Returning to public duty in Europe after the summer break is tougher than ever this year.

On the one hand, there is the vision of a Continent on the verge of a nervous breakdown, like someone “sleepwalking towards a cliff”, as the Prime Minister of Greece, Mr Alexis Tsipras, succinctly put it in a recent interview with *Le Monde*. On the other hand, change may be in the air, with an agenda calling for us to focus on practical initiatives and new, long-term horizons.

Unfortunately today, the risk of disintegration, prompted by a host of hair-raising problems, has once again reared its ugly head. We are faced with the familiar story of too many challenges coming at once - from Brexit to the still unresolved refugee crisis, from entrenched stagnation in the Euro area to efforts to combat the threat of radicalisation and terrorism. As a direct consequence and fuelled by weak or contradictory initiatives and responses, we are seeing an upsurge in populism across the whole of the European continent. Indeed, it would appear that if one espouses (figuratively speaking) on refugees and migrants, if one issues threats and builds new walls and barbed-wire fences, if one shifts the entire blame for everything that goes wrong on to the European institutions, then the chances of winning elections will be increased. And that is exactly what is happening: at a time of heightened international tension (from the war in Syria to the endless scenes of instability along the borders of Europe), tragically, protectionism in international economic and trade relations is making a decisive comeback.

However, it is precisely at times like these, in the throes of immense challenges, that new opportunities open up for the future. We have already planned to tackle our future work in a systemic manner, demonstrating pragmatism, foresight and coherence. I am convinced that most players will rally behind these three words, notwithstanding the fragility of the present moment and some degree of confusion and difficulty when it comes to agreeing on joint action. The State of the Union address by the President of the European Commission, Mr Jean-Claude Juncker, to the European Parliament, the extraordinary summit in Bratislava, the various EU legislative initiatives that are already in the pipeline under the Slovak and Maltese Presidencies and the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome at the end of March 2017: these are all milestones in this process. The first thing is to take practical decisions, ensuring that measures are realistic and meet the demands of the people of Europe, summed up so clearly in Eurobarometer surveys. More than 60% of Europeans called for more resolute action by the EU in the following nine areas: terrorism (82%), unemployment, tax evasion, migration, protection of the external borders, democracy and peace in the world, the environment, security and defence, health and social security (63%).

We also need to examine the longer-term perspective and reflect on what kind of future we want for Europe in 20 years’ time. Issues to be considered include the practical agenda of the Energy Union, which can act as a driver for massive change, progress, employment and security. Similarly, we should give a fresh boost to and indeed double the ambitions of the Juncker Plan, focusing it on tangible European projects. We must invest in young people through dedicated projects (Youth Guarantee, Erasmus, European civic service). Finally, we must find the concrete means to overcome the challenges facing the economy, the labour market and society at large, resulting from the digital transformation and we must identify new industrial, social and cohesion policies to accompany these changes. To say nothing of the need to reform and consolidate the institutional set-up of the EU (an issue being addressed by the European Parliament) and the new EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy, which together, embody the many challenges facing the EU on the world stage.

It may indeed seem daunting as we contemplate the scale of the tasks ahead and we may experience a sense of genuine humility as each of us tries to do his or her part to ensure success. It will be impossible to achieve these goals without the backing of a revitalised and united civil society. To do all this, we need a new narrative and this will entail drawing on the immense energy of culture as a source of regeneration.

What Europe needs is a new Renaissance and each and every one of us has a part to play in it.
EU and Turkey

Reasonable dialogue for reasonable solutions

In recent years, Turkey has been at the forefront of the global political scene thanks to the Syrian crisis, the massive flow of refugees to Europe and the recently failed coup.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared a state of emergency in Turkey after a failed putsch on 15 July during which 240 people, mostly civilians, were killed. More than 60,000 people in the military, judiciary, civil service and education system have been detained, suspended or placed under investigation since the coup attempt, in which rogue soldiers commandeered tanks and warplanes to try to take power.

Europeans are concerned that Erdoğan, already seen as an authoritarian leader, is using the coup attempt as an excuse to further tighten his grip. Many EU politicians criticize Turkey’s handling of the post-coup security operations, while the Turkish government protests against the EU’s lack of empathy. So what can be done beyond simply spouting words?

EU citizens are deeply worried by the latest developments in Turkey, including the cancellation of the prestigious Jean Monnet scholarship (which aims to help cultivate pro-EU high-flyers in the long-standing candidate state), the new attacks on the freedom of the press and human rights with the ban of the daily paper ‘Ozgur Gundem’ and the detention of 23 journalists and staff members in Istanbul on 16 August. The impact of the Turkish state on civil society organisations (CSOs), which includes formal non-governmental organisations, business organisations, women’s organisations, advocacy, community and religious groups, has also been noted with concern. The developments raise serious questions about the future of independent CSOs in Turkey, and the broader role of civil society.

Yes, we all condemned the failed coup, and insist that the “state of emergency” cannot be used to abuse democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The failed coup should be a reason to uphold, not violate, ILO conventions and the International and European conventions on human rights.

That is why we must adapt and make the EU resilient to rapid geopolitical changes. We live in a time of extreme dynamism and instability. We need to develop proper and effective crisis-management approaches as crisis has become part of our lives. We need reasonable and EU-wide solutions to the challenges in front of us, and we need to treat the problems of refugee flows and Turkey at EU level and not at Member State level.

“If we want Turkey to be cooperative and to be a partner, we desperately need to change the way we look at Turkey,” said Jana Jabbour, from the Paris-based Sciences Po. “Through the deal with the EU on refugees, Turkey was simply looking to share the burden of European countries in order to share power by being recognised as a real partner,” added Ms Jabbour, noting that there is a clear need for better understanding of partners’ motives and to move away from the thinking that Europe is the ultimate model of value-driven modernity.

What are the solutions?

The cost of excluding Turkey from European integration is very high for both the EU and Turkish citizens. So it is not an option. If Turkey had been properly engaged in the EU accession process since negotiations began in 2005 — on issues ranging from foreign policy, the rule of law and refugees to economic growth or energy policies — the picture today would be quite different.

The only reasonable solution is to be partners. This is where EU civil society has a role to play in promoting partnership and defending and transmitting democratic values, not only in the area of policy, but also in the private sector at all levels of society. Civil society can help to support democratic development and trade and cultural exchange between both parties.

Europe should be much more creative and smarter in its treatment of Turkey. We cannot change geopolitical location and our neighbours but we could be more innovative and cooperative in interacting with them. Based on their national interests, Turkey and Europe should be moderating their rhetoric in order to increase cooperation on urgent policy issues that continuously affect both sides. We should always remember that in the present political situation, Turkey is still an important geo-strategic neighbour. Moreover, no Member State can successfully negotiate issues with Turkey individually. The EU needs to have a clear common policy and strategy to meet the challenges of an efficient migration process, strong border control and a filtered flow approach towards real refugees and economic migrants based on real cooperation with Turkey and between EU Member States themselves in order to find sustainable solutions to the migration crisis.

Cooperation and border controls also need to be strengthened to counter terrorism as a major threat to our peace and security. In addition, the negotiations with Turkey should be conducted at EU level, not at Member State level. It is high time that we act as partners with Turkey to achieve reasonable dialogue for reasonable solutions.

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Various Interests’ Group

Member of the

President of REX section

Dilyana SLAVOVA (BG)

Member of the

President of REX section

Various Interests’ Group

Delyana SLAVOVA (BG)
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE MAY AND JULY PLENARY SESSION

Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

MAY

Carlos TRIAS PINTÓ (ES) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Communication on collaborative economy” - INT/793

Benedicte FEDERSPIEL (DK) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Communication on European standardisation” - INT/794

Bernardo HERNANDEZ BATALLER (ES) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Legislative proposal on unjustified geoblocking on DSM” - INT/797

Jorge PEGADO LIZ (PT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “EU Consumer and Marketing law” - INT/795

Ákos TOPOLÁNSZKY (HU) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Revision of anti-money-laundering directive” - ECO/408

Antonio LONGO (IT) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Review of the Audio-Visual Media Services Directive” – TEN/599

Antonio LONGO (IT) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Review of the wholesale roaming market in the EU” – TEN/600

Michael MCLOUGHLIN (IE) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Lives in Dignity: from Aid-dependence to Self-reliance” - REX/469

JUNE

Bernardo HERNANDEZ BATALLER (ES) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Consumer protection laws” - INT/798

Gabriel SARRÓ IPARRAGUIRRE (ES) is the General Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “The characteristics of fishing vessels (recast)” - NAT/694

JULY

Reine-Claude MADER (FR) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Involvement of consumers and other financial services end-users in Union policy making in the field of financial services (2017-2020)” – INT/801

Arno METZLER (DE) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Competition policy 2015” – INT/800

Giuseppe GUERINI (IT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Regulation amending the European Venture Capital Fund (EuVECA) and European Social Entrepreneurship (EuSEF) Fund regulations (Rolling programme)” – ECO/413

Indré VAREIKYTĖ (LT) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Skills strategy and human capital” - SOC/546

Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO) is the Co-Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Common European Asylum System Reform Package II” - SOC/547

Mindaugas MACIULEVIČIUS (LT) is the Co-Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “Effort Sharing Decision in 2030 Climate and Energy Policy Framework and Emissions and removals from land use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF)” - NAT/696

Bernardo HERNANDEZ BATALLER (ES) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Strengthening Europe’s Cyber Resilience System” - TEN/608

Krzysztof KAMIEÑIECKI (PL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Decarbonisation of transport” - TEN/609

Etele BARÁTH (HU) is the Rapporteur of the study group for the opinion on: “2017 Annual Growth Survey” - SC/046

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
Trained as a chemical engineer, Michel Dubromel worked in a multinational company until 2003, where he was principally responsible for quality management and environmental management systems. He ran the “sustainable transport and mobility network” of France Nature Environnement (the main French association for environmental protection – 800,000 members) from 2003 to 2015 and has been a regional director since 1994. After representing FNE at the “Grenelle de l’Environnement” talks, he has advocated a modal shift to enable greenhouse gas emissions to be reduced. He has also expanded his expertise in urban logistics, eco-mobility, and transport-related energy and health problems. He has successively represented FNE on the boards of the French Environment and Energy Management Agency and the SNCF, as well as on the board of the European Federation for Transport and Environment. He represents FNE on the board of the European Environmental Bureau (http://www.eeb.org/) and HEAL (http://www.env-health.org/). Michel Dubromel has been vice-president of FNE since the end of March 2015. A member of the EESC since September 2015, he is the co-spokesperson of the Consumers and Environment Category. After having represented the EESC at the pre-COP 22 meetings, Michel Dubromel will represent the EESC at COP 22 in Marrakesh in November.

They are discriminated against in almost every aspect of their life, from access to the labour market to healthcare, from education to culture.

The Roma cannot really be included if half of their community has little or no opportunity to express their needs and make their voice heard. Roma inclusion policy needs Roma women activists and advocates. It is clear that the gender dimension also has to play an important role in the success of National Roma Integration Strategies (NRISs).

These questions were addressed by the hearing of the permanent study group on Roma inclusion held on 2 September, which aimed to establish the state of play, to look into how the participation of Roma women in public life can be improved and to exchange good practices and come up with conclusions that will feed into the work of the EESC’s permanent study group on Roma inclusion.

Experts revealed the facts about the level and pattern of segregation and multiple discrimination facing Roma women, and public figures and decision-making representatives shared their views on possible policy solutions. However, the most touching part of the meeting was when strong Roma women spoke out and told their STORIES and examples which changed both their and their fellow women’s lives. These all created an extraordinarily climate of discussion and the realistic feeling of hope for change.

A delegation of members from our group was invited by our colleague Marina Calderone, president of the National Council of the Association of Employment Consultants, to attend an inspiring employment congress held in Rome on 2 and 3 July. The Italian Council was able to mobilise at least 7000 members, independent labour consultants who give advice mainly to small and medium-sized companies on a large range of issues relating to management and work organisation. This made for a very diverse range of subjects on the table at the Congress, including: human resources policy, financing, technological development, consumer affairs, growth, and the social model of the future. The issues were presented by experts, relevant operators, representatives of public authorities, and consultants. Our EESC delegation comprised the group president Luca Jahier, as well as Arno

When it comes to Roma issues, the gender dimension has long been neglected. However, women play an essential role in Roma society and ensuring their participation is key to improving their situation.

The educational qualifications, employment level and income of Roma women are significantly lower even compared with Roma men. They are in a poorer state of health, have less access to healthcare and social services, and therefore their life expectancy is also shorter. At present, the risks and dangers they are exposed to are not stressed emphatically enough.

Roma women face much more serious multiple discrimination than men from the same ethnic group or women from the majority, and the employment rate of Roma women is even lower than that of Roma men. However, given their role in the family, women can be the cornerstones of the inclusion of marginalised communities.
Metzler representing the professions and Ronny Lannoo for SMEs.

They had plenty of opportunity to present the Committee's activities in general and those of our group in particular. In addition, this very well-organised congress was preceded by an audience with Pope Francis, who explicitly mentioned the congress and the EESC delegations in his address. The Pope also emphasised the importance of employment in small companies, of meaningful work for everyone and of social dialogue.

The topics addressed during the congress and the many talks demonstrated once more how the same concerns exist everywhere in Europe, albeit in different variations. This is further evidence of how important a European framework still is for addressing real issues in many areas. Moreover, it is still very interesting for members of the EESC and of our group to actually learn about the initiatives of the organisations we represent in a real setting. And for those in any doubt: the Italians really can be very effective organisers! This congress was a striking example of that.

On 22 June, the European Foundation Centre Disability Thematic Network brought together representatives from EU institutions, foundations, NGOs and academia to discuss the role of accessibility in creating a more inclusive Europe.

Starting from the assumption that accessibility is essential to full participation and inclusion in society, and is a human right, speakers examined and discussed this issue from a variety of perspectives: touching on transport, education, employment, housing, social services, leisure and culture, from a detailed review of the EU Accessibility Act to consideration of the value of inclusive sport. This day gave an overview of the work to be done in relation to accessibility and the vast potential which could be tapped by creating a more accessible world.

As Mr Vardakastanis pointed out, accessibility is also at the heart of the work on disability carried out within the EESC by a group that started as an ad hoc group in 2014 and has now become a permanent study group. Mr Kósa emphasised that support is strong in the European Parliament and with the potential of new technologies, a forward-thinking perspective and a frank exchange of views, the EAA could help to achieve a more mainstreamed life for many people with disabilities. As Anna Lawson pointed out, although accessibility is recognised as a right, it is not a new right— it is latent in all others. The EU has a key role to play in ensuring that Member States accept and act—as otherwise, the potential of accessibility is “disabling and wasteful”. Inmaculada Placencia Porrero from the European Commission said that the Act would build on existing accessibility work and its main aim was to harmonise all different national legislative systems in terms of accessibility requirements for selected products and services. Three panels contributed to explain the perspective of accessibility in three different dimensions, relating specifically to international cooperation, inclusion in the community and the culture and leisure dimension. Several good examples were presented and used as a basis for discussing the role of accessibility in Europe and beyond.

During the conclusions, Catherine Naughton of the European Disability Forum said that lack of accessibility wasted human potential, and called for Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities to be implemented properly. Miguel Angel Cabra de Luna, representing both the EESC and Fundación ONCE, emphasised the value of discussions which caused all stakeholders to meet and discuss the topic of accessibility. He called for the foundation sector to stand up for effective partnerships on accessibility. Finally, Michael Fembek, Chair of the EFC Disability Thematic Network and director of the Zero Project at ESSL Foundation, responded that we must be ready to move, respond to the way in which technology can help, and continue fighting for a more accessible future.

The traditional summit of business, government and civil society leaders discussing climate change problems took place in London on 21-29 June. It was a good opportunity for three members from the EESC (Brenda King (Gr. I), Brian Curtis (Gr. II) and Vitas Maciulis (Gr. III)) to participate in this important event. It is even more important that many EESC opinions this year are concerned with energy and climate change issues. Up-to-date news from top-level policy makers and experts will be very valuable for improving the quality and efficiency of our opinions.
Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role

The summit kicked off with an inspiring presentation by Segolène Royal, French Minister of the Environment, Energy and the Sea and President of COP21. She said that even when they were poorly timed and delayed, COP21 decisions were tough and very impressive. They implied that the world community finally understood the importance of taking real action to stop climate change. However, such decisions require clear mechanisms to be implemented which were sometimes difficult but necessary. One of these is the carbon taxes for usage of fossil fuels. Imposing any new tax is a difficult decision for politicians as well as for society and business, but countries have to make such decisions as soon as possible, said Ms Royal. France had already implemented a tax of EUR 8 per tonne of CO2, to increase to EUR 50 in the next five years. Few countries had followed suit.

Jan Dominique Senard, CEO of Michelin and chairman of a coalition of the 35 biggest European companies, said that targets and decisions had to be made not only at national level but at sectoral level as well. Transport, industry, construction and agriculture had very different impacts and circumstances in which to achieve low-carbon transition goals and needed different mechanisms. He also mentioned that transition would have a huge impact and would require a change in behaviour and attitude by everyone. It will be a challenge for civil society organisations to help people understand the needs and necessity of such a change.

The low-carbon transition process will influence everyone’s life for decades. The European Economic and Social Committee must promote the achievement of the COP21 goals and must encourage national civil societies to conduct active dialogue with governments and businesses with a view to achieving these goals in the most acceptable way.

The Asia-Europe Meeting is the biannual summit of heads of state and government from the EU and Asian countries. In total, 51 countries participate along with the EU and ASEAN. The ASEM Summit also took place on 14-16 July in Ulaanbaatar.

The summit is the culmination of other ministerial meetings which happen over the course of three years. The run up to the summit features three sectoral meetings, the business forum, the labour forum and a parliamentary meeting. The People’s Forum is effectively the civil society component of the Asia–Europe Meeting. The Asia–Europe Meeting is the biannual summit of heads of state and government from the EU and Asian countries. In total, 51 countries participate along with the EU and ASEAN. The ASEM Summit also took place on 14-16 July in Ulaanbaatar.

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The People’s Forum did tend to have a large number of groups who were quite critical of globalisation and of the EU’s role in this, and these views predominated in many of the activities and in discussions relating to trade and investment. In many respects, EESC participants felt that there was limited diversity in the views in many panels and workshops. The use of “open space” methodologies and a light approach to circulating documents on a rolling electronic basis was a very positive feature of the event. The final text was a very useful contribution to the full summit meeting.

It was often hard for the EESC to be seen as separate and distinct from the EU or other institutions. EESC members contributed and gave panel presentations in many areas which was very useful. There was much common ground with the work of the EESC, particularly regarding refugees.

As the European body representing European organised civil society the EESC delegation and anxious to receive our views on the event (to which they provide some financial support). The ASEM process is also significant as the US is not involved. Mongolia was a significant choice as venue being a democracy with an open market economy in the region. The President of Mongolia, Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj opened the People’s Forum.

Generally, the delegation observed that there was a very strong organisational dimension to the event held in the state palace in the centre of Ulaanbaatar. There was good media coverage and the event created much interest in Mongolia. The event saw impressive mobilisation of civil society in the country. Asian civil society was well represented, particularly from some countries. Participation from China and Russia was limited and there were no participants from North Korea (although Mongolia has very good relations with DPRK).

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The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) organised a mission to Russia on 30-31 August. The two-day visit provided EESC members with an opportunity to meet both the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation and other Russian civil society organisations. The EESC delegation discussed the current situation of civil society organisations, and specifically the situation with regard to human rights and the environment.

The visit followed an invitation from the Russian Ambassador to the EU, Vladimir Alekseyevich Chizhov, to EESC President Georges Dassis. As the European body representing European organised civil society in the EU legislative process, in line with the guiding principles of the EU’s policy towards Russia, and convinced of the need for civil societal dialogue between the EU and Russia to remain open at all times, the
Jane MORRICE (UK)
Member of the Various Interests’ Group

BEATING THE ‘BREXIT BLUES’ BY LEARNING THE ‘BREXIT LESSONS’

There can be no greater wake up call for every communication department in every EU institution or Member State government than the alarm that sounded on the morning of 24 June 2016 to herald the beginning of Brexit! The referendum result was a serious shock for many in the UK but the fact that the overwhelming majority of EU citizens were also shocked is proof positive that we were all watching the wrong ball. The experts, the elite, the pollsters, the punters, even the bookmakers got it wrong. So, how did it happen and what lessons can we learn?

There is no doubt that those of us who believe profoundly in the European dream never do enough to push it! We seem to prefer to keep EU benefits secret! Unlike the US communication model, the EU method is too subtle, too sophisticated, too understated and too stuck in silos to reach out to those beyond its reach and understand how the other half (plus 2% in the UK) thinks and feels.

In the case of Brexit, most of the blame could be placed squarely on the shoulders of the EU institutions and the UK Government. All stand accused of forty years of failure to inform the British public of the value of EU membership. We have had decades of so-called citizen engagement, communication plans and information campaigns but the main question on Google immediately after the referendum was - what is the European Union?

Successive UK governments have blamed ‘Brussels’ for ‘negative’ EU legislation while taking credit for anything positive. This paved the way for a frenzy of anti-EU feeling in the popular press which, due to the BBC’s obligation to 50/50 balance in the referendum, went relatively unchecked, while the EU institutions ‘sat on their hands’. On the one hand, they didn’t want to interfere for fear of accusations of peddling propaganda. On the other, they left a gaping vacuum in the provision of facts and figures which was filled with misinformation and myth.

But learning the lessons of Brexit doesn’t mean playing ‘copy cat’. It means:
- seriously starting to blow a single EU trumpet
- ensuring those who benefit, directly and indirectly, do likewise
- rejecting EU gobbledegook and learning the language of the street
- teaching more about the history, culture and creativity of the EU in schools and colleges
- making use of the wonderful resource of people who believe in the EU, especially young people
- placing communication and information at the top of EU policy priorities
- finally putting EU money where its mouth is!

Whatever happens, unless we start learning the lessons from BREXIT, we are doomed to watch our beloved EU forever fall foul of those with the snappiest sound bites, the sexiest or scariest headlines and the loudest voices. The proof may be the result of the US presidential election in November which will have a much more profound effect on the world than Brexit.
Overview of our Members’ Work in the EESC

At its plenary session on 13-14 July 2016 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co-Rapporteurs.

**Giuseppe GUERINI (IT) 
Member of the Various Interests’ Group**

**ECO/406 - Action Plan on VAT**

The EESC welcomes the “Action Plan on VAT”, which aims to move towards a definitive VAT system in the EU, and endorses both its objectives and the approach. It is important to implement all parts of the Action Plan as an indivisible whole, the transition to the definitive VAT system is to be carried out in any event and within a reasonable time-frame. The Committee urges all stakeholders to look into how services can be incorporated into the new system more quickly. It would also be worthwhile examining methods for ensuring that financial services are more generally subject to VAT.

The transformation of the current system should result in a definitive VAT system that is clear, consistent, robust and comprehensive, as well as proportionate and future-proof. The Committee endorses the proposal to opt for the country of destination principle, as it will create a level playing field for all suppliers in the same national market and will result in less market distortion.

**Lutz RIBBE (DE) 
Member of the Various Interests’ Group**

**NAT/684- Coalition to deliver commitments of the Paris Agreement**

The EESC welcomes the decisions of COP 21 in Paris but it sees two challenges linked with it. First, the emissions reduction targets submitted by the individual Member States (INDCs) do not correlate with the results achieved in Paris. Second, despite some limited progress, the importance of civil society has not been sufficiently taken into consideration. Civil society actors currently face significant obstacles when they wish to initiate and implement measures to counteract climate change. Regulatory guidelines can sometimes even systematically prevent civil society climate action. Thus civil society actors all too often find that there is no framework for action that would allow them to implement their plans for “bottom-up climate action”. Another factor is that they cannot finance their projects, although in fact sufficient investment resources are most likely available.

As an immediate response to the decisions made in Paris, the EESC therefore proposes a coalition of politics, administration and civil society. The coalition’s mission is to minimise obstacles standing in the way of civil society climate action by:

- promoting bottom-up climate action and breathing new life into the principle “think global, act local”;
- taking account of the broad spectrum of potential civil society climate strategies, while not losing sight of the variety and broad range of civil society actors;
- developing a form of multi-level governance that facilitates civil society climate action rather than hindering it.

**Antonio LONGO (IT) 
Member of the Various Interests’ Group**

**SC/043- The European Citizens’ Initiative (review) - (own-initiative opinion)**

Four years after the ECI regulation entered into force, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) points out that Europeans are at the heart of the European venture and the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) could help overcome the democratic deficit by promoting active citizenship and participatory democracy. The EESC has pinpointed significant technical, legal and bureaucratic problems, along with a clear excess of powers attributed to the Commission, preventing full distribution, implementation and follow-up of successful initiatives. Amongst other things, the EESC recommends to simplify the existing rules so that they are more tailored to the actual possibilities of the citizens starting up initiatives at grass root level (leaving the citizens the choice of the launching date, considering lowering the minimum age for supporting an ECI, recognising the citizens’ committees legally, and providing the platform for the online collection system on permanent basis) and to clarify the existing registration procedure to make the process more transparent.
The Committee supports the Commission’s approach regarding the need to update and simplify how technical measures are currently governed. However, some of the proposals do not take the practical conditions of fishing activities fully into consideration.

The Committee asks the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission to establish a genuine dialogue with fishermen and their representatives before taking any decision on the proposals. The tacit agreement and cooperation of fishermen are needed if the rules are to be respected, which is more likely if fishermen are fully involved in the debate.

The EESC welcomes the Commission’s proposal on an EU Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking and is pleased to note the inclusion of a number of key proposals set out in its previous opinion on this issue. The Committee considers the holistic approach, including a worldwide alliance involving source, transit and demand countries, to be a fundamental cornerstone in fighting the direct and indirect impacts of wildlife trafficking.

The EESC identifies different priority actions for different levels of the supply chain in trafficking:

- in source countries, the priority must be both awareness and creation of sustainable sources of jobs and income;
- at the organised crime level, the priority is both enforcing a system of common, effective, proportional and dissuasive controls and sanctions, and providing the resources for the policing efforts;
- at the demand level, both from the perspective of businesses and consumers, the priority must be awareness-raising, traceability and labelling;
- at the judiciary level, the priority must be on enforcement through focused training of judges to ensure that there is consistency and proportionality in sentencing.

The section opinion generally supports the Commission’s proposals, welcoming it as the first legislative outcome of the Circular Economy Action Plan after the proposals on the waste legislation. The EESC welcomes in particular the creation of a level-playing field including organic and waste-based fertilisers, which will help them become more competitive vis-à-vis mineral ones. The section opinion recommends a reliable labelling system, emphasises the differences between soils in EU countries and highlights that the EU still lacks an EU Soil Framework Directive. The Commission’s proposal introduces a limit on cadmium in fertilisers, which the section opinion endorses, highlighting that it will increase costs and that farmers should benefit from adequate support.

The complete texts of all EESC opinions are available in various language versions on the Committee’s website:

On 1 September, President Mr Jahier visited the Belgium social enterprise *Les Petits Riens*. The social economy is a little known key contributor to our economy – but it actually employs over 14 million Europeans or 6.5% of the active population. Social enterprises such as *Les Petits Riens* are not charities, they make a profit just like any other SME - they directly contribute to job creation and growth and provide much needed services. However, the key difference is that their principal objective is social: either in the services they provide or in the methods used. For Group III, the sector has enormous resonance and the potential to provide services to the public, which the state may be unable to provide, and over the last 15 years, the EESC has helped the sector to grow, going directly into the field, helping to forge alliances and the exchange of know-how, not only among European social economy enterprises but in developing countries as well. The EESC has also actively promoted the sector vis-à-vis national and European authorities, explaining why and how a supportive financial and legislative environment should be created. Creating opportunities for the public, looking out for their well-being, addressing local social and environmental challenges and unmet local needs – this is the objective! There is no doubt that social investment and the social economy are multipliers of growth and that this growth can spill over beyond territories, to the national level or beyond. As stated by Mr Jahier, “let us look to the future: a future of public empowerment, cohesion, local communities and solidarity!”

Find out more about the work of the EESC’s Social Economy Category, chaired by Group III members Alain Coheur (BE) and Krzysztof Balon (PL): [http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.categories-social-economy](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.categories-social-economy)
On 27 October 2016, the Various Interests’ Group will organize a conference on ‘The role of the civil society in the European Energy Union: ensuring secure, sustainable, competitive and affordable energy’ in Bratislava.

The aim of the conference is to obtain a better grasp of the role civil society has to play in energy security and the transition to renewable energy at both national and regional levels. The challenge is to channel civil society involvement and expertise towards creating more links, partnerships and dialogue between local, national and regional players.

Mr Maroš ŠEFČOVIČ, Vice-President in charge of Energy Union of the European Commission, has already accepted our invitation as key note speaker of the opening panel to introduce the European Commission’s point of view regarding the role of the Civil Society in the European Energy Union.

More specifically, the conference will explore the following themes:
- Energy security and efficient supply
- Effective management of the transition to renewable energies
- An Energy Union with a forward-looking climate change policy
- Ways that energy policy can lead to national and regional development
- The new electricity market’s design and impact on vulnerable consumers

Our Group’s Strength

The Farmers’ Category will meet on 12 October all day. There will be a debate on the implementation of the CAP, on the health check, on the CAP post 2020, and on the Category’s 2017 agenda. There will be interventions from prominent guests such as Member of European Parliament Albert DESS (DE).

For more details, please consult the web pages: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.categories
The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Romania (CCIR) has launched a study regarding the perception of the business environment over the national economy. The study was undergone by TNS CSOP Romania, at CCIR’s request. TNS CSOP is the first independent Market Research Agency in Romania founded in 1993.

The study is a comprehensive barometer of opinion at national level, unique in Romania, realized annually, to precisely inventory the perception of the companies over the economic evolutions. Here are some of the main results.

Beyond the high level of taxes, which appears constantly as the main problem faced by the business environment in Romania, the study catches other pressing matters: public authorities bureaucracy is a very heavy burden on companies and, on another hand, there is an obvious crisis of the labor force in Romania, especially an obvious lack of qualified personnel.

Thus, reduction of taxation (49%), reduction of bureaucracy (14%), simpler access to EU funds (9%) and reduction of the VAT/simplifying the procedures of returning the VAT (9%) are the main economic measures perceived as leading to an improvement in the economic activity of the companies in Romania.

The lack of qualified personnel becomes a pressing matter for the Romanian enterprises, especially the companies with the headquarters in the West and Central part of the country. One out of three questioned companies has confronted with leave of personnel abroad, while 68% declare that qualified personnel were the main affected category. The companies in the North-East region are affected the most by the migration of the workforce abroad.

The education is clearly not adapted to the labor market and, in the same time, Romania is facing a powerful migration of the qualified personnel. On short term, it is obvious that Romania’s Government must take a series of important decisions in the field of education, especially regarding professional education.

The study catches also an important decrease of corruption in the public administration, which Romanian companies used to be struck by. Thereby, 44% of the respondents perceive corruption in the public administration reduced compared to two years ago.

The results of the study indicate a series of characteristic aspects for the business environment from Romania. The companies need support in developing their activities, while the main issues they are confronted with are linked to taxation, legislation and competitiveness.

In this context, The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Romania has identified a series of recommendations, which are considered to be imperative for the consolidation of the national business community:

1. Promoting a transparent and predictable legal framework
2. Improving the efficiency of the public administration
3. Investments in human capital
4. Facilitating the companies’ access to financing sources
5. Investments in infrastructure
6. Increasing the competitiveness of Romanian companies on foreign markets

Romania needs a consolidation of the public administration in order for it to be a real support for the business environment. In this matter, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Romania has identified a series of measures that require immediate implementation:

- efficient expenditure of the state budget;
- cutting the institutional overlaps and clarifying their attributions;
- complete digitalization of the public administration system and decrease of bureaucracy regarding the relationship companies-authorities;
- integrating and coordinating the data bases of all public institutions;
- equal treatment for all companies, regardless their size or ownerships’ nationality;
- all local administration units should make public the availability of terrains and the connection to utilities, in order not to block important actives, vital for the progress of cities.