‘Making Democracy Work at the Local Level: Ensuring Sustainable Growth and Progress in Latvia’

Riga, 25 March 2015

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The date that we chose for our conference coincided with two important events.

Firstly, the Latvian commemoration of the Latvian Soviet Republic’s 70th Anniversary on 25 March. The date that we chose for our conference over the last five years to the heart of the work of the Various Interests Group over the last five years and also reflect the cumulative richness of expertise and knowledge within our Group.

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As the conference addressed a broad scope of subjects and actors, I found that what really links these topics together, is the concept of participatory democracy and active citizenship. It is the idea that civil society and citizens need to take ownership of the process, they need to be engaged and active throughout. Why is this the case? Firstly, as the Treaty on the EU makes institutional provisions for dialogue with civil society and citizens, in Article 11 of the Treaty. So there is a legal obligation for the EU to consult civil society and citizens. But there is also a very pressing reason which touches on the lives of all of us, namely: the economic crisis.

Today’s Europe is one of increasing divisions between its people, between North and South, with the rise of populist, anti-European, anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic movements. It is a Europe whose citizens do not trust the institutions. The Europe of today is also one which in my opinion has lost its sense of direction. Let us hope that the new Commission of President Juncker will be able to redeem the situation. But today, we have a Europe which is ‘reacting’ instead of being ‘proactive’, a Europe which is ‘facing’ or looking at its problems but not really grappling them. In the 1950s European integration was driven by a ‘dream’ of peace and reconciliation.

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The conference sought answers to the question of how to live in Latvia after a severe economic and social crisis. Although often - in addition to present positive developments - we talked also about the less successful cases, it was a chance to see the reality of different situations in Latvia. We will never be able to make our country better if we do not understand the specific things that should be changed. Moreover, it would be difficult to improve our situation if we do not learn from already existing European experiences and are not going to count on European solidarity.”

Europe today has almost 24 million unemployed people, with sky-rocket rates of youth unemployment, the highest in the developed world. In November of last year, the President of the European Commission, Mr Juncker, referred to these 24 million unemployed as the 29th State of the EU. He continued by saying that the principal objective of the EU should be to reverse this reality.

Unfortunately, in most of Europe, the economic crisis of 2008 has been the worse even than that of the Great Depression of 1929. It has resulted in a serious identity crisis for Europe and the revival of prejudices that we thought had been overcome.

Again in the 1990s it was driven by the aspirations of a social Europe, of EMU, of reunification after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Iron Curtain…We were always moving ‘forward’. Today, I fear that Europe is defining itself and advancing only in reaction to external factors, rather than driving its own agenda. For example,

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A Keynote address was given by Andris Piebalgs, Former EU Commissioner and Advisor to the President of Latvia at the conference by Mr. Andris Piebalgs, former EU Commissioner and Advisor to the Latvian President, “solidarity, freedom, tolerance and democracy” are the values the EU which continues to drive the European project. However, it is imperative that Europe captures the essence of what citizens care about and to take action on at affects their daily lives. Today, we need a Europe which respects the principle of subsidiarity and which finds solutions for better social outcomes!

Let us jointly strive for a new European dream. Let us dream together!

The programme and speeches and presentations can be read here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/#!portal-en/events-and-activities-economic-growth-social-progress

The full listing of membership of the study groups for the new work may be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/#!portal-en/group-3-new-study-groups
Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role

BOOSTING INNOVATION FOR A BETTER SOCIAL OUTCOME AT THE GATHERING IN SCOTLAND

On 2 and 3 March Civil Society was mobilised to assist to the NGO-Forum in Riga under Latvian Presidency. For that the CSO members of the Liaison Group had constituted a working group which – together with Andrés Gabrini – prepared a Roadmap for the implementation of the Articles 11 (1) and 11 (2) of the Treaty of the European Union. The aim of the work is, based on the opinion presented by Luca Jahier 3 years ago, to re-launch the process of setting a frame and standards for civil dialogue on European issues at European, national, regional and local level. The hope is that the Latvian Presidency would include elements of the roadmap in the Council conclusions at the end of their term and inspire the EU and the new Commission in particular on this issue. Progress has been made, but there is still confusion between dialogue, communication and consultation. At least Commission VP Dombrovskis together with EESC President Malosse and the Latvian Prime Minister opened the Forum and expressed their commitment to Civil Dialogue.

Following the achievement of the common roadmap, the next phase will be on implementation and the next step shall be the Civil Society Day at EESC in June 2015 before the end of the Latvian Presidency. After having been mobilised, it is now time to remain attentive and to underline that if the challenge of the new Commission is to improve legislation, civil dialogue is not the small item, it is key improve policy making by ex-ante and ex-post impact assessment by and together with civil society and its representatives.

The further information and the full programme can be read here: http://europeamovement.eu/event/ngo-forum-riga-2015/


FEEDING THE PLANET, ENERGY FOR LIFE

“Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life” is the core theme of Expo Milano 2015. This common thread runs through all the events organized both within and outside the official Exhibition Site. Over this six-month period (starting on 1 May 2015), Milan will become a global showcase where more than 140 participating countries will show the best of their technology that offers a concrete answer to a vital need: being able to guarantee healthy, safe and sufficient food for everyone, while respecting the Planet and its equilibrium. In addition to the exhibitor nations, the Expo also involves international organizations, and expects to welcome over 20 million visitors to its 1.1 million square meters of exhibition area. A platform for the exchange of ideas and shared solutions on the theme of food, stimulating each country’s creativity and promoting innovation for a sustainable future, Expo Milano 2015 will talk about mainly on the problems of nutrition and the resources of our planet. The idea is to open up a dialogue between international players, and to exchange views on these major challenges which impact everyone.

Expo Milano 2015 will provide an opportunity to reflect upon, and seek solutions to, the contradictions of our world. On the one hand, there are still the hungry: approximately 870 million people were undernourished in the period 2010-2012 and, on the other, there are those who die from ailments linked to poor nutrition or too much food (approximately 2.8 million deaths from diseases related to obesity or to being overweight in the same period). In addition, about 1.3 billion tons of foods are wasted every year. For these reasons, we need to make conscious political choices, develop sustainable lifestyles, and use the best technology to create a balance between the availability and the consumption of resources.

Reflection on the Expo theme becomes a time of sharing and celebration, involving conferences, events and performances, enhanced by the presence of the mascot “Foody” and the chery characters who accompany him. Every aspect and every moment of, as well as every participant at, Expo Milano 2015 define and move forward the chosen theme: Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life.

The EESC Section for Agriculture, Rural Areas and Environment is going to have its Section Meeting on 4 June 2015 in the EXPO and all members of the NAT Section are going to visit the exhibition on 3 June 2015. The NAT Section plans to present its Food Waste Project and to send a number of members to participate in the events during the EXPO.

Join us in Milan. Learn more and have fun!

NEW TRENDS IN CONSUMPTION

As part of the activities organized for European Consumer Day, on 16 March 2016, some 200 people gathered at the invitation of the EESC to discuss the theme of collaborative consumption. It was noted that this concept is being reproduced in different areas, is growing in scope and is becoming increasingly professional. While goods and services continue to be exchanged free of charge between individuals in a user-friendly manner that raises no particular issues, the system’s economic governance, based on the use of call centres, does raise issues that need to be addressed. Thus, in the course of the day, on the basis of speaker’s contributions, a comprehensive inventory was drawn up of services (such as car sharing, private home rentals, etc.), mostly using platforms that are now paying (Airbnb has a turnover of USD 10 billion…). It became clear from the discussion that this shift away from the sharing economy needs rules, as it cannot remain in a position of legal uncertainty that simply prevents certain trades from dabbling in the grey zone.

More information on the event can be found here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?f=portal/en/events-and-activities-consumer-day-2015
Overview of our Members’ Work in the EESC

At its plenary session on 18-19 March 2015 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.

Michael SMYTH (UK) – ECO/374 “EU strategy and action plan for customs risk management: tackling risks, strengthening supply chain security and facilitating trade” (EESC opinion 7287/2014)

The EESC welcomes the Investment Plan for Europe and appreciates the change of tone away from austerity and fiscal consolidation. The Commission now acknowledges that there is a lack of investment and of aggregate demand and that the financial sector is still not able to play a full role in boosting growth.

The Investment Plan is a step in the right direction but it does face a number of serious questions about its size relative to Europe’s huge investment needs, about the high degree of leverage expected, about the potential flow of suitable investment projects and about the Plan’s timescale.

There is uncertainty about whether a pipeline of projects can be developed that offer returns that attract institutional investors. The EESC believes that, across many project classes, public investment gives better value for money for present and future taxpayers. There is concern, therefore, that in its desire to crowd in private investment the Plan may result in suboptimal outcomes.

The Plan proposes that contributions to the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) from Member States will not be included in budget deficit calculations and this is to be welcomed. This does however beg the question as to why ongoing strategic public infrastructure expenditures are not treated in the same way.

The EESC believes that it is time to recognise that Europe needs a sustained public investment programme in order to regain growth, jobs and prosperity. Strategic public investment such as that envisaged in the Plan which underpins present and future economic development should be incentivised by a more benign European fiscal framework.

PAVEL TRANTINA (CZ) – NAT/633 “Youth Employment Initiative - pre-financing” (EESC opinion 1246/2015)

In this opinion, the EESC:

• welcomes the efforts of the European Commission to substantially increase the initial pre-financing for the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI);
• agrees with the Commission about the need to adjust the Parliament and Council regulation on the European Social Fund in line with the proposal that was put forward;
• is convinced that this initiative should encourage Member States to prioritise the fight against youth unemployment in their national budgets. Bureaucratic procedures should neither prevent the efficient delivery of the €6 billion euros allocated to the Youth Employment initiative, nor slow down any other initiatives aimed at efficiently combating current youth unemployment;
• considers the YEI to be an opportunity to review the future of work in Member States – public employment services must become much more pro-active, better synergies between education and training and actors of the labour market must be created, young people must be adequately and promptly informed about their rights and opportunities;
• strongly encourages the involvement of organised civil society in the design and monitoring of the national YEI programmes on a partnership basis. It is convinced that involving the social partners will ensure the consent of large parts of the population and thus social stability;
• calls on the European Commission to closely monitor the challenges to the implementation of the YEI especially to the Youth Guarantee. The monitoring process should not only be based on quantitative analysis but also on more qualitative indicators.

NOTE: The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee’s website: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.opinions-search

News from Group III

Group III is pleased to welcome three new members, two of whom are from Ireland and the third from Italy.

John BRYAN was the 12th President of the Irish Farmers’ Association and began his four-year term on January 12th 2010. During his time as president he also served as a member of the Bord Bia Board of Directors, Chairman of the meat and livestock committee and as a Vice-President of COPA with responsibility for trade.

John Bryan served as Chairman of the IFA Livestock Committee from 2004 to 2008. During that time he undertook two visits to Brazil to highlight the lack of standards in that country’s beef production. The EU Commission subsequently imposed a ban on Brazilian beef. John also served as Chairman of IFA Killenny. John replaces Padraig Walsh, who has resigned from the Committee.

Cillian LOVAN has replaced our former member Siobhán Egan, who resigned from the Committee. He is an Environmental Scientist and the CEO of the Green Economy Foundation.

Originally, this NGO worked exclusively on forestry issues. Forest policy in Ireland was promoting unsustainable practices. An aggressive afforestation programme set a target of covering 17% of the country by 2035. The policy for how this was to be achieved was set out in a government document called Growing for the Future (1996). The focus on planting large monocultures of non-native Sitka spruce designed for clearfell has led to a range of environmental and social failing of the forest policy in Ireland. The role of his organisation, when founded, was to campaign for a robust, inclusive sustainable forestry programme. They campaign for mixed species broadleaf forests, cognisant of the need for a commercial return, while protecting biodiversity.

As the Green Economy Foundation, Cillian now leads an NGO that focuses on job creation through the environment. They are a leading organisation working on the sustainability of Ireland’s ambitious growth plans for the agrifood sector. Cillian’s expertise has been utilised to coordinate the NGO sectors input to the greening of the Irish economy, including specific areas like resource efficiency and green public procurement.

Flora GOLINI replaces our member Mr Rositza, who sadly passed away some months ago. She was already a GR III Delegate in the CCMI and has a lot of experience in the Committee. She is a CIU Board member and is a representative of the Confederazione italiana di unione delle professioni intellettuali (Italian confederation of intellectual professions) (CIU). Ms Golini is the CIU representative on the technical committee of the national fund for lifelong learning for corporate employees, middle managers and managers (Fondiazioni). She is also a Lawyer specialising in EU employees and policies to obtain EU funding for training, high-tech, renewable energy and SMEs.

Culture, Art and European Identity’

On Wednesday 18 March 2015, we welcomed a guest speaker at our group meeting. Paul Dujardin is Director of the Palais de Beaux Art, otherwise known as BOZAR, in Brussels, which under the stewardship of Mr Dujardin has developed into a world class cultural and artistic centre, welcoming more than 1 million visitors annually. In view of the exceptional contribution of Mr Dujardin to the Belgian cultural scene, the federal government amended its legislation, enabling Mr Dujardin to continue in his role for a third consecutive term.

At our meeting on 18 March, the Director of Bazar was invited to speak on the topic ‘Culture, Art and European Identity’. In his intervention, he highlighted that in Europe today, we need strategic images of Europe which go beyond the Euro and we need narratives on the continent’s cultural diversity, which is one of its greatest assets. He stressed that the European cultural model is one of dialogue, respect, responsibility and inclusivity. Europeans can share the same ‘space’, without sharing the same ideas, but today in Europe we need an open debate on common European values. Mr Dujardin ended his presentation by noting that Artists are Ambassadors for Europe, who can contribute to the local narrative and build bridges with politicians.

For the full text of the presentation of Mr Paul Dujardin, please see the website of the Various Interests Group at: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.group-3-news

JUST FOR A LAUGH

Remember when people had diaries and got mad when someone read them? Now they put everything online and get mad when people don’t.