A Mixture of Sadness, Anger, Solidarity and... Hope

We are three Belgian members from Group III, our Group, and another Belgian colleague from the Group III secretariat.

The cruel, mindless attacks carried out right in the centre of Brussels, in the heart of Europe, have affected us deeply and left us with a mixture of anger and sadness, but also solidarity and, despite everything, hope, without being naive.

Our thoughts are, of course, first and foremost with the victims, both direct and indirect, and their families, friends and colleagues. We would like to thank all those who have supported and continue to support all the people suffering so greatly at this time, with deep physical and psychological wounds. Colleagues from our group and members of our organisations are also among those affected. It is entirely natural for our feelings to run high, but our anger must on no account lead to revenge. The past has shown that even the greatest crisis can and must give rise to reflection, to more effective measures, so that lessons can be learned to ensure a better future. Dictatorships, extremism, intolerance, stigmatisation and populism have never resulted in a better society or sustainable solutions. There is a message for our Committee in this tragedy. Now, more than ever, we need an approach based on mutual respect, dialogue, listening to each other and human and universal values, such as solidarity. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to adopt this mindset, and to our countries, Europe, the world and, of course, the victims of these absurd attacks and their relatives. Violence must never be allowed to win. Let us not be afraid - we must be vigilant, but continue to live our lives.

On 16 March, Commission Vice-President Federica Mogherini was a guest participant at our plenary session. This was the first visit of the High Representative for Foreign Policy, and also the first time a high representative attended an EESC plenary session. As the president of the External Relations section, I welcome the cooperation we have with the EEAS and Ms Mogherini’s private office. I would also like to congratulate Ms Mogherini on the results she has achieved as High Representative in recent EU foreign affairs “success stories”: the Colombia peace process, the nuclear deal with Iran, work on humanitarian access on the ground in managing refugee flows. I would like to emphasise the success achieved in saving lives, and also the decisions on relocation, resettlements and hotspots. Thus, the results of Ms Mogherini’s work are visible to all, and we firmly support her.

Today, foreign policy is no longer about what happens in a distant country. It affects our own lives, on an every day basis. Foreign policy concerns us all. I would like to emphasise our main priorities in the REX section – the enlarged EU neighbourhood and peace-building. In addition, we should not forget that the EU is the most successful peace-building project in the world. And we hope these priorities are going to be reflected in the EEAS’ new strategy. When presenting the concepts of the new European Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy, the EEAS focused on two main principles: The first one being consistency, the second one responsible engagement. We fully support these principles. Responsible engagement goes hand in hand with partnership. However, it is crucial both at regional and local level, on the ground, where we must find the right partners to promote democracy, stability and national reconciliation. And here, the EESC may be able to assist Ms Mogherini in finding the right partners and networks. Being an organised European civil society, we can facilitate this process, which has to be as inclusive as possible, to make our societies as open as they can be. That is why I believe it is important for our Committee to be involved in the EEAS strategic reflection – to obtain the many different views and perspectives, and creating synergies between the various civil society representatives active in the field. Let me finish by reminding everyone that the EESC has the expertise, the overall vision, the networks and the capacity to become a key partner of the EEAS in dialogue with civil society as part of the EU’s external action. The dialogue structures set up by the EESC respond mostly to its mandates under EU international agreements: strategic partnerships, association agreements, free trade agreements, agreements with candidate countries. The EESC has done a huge amount of work monitoring the EU’s external policy since its inception, which over the years has taken the form of permanent structures for dialogue with third countries and regions throughout the world. These existing bodies could be extremely useful for the EEAS, which may find in them representative, experienced and inclusive (employers, trade unions, third sector organisations, NGO networks) civil society partners.

In the context of the current crisis, the global review of foreign and external policy that Ms Mogherini and her team are currently preparing is important to all of us. But the crisis we are currently experiencing is part of a larger strategic framework. The epicentre of this unprecedented crisis illustrates that war, extreme poverty and extreme economic imbalances lead to phenomena of mass migration. Within this context, we need to start working on the deeper causes, in order to find longer-term solutions. First of all, we should have a global and long-term approach, a proposal that we have mentioned in one of our Opinions on the external dimension of the Lisbon treaty (http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?l=portal&l=en&inst=institutional-reform-documents-opinions-30771). We should seriously consider creating a so-called “alliance for progress”, including Europe, the Mediterranean region and the whole of Africa. With its 2.5 billion people, Africa has a huge potential both for Europe and the local population.

Secondly, we need to put civil society at the heart of all reflections, dialogue and decisions. Dialogue and the role of civil society can only work if there is independence, continuity and a clear structure. The Committee has always provided that stable framework. We need to work with Ms Mogherini and her team, so that together, we can come up with a strategy to create a structured and stable dialogue, including an external policy view. That vision is the main part of the participatory democracy we represent.
SPECIAL FEATURE: Ukraine, the Treaty and the referendum

On 6 April a referendum took place in the Netherlands on the EU’s Association Agreement with Ukraine. 53% of Dutch nationals eligible to vote took the trouble to go to the polling station and 61% of them voted against the Treaty. Why this referendum and what are the implications? An attempt at clarification.

On 1 July 2015, the Law on Consultative Referendums (“Wet raadpleegbare referendum”) entered into force. Ever since, citizens have been able to request a referendum on draft laws adopted by the States-General and ratified by the King and a minister. If a majority of eligible voters vote against a law, then, providing the voter turnout is 30% or higher, a new legislative proposal must be submitted or the law can be overturned by the States-General. The Law on Consultative Referendums is the first permanent legislation regarding referendums in the Netherlands.

In order to be able to apply for a referendum on an adopted legislative proposal, 300,000 citizens need to sign it. These signatures can be collected via the internet (with two mouse clicks). No paper signatures are thus needed. This makes the collection of signatures relatively simple.

Chance

The first request for a referendum submitted after the entry into force of the Law on Advisory Referendums concerned the Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States and Ukraine. This is partly pure coincidence, as the Law approving the Association Agreement was adopted on 8 July 2015, i.e. one week after the entry into force of the Law on Advisory Referendums. This coincidence was seized on by a number of organisations, the main one being GeenStijl, to highlight their opposition to the EU. GeenStijl is a political initiative set up in 2014 with the aim of “destroying” the European Union. GeenStijl is closely associated with the GeenStijl blog, which was established in April 2003. GeenStijl is regarded as right-wing/populist, its style being ironic, direct, open and tough, deliberately eschewing political correctness, journalistic principles and nuance.

Clearly, in addition to the specific referendum questions: “Are you for or against the ratification of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine?”, many other issues were raised, both in the debates preceding the referendum and the vote itself. In particular, confidence in the EU, the Dutch Government under Prime Minister Mark Rutte, and politics in general.

Perverse

One particular aspect of the Law on Advisory Referendums is that government and parliament only have to take account of the outcome of a referendum if the voter turnout is above the 30% threshold. When the law was being adopted, academics warned about the perverse consequences of this provision. These consequences were brought to light by this referendum in the following way. Public opinion polls conducted before the referendum suggested that the “no” camp (no to the Association Agreement) had a clear majority, but, that in all likelihood, fewer than one third of all eligible voters would take the trouble to cast their vote. Members of the “yes” camp thus faced a dilemma: not to vote in an attempt to keep the turnout below 30%, or not to take the risk and vote anyway. Right up to the day of the referendum, many voters were struggling with that dilemma, and on the day itself, the turnout was constantly under the media spotlight, with the final figures being higher than expected. The responsible minister made it clear he would evaluate the result, and it is expected that changes will be made to the law.

Challenge

Cabinet and parliament are currently considering follow-up action, a challenge to which there is no easy solution. A distinct parliamentary majority is in favour of the Association Agreement. Of the larger parties, only Geert Wilders’ populist far-right PVV and the left-wing Socialist Party are against it. However, politicians cannot afford to ignore the outcome of this first valid consultative referendum. This would give rise to even greater cynicism about politics and only play into the hands of populist forces.

It is expected that the government will take the time to discuss the way ahead with “Brussels”. And meanwhile, the EU, the 28 member states and Ukraine are simply going ahead with implementing the Association Agreement, since in the EU, practice ratification is desirable but not always indispensable.

Be assured that the next referendum is already looming on the horizon, in the event that the Dutch parliament should approve the TTIP trade agreement between the EU and the USA, and voters will have their say.

Explanation of vote

Finally, a few words about my own vote. I voted in favour of the Association Agreement. Partly out of my own conviction concerning the desirability of European integration, and partly because of opinions from Ukraine. I work for a Dutch nature and environmental organisation. We have established contacts with a major counterpart organisation in Ukraine, and their opinion was clear. They are already feeling the positive impact of the Association Agreement and are convinced agreements with the EU are needed to assist Ukraine on the way to sustainability.

News from Group III

Special guest at Group III Meeting Jorge Nuño Mayer, Secretary General of Caritas

On March 16, Jorge Nuño Mayer, secretary general of Caritas, took part in the Group III meeting. As explained, Caritas recently published a ‘Crisis monitoring report’, based on statistics from 27 countries. This report highlighted in-work poverty and long-term unemployment as Europe’s top challenges. The report ‘End poverty in Europe’ will be published in mid-April.

During his presentation, M. Mayer welcomed the Commission’s proposals, but called for a clear vision and concrete measures. “Europe has focused too much on a growth agenda”, he specified. “What is needed now is a new economic paradigm to tackle inequalities in Europe”.

More specifically, M. Mayer stated that social investment and dialogue with civil society should be at the heart of this agenda. The Europe 2020 strategy and the European semester can be powerful tools for a more inclusive Europe. M. Mayer concluded by saying that if the EU and Member States returned to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, they would find committed partners in civil society.
Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role

Thierry Libaert (FR)
Member of the Various Interests Group

56% INCREASE IN PRODUCT SALES WHEN LABELLED "LONG-LASTING" - NEW EESC STUDY ON PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE

On March 29th, the EESC released a study, entitled “The influence of Lifespan Labelling on Consumers,” clearly demonstrating the effect of lifetime labelling on consumer purchasing behaviour. It is very clear that products, labelled as long-lasting, such as suitcases and printers, would see a huge boost in sales, by 12% and 70% respectively. Smartphones are markedly affected, with an increase of 41% on sales for products indicating a longer lifespan. Interestingly, the importance of the product lifetime to consumers increases proportionally to the amount consumers are prepared to spend.

What this first European study shows beyond any doubt, is that the issue of planned obsolescence is not so much due to obsolescence being planned, as it is to consumers not having enough information about the products’ lifespan. Putting consumers first, by improving the information they have about the products they buy, is important in terms of the economy, society and the environment, as well as being a key catalyst for restoring business confidence,” said Thierry Libaert, rapporteur for the EESC opinion.


The 4th Global meeting for Policy Forum for Development, held in Brussels, provided an excellent opportunity for getting updates on EU development policy and its impact on other parts of the World. Concerning uneven distribution of wealth, poor living conditions, both in urban and rural areas, were just a few items on the agenda.

My special interest, a user-friendly society for all, is of course a relevant topic, but compared with hunger, lack of sanitation, disease, the need for creating an environment where all users can cope it might seem a minor concern. Nevertheless, even the developing countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and it is therefore a core part of SDG-s and an important task to work on.

I was also acting as rapporteur for a workshop on the second day on a rights-based approach to development. Our group was very diverse, but the discussions reflected the universality of rights. One interesting question emerged. We all have different aspirations for a better world, but what exactly is preventing us from achieving these goals? There is no easy answer to that question.

It was lovely to meet new people and also some I had met earlier at EU-Africa and EU-ACP events, such as Helma Mote from Togo and Anne-Cécile Coly from Senegal.

More info is available at http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu

THE POWERFUL VERSUS THE POWERLESS

We are all aware of concepts such as alienation, social exclusion and poverty, but there are growing communities feeling helpless and hopeless. These are the catchphrases used by analysts to characterise the latent violence and anti-social behaviour that originates in communities whose social conditions are precarious and where families are struggling to maintain the basic needs to live. In these situations some of the youth find extreme movements to align themselves with and volunteer to commit acts of violence on a mass scale. The rest simply get very angry and support political parties with extreme policies.

So when SOC recently met and heard presentations on the subject of poverty, from Dr. Sean Healy of Social Justice Ireland and Brenda King, EESC member and President of the Sustainable Development Observatory, it proved to be a lively and intense discussion.

In quoting the statistics which show that 23 million people in the EU are classified as being in the poverty trap and the fact that child poverty is now at its highest, there is at least the suggestion that, as in a union, we are failing our children and in so doing, we are failing as a European Union. Such a failure ensures that we as citizens, represented by the European institutions, are neglecting the most vulnerable members of our communities. As a consequence, we are alienating more and more people who in turn become totally disconnected from the European principles on which the EU was founded. The report presented by Dr Healy, namely ‘Europe for the powerless‘ and the powerful www.socialjusticeireland.ie, shows a Europe that is dividing into two main parts, the powerful and the increasing population who feel they belong to the powerless category.

The powerless communities are gravitating towards the political extremes, and a small minority are attracted to movements which promote violence in order to achieve their particular aims.

It is not as if the European institutions are doing nothing about poverty and social exclusion. Fighting Poverty is one of the core objectives of the EU 2020 agreement. There is a requirement for each member state to report to the Commission on the achievement of targets that improve people’s situations. One of the seven flagship’s which is part of the 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth is the establishment of the European platform against poverty and social exclusion (EPASE). Last recorded in 2014 and projected up to 2020, it is designed to encourage member states to achieve targets that will cumulatively lift 20 million people out of poverty.

The target did not foresee the financial collapse with the resulting austerity measures; nor did it predict the huge migration crisis.

Among the criticisms of these initiatives is the fact that, according to the latest figures, there is an increase in poverty and social exclusion. There is a sense that the issue is no longer on the EU-agenda and as a consequence, the problem is growing to a point where it threatens the core survival of the Union.

The presentation by Brenda King, President of the Sustainable Development Observatory at the European Economic Social Committee, makes it clear that there are considerable synergies in the achievement of sustainable development and fighting poverty. Clearly, communities who are working towards sustainability objectives will have failed, should targets on poverty reduction not be achieved. This is why the achievements of countries that have undersigned the Cop 21 Paris agreement, must build into its implementation, a true sense that poverty and Social Inclusion will be eliminated.

With their interventions, the SOC members showed they were well aware of the complex issues the EU is facing. Equally, the continuing alienation of communities in Europe as a result of failing to deal with their situation, will threaten the principles and values which were fundamental to the EU’s foundations.
At its plenary session on 16-17 March 2016 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.

Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL) Vice President and Member of the Various Interests Group

STRUCTURAL REFORM SUPPORT PROGRAMME

The EESC welcomes the initiative aimed at enhancing the capacity of the European Union (EU) to support structural reform at a national level, through a specific funding mechanism such as the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP).

The EESC regrets that the total budget allocated to this fund falls short of what is needed for the macroeconomic policy reforms in the EU; it further regrets that the funding for the SRSP comes from existing ESF (European Structural and Investment Funds) resources, and calls for future reforms of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework to create a self-sustaining structural reform support programme.

In order to ensure the success of the SRSP, the EESC calls strongly for the inclusion of social partners and civil society in the SRSP (identification and initiation of the support, design and monitoring at national, regional and local levels). The eligible actions should include capacity building for social and civil society players involved in policy reform programmes.

The EESC would like funds to be transferred to the new programme, to comply with the participatory requirements for social partners and civil society, and be subject to the same monitoring mechanism as in the ESIF Common Provision Regulation (CPR).

Cristian PIRVULESCU (RO) Member of the Various Interests Group

EUROPEAN AGENDA ON SECURITY


The EESC encourages the Member States to pool resources to combat both trafficking in firearms and ammunition, and terrorism. However, increasing the number of European and national safeguards could have a cumulative effect and harm fundamental rights.

The Committee believes that Europeans have the right to be both secure and free.

The Committee considers it dangerous for any democracy to legislate against anticipated crimes (criminalising offences or crimes which have not yet been committed). Article 3(2)(i) of the proposal must be removed to avoid confusion between justice and security. Similarly, Article 15 of the proposal for a directive does not guarantee public freedom or the presumption of innocence.

Tools to prevent radicalisation must be developed. Prevention policies and programmes must target individuals and groups most predisposed to use violence for the purpose of terrorism.

The role of civil society is crucial in dealing with the conditions which foster radicalisation and the use of violence.

Steps must be taken to coordinate Europe’s foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa. The Committee considers that a clear commitment to stabilisation, development and democratisation efforts in this area must be a priority. Priority must also be given to combating poverty, corruption and political and social exclusion.

The Committee considers that drastically curbing access to firearms, ammunition and explosives must be a priority. Links between terrorist groups and organised crime are a major threat to the security of people in Europe.

The Committee supports the clarifications to the legislation on the victims of terrorism. Victims of terrorism must be supported swiftly and efficiently, including in the medium and long term. Preventing and combating terrorism comes at a price, and the EU must consider providing financial support for member state action in this area.

Overview of our Members’ Work in the EESC

Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

Giuseppe GUFN (IT) the co-Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Action Plan on VAT” - ECO/606

Victor AUSTER (RO) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on “Proposal on public tax transparency (country-by-country reporting)” - ECO/407

Krystof BALCON (PL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Revision of the Posting of Workers Directive (96/71/EC)” - SOC/541

Ania RODERT (SE) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “European Pillar of Social Rights” - SOC/542

Mihai NAȘCU (RO) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Challenges faced by the steel industry” - CCM/H/46

Gabriel SARRO IPARRAGUIRE (ES) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Removing obstacles to sustainable aquaculture in Europe” - NAT/688

Lutz RIBBE (DE) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Mid-term evaluation of the LIFE Programme” - NAT/689

Yves SOMVILLE (BE) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “The Road from Paris” - NAT/690

Balázs MILTÓVICS (HU) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “EU strategy on heating and cooling” - TEN/591

Antonio LONGO (IT) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “eGovernment Action Plan 2016 – 2020” - TEN/594

Antonio LONGO (IT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “European Cloud Initiative – Building a competitive data and knowledge economy in Europe” - TEN/592

The full listing of membership of the study groups for the new work may be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?l=en&group=3

How do you defeat terrorism? Don’t be terrorized.

Salman Rushdie
Novelist and essayist