress report on planned obsolescence was presented by EESC member Thierry Libaert and Pascal Durand, Member of the European Parliament, Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance. This was followed by a discussion on “Migrants and their rights as consumers” by Isabelle Buscke, Head of the Brussels Office of the Federation of German Consumer Organisations. Later, Group III members Lutz Ribbe and Michel Dubromel presented the category’s position on opinion TEN/598 on “The new electricity market design and potential impacts on vulnerable consumers”. In the afternoon, a presentation was made on Certification of household appliances and electrical equipment by Christoforos Spiliotopoulos and Alun Jones from ECOS (European Environmental Citizens’ Organisation for Standardisation).

Finally, the INT section secretariat briefed the participants on the organization of the 2017 European Consumer Day.
The third and last *SMEs, Crafts and the Professions Category* meeting of this year took place on Friday 2 December 2016. The morning session was dedicated to SMEs, starting with a presentation on The crisis and its aftermath: SMEs performance and macroeconomic policies by Lucio Pench, Director of Directorate C from DG ECFIN, followed by a second discussion on Circular Economy: an opportunity for micro SMEs with Peter Czaga, Policy Officer from DG ENV. The meeting continued with a debate on SME Performance Review 2015/2016 lead by Ludger Odenthal, Policy Officer at DG MARKT H.1, followed by a presentation from Mrs Milena Angelova (member of Group I) on the opinion on Effectiveness of policies for SMEs.

In the afternoon, the discussions concentrated on themes related to Liberal Professions. Dr. Bernhard Wisleitner (CMC) gave an overview of Social security systems for liberal professions, followed on a debate on Representative structures of liberal professions in Europe, introduced by Dr. Wolfgang Doneus, Past President of the Council of European Dentists (CED). Last but not least, a debate was held on Structure of self-administrative chamber organisations in Germany with specific focus on Chambers of Skilled Crafts presented by Dr. jur. Manja Schreiner LL.M., Director of Organisation and Law Department, Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks (ZDH).

The *Farmers’ Category* held its last meeting on 12 October at the EESC in Brussels. A debate took place on the implementation of the CAP, health check and the CAP post-2020 with Georg Häusler, Director of the Management of Resources Directorate at DG AGRI and Albert Dess, Member of the European Parliament and member of the EP Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development. The Category also discussed the work programme for 2017.

For more details, please consult the web pages: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.categories
Do you know what the EESC Information Centre can do for you?

For several centuries, information has had a special place among political decision-makers, business leaders and even, more recently, men and women eager to understand and change the world we live in. In recent years, however, technological developments, the emergence of the internet and new media have given rise to a new form of information, a mass of information which is not always a guarantee of quality. Whether good or bad, misleading or discerning, information has become omnipresent, offering everyone the possibility to express their own view on things. And we all know the expression “too much information is the same as no information!”

For the sake of clarity, efficiency and saving time for its users, the Centre d’information (CIN – Information Centre) is making every effort to organise information and unearth the documents necessary for your research with a view to offering you a high-quality service as quickly as possible.

The CIN aims to be proactive and help you throughout your work. For example, we contact the rapporteurs as soon as they are appointed to offer them our support when researching information.

The CIN has a specialised reference collection and is part of the network of interinstitutional libraries, which significantly increases the amount of documentary resources available. We also offer our users a large collection of ebooks.

We also cooperate closely with the EPRS (European Parliamentary Research Service). This enables us to send a newsletter to members before each plenary session listing recent EPRS studies and briefings on current issues, in addition to our newsletter. Furthermore and also via the CIN, members who so wish may ask the EPRS to prepare briefings on issues connected to an opinion, an EESC policy or a specific activity, such as a mission.

This information and these resources are all available both online and at the library: simply contact the librarians who will be pleased to research and prepare the information you need.

The CIN is much more than a pleasant place to consult books and periodicals: it is also a place to hold meetings and exchange information on civil society. The CIN does this by organising a Focus on civil society event several times a year, which entails meeting with the author of a book on civil society.

The CIN is a one-stop shop for all your documentary needs. Please do not hesitate to contact us:

• by email: biblio@eesc.europa.eu,
• by telephone: +32 546 8194 or
• visit us at JDE 1002 (reading room) or JDE 1048 (office).