



EESC info

European Economic and Social Committee
A bridge between Europe and organised civil society
March 2016 | EN



EDITORIAL

I am, of course, very pleased that, in February, our assembly almost unanimously adopted a resolution supporting European integration, the free movement of persons, goods and services and the Schengen Agreement. Our three groups have found the right words to express what organised civil society is thinking. Companies, workers and civic associations have expressed their feelings together, which is precisely what our Committee is mandated to

do under the Treaty, its *raison d'être* and its greatest added value, which is quintessentially European.

We undertook to carry out a detailed analysis of the circumstances underlying a crisis that threatens our rights, our economy and the European project itself. We will fulfil that undertaking by holding a debate this month, with some extremely distinguished guests, on the influx of refugees we are experiencing, and on what needs to be done to respond to it effectively, in dignity and solidarity – in other words, again, in a truly European way.

I hope that we will have an opportunity to unite in condemning responses based on irrationality, propaganda, bad management and the conflation of, typically, refugees, migrants and even terrorists. And I hope that we will have an opportunity to jointly identify what needs to be done in order to respond correctly, realistically and rationally.

There has also been a lot of discussion recently about the United Kingdom's situation with respect to the European Union. Personally, I think that the United Kingdom has a place in our Union and that it would be a shame for them to leave: quite the reverse, they should integrate further in everyone's interest, not least their own, but that interest needs to be properly understood, and based on a peaceful and rational geopolitical and economic vision.

However, should the frustration stoked by the crude remarks of populists – and politicians who fall into the trap of one-upmanship – prove to be such that the people of the United Kingdom decide to leave the EU, we must of course respect their wishes completely. On the other hand, it is quite out of the question for a country to stay in the Union in exchange for a kind of sabotage of European integration that, for example, openly contravenes the foundations of European legislation by introducing discrimination against workers from other Member States with regard to welfare provision.

Above all, at any rate, I have observed that the representatives of the United Kingdom's civil society organisations in our Committee are not standing up to say goodbye. Far from it: I have heard several of them make comments that are quite correct and, once again, truly European. I will also take this opportunity to express my admiration, sympathy and gratitude to them.

Georges Dassis
EESC President

DIARY DATES

16 March – 22 April 2016 /
EESC, Brussels:
Exhibition: "Sustainability"

20 April 2016 /
EESC, Brussels:
European Citizens' Initiative Day

27 – 28 April 2016 /
EESC, Brussels:
EESC plenary session

IN THIS ISSUE

2 Europe needs to defeat poverty, children most at risk

2 Official visits by Georges Dassis to Greece, the Netherlands and Spain

3 New delegates on industrial change join the EESC

EESC adopts resolution and launches its campaign to support Schengen at February plenary



At its February plenary session the EESC adopted a resolution in support of the Schengen Agreement, entitled "Free to move, Support Schengen". In the resolution, representatives of European civil society expressed their concerns about the pressure being put on the Schengen Agreement and its use as an easy scapegoat for all the shortcomings in the management of Europe's borders. This text represents a strong appeal from European civil society to Europe's governments not to bow to populist pressure and fear but instead to defend the rights that Europeans have striven for over the last 30 years.

Launching the campaign organised to support the EESC resolution, **Georges Dassis**, EESC President, declared: "If solidarity is strengthened by removing obstacles, then it is bound to be weakened when they are put back. If freedom to cross borders

and free movement are the expression of an 'ever closer union' between peoples, then anything that hinders that freedom points to division between peoples."

Jacek Krawczyk, president of the EESC Employers' Group, said: "Schengen means far more than just easy travel for millions of European citizens. It means far more than just enormously facilitated trade for thousands of European companies. Schengen is one of the most important and most ambitious results of the great EU project. It is a symbol, an achievement that must not be squandered. European employers support Schengen and urge policy makers not to take a step backwards. Europe as we know it cannot survive without Schengen!"

Gabriele Bischoff, president of the EESC Workers' Group, declared: "The right of EU citizens to seek employment, to work and to exercise the right of establishment in another Member State is enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. For citizens, Schengen is a tangible thing. It is the key that opens the door, enabling them to put these rights into action and to positively experience the benefits of 'Europe' in their

daily lives. Weakening or dismantling Schengen will further weaken the trust and support of many workers, and ultimately result in a weaker Europe."

Luca Jahier, president of the EESC Various Interests' Group, stated: "The symbolic, political and economic price of a return to internal borders in Europe is too high: it could rapidly dismantle the European Union. What we need is more Europe: in the control of external borders, in internal security, and in the refugee crisis, and we certainly do not need the destruction of our freedom of movement. The reintroduction of border controls would stand for the failure of European solidarity, cohesion, negotiation, compromise and understanding. So, please: Don't touch my Schengen!"

Workers, businesses and – by and large – civil society as a whole will indeed pay a heavy price: 7 million EU citizens living in another EU Member State will lose some of the most practical aspects of free movement, lorries will be stuck at the border for hours on end at peak times, reunited border communities will be divided in two again, and a drop of 110 billion euros in GDP is predicted over 10 years. European integration will take two steps back if the solidarity that Schengen represents is dealt such a severe blow. (cad)

EESC supports an effective Capital Markets Union but raises concerns about relevance for SMEs

Investment and free flow of capital are essential for Europe's growth. However, the EU's capital markets are still underdeveloped and fragmented. Therefore, in 2015 the European Commission adopted an Action Plan on Building a Capital Markets Union, aiming to create a true single market for capital in Europe. The EESC calls for Europe to mobilise capital more effectively and channel it to companies, infrastructures and sustainable projects that will create jobs and growth.

At its plenary session, the EESC adopted an opinion on the European Commission Action Plan that endorses its goals and advocates extension and diversification of sources of funding, within a single capital market based on maximum harmonisation of rules.

It is of utmost importance that Member States introduce, apply and supervise the proposed measures of the Action Plan in the same way.

The EESC opinion also proposed specific adjustments for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as it has serious concerns about the relevance and effectiveness of the Capital Markets Union for SMEs.

"The funding of SMEs, a driving-force for Europe's economy, should be at the heart of the future Capital Markets Union. There is currently an information deficit that needs to be tackled and a framework for lending that needs to be made more SME-friendly", said Daniel Mareels, EESC rapporteur on the issue.



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With this opinion, the EESC re-affirms its support for bank funding as a key component in financing the economy and advocates further exploring new markets, including those for non-performing loans (loans in default or close to default). (cad)



Europe needs to defeat poverty, children most at risk

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During its February plenary session the EESC adopted an opinion urging the EU Council to stick to its commitment to get at least 20 million people out of poverty by 2020. The **opinion on fighting poverty (rapporteur: Seamus Boland, co-rapporteur: Marjolijn Bulk)** was requested by the Dutch Presidency of the Council. To achieve the EU's target, Member States need to launch their own national strategies to fight poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, supported by a common European framework. These strategies should focus on adequate income support, inclusive labour markets, quality jobs, equal access to affordable high-quality services for all, including migrants and people granted asylum.

One of the areas requiring immediate attention is child poverty. Children under 18 are among the groups that are more at risk of poverty and social exclusion than the overall population, with a rate of 27.1%. In addition to children, the poverty risk is particularly high among young people because of the unprecedented high rates of youth unemployment (Eurostat data for October 2015).

The EESC believes that urgent measures to combat poverty in Europe should be introduced, such as an adequate minimum income and the establishment of universal, comprehensive and adequate social protection systems. The EESC welcomes the Dutch Presidency's intention to organise peer reviews to look into "bottom-up" grass-roots approaches used to fight poverty at the national level, but has reconfirmed the principal role of the welfare state in combatting poverty rather than relying solely on community-based initiatives.

In December 2015, the EESC awarded the **2015 European Civil Society Prize** to five grass-roots organisations working to alleviate poverty in Germany, Ireland, France, Poland and Finland. (sg) ●

EESC Priority: Let's get people back to work!

Committee calls for swift action and creativity in solving the job crisis

In view of the worrying job situation and faltering investment in many parts of Europe, at its plenary session on 17 March the European Economic and Social Committee adopted an **opinion on the 2016 Annual Growth Survey (AGS)**. The EESC is particularly concerned about the high level of unemployment, which is leaving 22.5 million people without a job and 122 million at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This is unacceptable and the final wake-up call for both the Commission and European leaders.

The EESC opinion welcomes the decision to reinforce the Europe 2020 targets within the European semester process. For a real and sustainable recovery, an increase in internal demand is needed and long-term public investment would trigger this demand. Governments should therefore be given leeway to make necessary infrastructure investments and to access cheaper money.

In its recommendations, the EESC calls for

- more efforts to complete the European internal market and to modernise Europe's economy;
- the Paris Agreement on energy transition to be made a source of economic development;
- greater coordinated effort to combat aggressive tax planning, tax evasion and fraud, which will generate an estimated one trillion euro a year for national treasuries.

Immediate action is needed to tackle long-term unemployment and youth unemployment. Special attention must be given to the many young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs). "Investment in human capital via education and training, mainly focusing on young people, cannot be delayed any longer," warned Juan Mendoza Castro, EESC rapporteur for the Annual Growth Survey opinion. (sma) ●

Labour Market Observatory: Refugees are an opportunity for Europe's labour market

At a public debate held at the EESC on 22 February, strong voices were heard in defence of better inclusion of refugees in European societies, notably through work. The EESC Labour Market Observatory chose the title *Integrating refugees into the labour market: turning the crisis into an opportunity*, for this event, which produced a number of important policy recommendations.

"Experience shows that the integration of refugees is beneficial to society, and civil society clearly plays a key role in facilitating that", said Krzysztof Pater (Various Interests Group, PL), Vice-President of the EESC Labour Market Observatory. Member States are faced with a massive influx of refugees and are largely unprepared. Laws, as well as support for integration, vary from country to country, according to Klára Fóti, Eurofound representative. Geertrui Lanneau, IOM delegate, underlined the importance of investing in education and training, as a large proportion of the migrant population is still very young and needs skills.

Christa Schweng, EESC member (Employers' Group, AT), said that "a truly European migration system" is needed and that "integration policies should be developed specifically for women refugees, to help raise family income and avoid concentration in ghettos". She underlined the need to focus on entrepreneurship and self-employment as an important vector in the process of integrating refugees into the labour market.

Discussing the factors which facilitate the employment of refugees, as employees or entrepreneurs, the LMO seminar showcased good examples from Austria (Austrian Federal Economic Chamber), Belgium (Duo for a Job project) and Sweden (Fast Track to Integration project). (cad) ●

More research and innovation in the energy sector and a need for a Europe-wide public dialogue on energy

The European Strategic Energy Technology Plan is necessary to speed up the transformation of Europe's energy system, the EESC pointed out in its opinion on the SET plan, adopted during the February plenary session. The EESC believes that the new energy policy should be based on developing sectors key to research and innovation and on encouraging new ideas and concepts such as renewable power generation technologies and other low-carbon technologies. The EU has to innovate in terms of how energy is produced and transported, and how it is delivered to customers.

The SET plan must reflect the real-life situation in Europe – if the new energy technologies increase end energy prices, the EESC feels that correction can be expected. Consumers should be involved in the process and energy poverty should be combatted through social policy measures, education and training. There is a need for a European Energy Dialogue with the general public and civil society so that they can take ownership of the energy transition and the costs of various technologies. The EESC can act as a catalyst in this dialogue, possibly through a European civil society forum.

The EESC supports a European approach to energy supply and the creation of genuine solidarity in



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this field. The importance of gas in the energy mix in terms of energy security for Europeans must not be ignored. Investment and R&D in the area of storage need to be encouraged so that Member States have joint reserves.

The Energy Union means making energy more secure, sustainable and affordable for the end user. It will allow free flow of energy across borders and secure supply in every EU country, for every European. The role of the SET plan in this process is crucial. (sg) ●

Official visits by Georges Dassis to Greece, the Netherlands and Spain



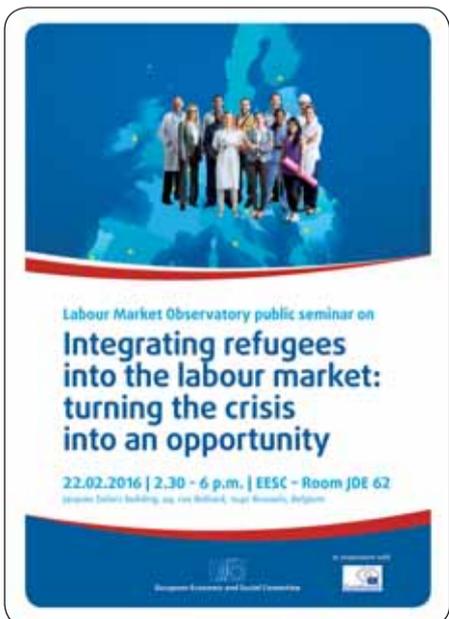
President George Dassis at the Spanish Economic and Social Council

In February, the EESC President, Georges Dassis, completed three official visits to Greece, the Netherlands and Spain. On Tuesday 9 February he met with Prokopis Pavlopoulos, President of the Hellenic Republic. Mr Pavlopoulos declared that the EESC had a special and historic role to play, noting that it had been "set up as a reminder of the social face of the European Union and was a fundamental pillar of the entire European edifice". He went on to express his satisfaction at the fact that, once again, a Greek was at the helm of the EESC. Mr Dassis thanked the Greek President, and noted that the EESC adopted its opinions on the basis of very significant majorities; he also emphasised that austerity was not the solution to the economic crisis. He referred specifically to the initiatives taken by the EESC in response to the crisis, amongst them its opinions on the financial transaction tax and the mutualisation of public debt in countries experiencing problems – including Greece. He likewise presented the Committee's position on the refugee and migration crises, describing all the measures that the EESC had taken, including the Going Local missions to 12 different countries.

On Wednesday 10 February, Georges Dassis visited The Hague in the framework of the Dutch Presidency. The EESC President met in particular with Ms Jetta Klijnsma, State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment, who also attended the EESC's plenary session in February; he had the

opportunity to present the Committee's priorities during the Dutch Presidency, underlining the importance of deciding that the EU should establish a European minimum wage in order to combat poverty in Europe. Later he also had meetings with Ms Brigitte van der Burg, Chair of the Dutch Parliament's Committee on Social Affairs and Employment, and Ms Mariëtte Hamer, President of the Dutch Social and Economic Council (SER). At these meetings, Georges Dassis was able to discuss possible proposals that the EU could use to reduce unemployment and facilitate access to the labour market. He also highlighted the importance of supporting people's free movement and the Schengen area referring to the EESC campaign.

Finally, at the end of February the EESC President visited Spain, where he met with representatives from the CCOO and UGT unions, the Council of Consumers and Users and the Confederation of Business Organisations. The discussions were fruitful, especially on the topic of social Europe; he likewise raised the issue of migration in Europe in a speech to the Spanish Economic and Social Council on 24 February. The following day, while visiting Extremadura, he took part in a debate on *The Future of Europe and Social Dialogue* organised by the University of Extremadura while he also met with the President of the Economic and Social Council of Extremadura Ms Maria Mercedes Vaquera. (pa) ●



EU-Ukraine civil society tackles corruption and energy policy issues

The second meeting of the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform (CSP) focused on much-needed reforms in the fight against corruption and the energy policy as well as the state of play in the implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (FTA). EESC President George Dassis stressed the EU's commitment to seeking good partnership with all the European Neighbourhood countries. *"The platform will bring added value to the association process and provide valuable input from civil society; the process should not, however, be limited to technical dialogue between governments"*, he added.

"This marks a new stage in institutional cooperation between our civil societies", stressed



The second meeting of the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform (CSP)

the co-chair of the Platform on the Ukrainian side, Oleksandr Sushko. EEAS Director Fernando Andresen Guimaraes reiterated the EEAS's support for the work of the Platform as one of the key components for implementing the AA.

Peter Wagner, Head of the Support Group for Ukraine, reminded the meeting that not all difficulties had their roots in the Russia-Ukraine conflict; some were simply home-made, including a lack of reliable legislation, efforts to fight corruption, civil service reform and privatisation.

CSP members agreed that tackling the lack of political will to implement reforms in Ukraine was one of the main priorities, together with a push for full enforcement of the Minsk Agreements. A **joint declaration** was adopted, calling for a fully independent judiciary, laws on party financing and advertising, freedom of the press, effective competition law, and consideration of Ukraine's future membership of the European Energy Union. (mm) ●

The European Citizens' Initiative: more impact, simpler rules

EESC public hearing on the revision of the ECI instrument

For a long time the EU has been criticised for its democratic deficit. The EU's aim with the European Citizen Initiative (ECI) was to enable citizens to participate actively in the EU's law-making process.

More than 6 million Europeans have now signed an ECI; however, out of a total of 56 initiatives only 36 have been registered by the Commission and only three of them have been able to collect the necessary one million signatures. And even these final three initiatives did not have any impact, as the European Commission is not obliged to translate an ECI into European legislation.

The EESC is currently preparing an opinion on the ECI with the aim of making it more *user-friendly, practical and impactful*. At a hearing on the ECI held in Brussels on 23 February, Antonio Longo, rapporteur for this opinion, called for a more user-friendly instrument allowing every European to participate: *"In times where people are more and more losing trust in the EU, the ECI has to become the instrument to give people a real say"*, he emphasised,

The main criticisms levelled at the ECI include:

- a timeframe that is too tight to get all the necessary signatures;
- the huge liability risks that the organisers have to take on: the fact that promoters are personally liable for "any damage they cause in the organisation" of an ECI has a deterrent effect;
- the excessive amount of information needed to support an ECI application;
- the absence of a legal status for citizens' committees;
- the excessively rigid application of ECI eligibility criteria; and
- the different requirements regarding data in different Member States.

The EESC will hold its ECI Day 2016 in Brussels on 20 April (see dedicated web page <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.civil-society>) (sma) ●

New delegates on industrial change join the EESC



On 25 February 51 new and returning delegates attended the first meeting of the EESC Consultative Committee on Industrial Change (CCMI) under the new EESC mandate. CCMI delegates represent the different economic and social sectors and civil society organisations who are affected by, or involved in bringing about, industrial change. They make up one half of the members of the CCMI and will work alongside the same number of EESC members who sit on the CCMI. They will remain in office until 31 December 2020.

Delegate **Jacques Glorieux**, representing the Various Interests category, was elected CCMI co-chairman and will co-lead the commission with its President, **Lucie Studničná** (Workers' Group, CZ), an EESC member, for the next 2 and a half years. EESC members **Gundars Strautmanis** (Employers Group, LV) and **Carlos Trias Pintó** (Various Interests Group, ES) and CCMI delegates **Patrizio Pesci** (Employers category, IT) and **Enrico Gibellieri** (Workers' category, IT) make up the new bureau.

The welcome ceremony was attended by Günther Oettinger, European Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society.

The CCMI is the heir to the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). It was set up when the ECSC treaty expired in 2002 to retain the valuable expertise it had built up over its 50 years' activity, to continue structured dialogue in the original areas of coal and steel but also to gradually expand the ECSC's original remit to cover all aspects of industrial change and its repercussions on employment, social and structural policy measures, aid and competition policy, research and technological development, sustainable development, trade policies and other areas.

CCMI delegates are appointed by the EESC from associations representing civil society at European level. They are divided into three different categories (Employers, Workers, Various Interests), mirroring the EESC's own structure. Similar to EESC sections, the CCMI draws up

opinions and information reports on request from EU decision-making bodies but also on its own initiative, and can be called upon to complement other sections' opinions by looking into the industrial change implications of specific issues (opinion supplements).

The CCMI has been the author of many landmark opinions and studies in recent years. Its pioneering work on planned obsolescence is part of a wider, ongoing project which will see the publication of a ground-breaking study next March. In 2015 it tackled the complex issue of **fighting corruption in the EU** and looked into the challenges of **freeing Europe from asbestos**, with its huge economic and public health implications. In 2014 it examined the **impact of business services in industry** and the prospective socio-economic consequences of the 4th industrial revolution and the internet. It will continue its work on Industry 4.0 in order to encourage European industry to take full advantage of the strategic opportunities offered by the internet. (dm) ●

YEYS 2016: students getting ready for pan-European youth debate on migration

Over the last month and a half many members of the EESC have been actively engaged in visiting schools all over the EU and beyond to

prepare students for **Your Europe, Your Say**, a pan-European youth debate which will take place in Brussels on 17-19 March 2016. The EESC

is organising this event for the seventh consecutive year to ensure that the views, experiences and ideas of young people are taken into account in EU policy making.

During their visits to the schools, members worked with the students and one teacher to prepare for the event, which this year will focus on **migration** in Europe. They presented the EESC's activities and its role as the voice of civil society in Europe and gave them guidance on the debate. Students taking part from across Europe are tasked with coming up with concrete measures to be taken in schools, clubs, etc., to promote effective integration of young migrants into European societies.

Thirty-three schools have been selected from among over 400 applicants from the 28 EU Member States and, for the first time, the five candidate countries (Albania, Turkey, Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

Students from the selected schools can already contact each other on **Facebook** or **Twitter** to exchange ideas and information. (dm) ●



EESC members Roman Haken, Ronny Lannoo and Ionuț Sibian meeting students during their visits to the schools in Belgium (left), former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (top right) and Albania (bottom right)

Are you up to date with EESC activities?



With nine plenary sessions taking place a year, not to mention hearings, conferences, civil society dialogue meetings and much more, it really is true to say that there is always something going on at the Committee!

Keep up to date and – more importantly – don't miss out on events and discussions that are relevant to your area of interest! You can follow us almost in real-time via our social media channels. Visit our **social media map** to get a full overview and to select your preferred information sources.

This way, not only will you receive first-hand updates on **opinions** in the making as well as debates of interest, you will also find out when to tune in to follow our live webcasts via streaming.

Want to know more about our members? You can follow them too at: https://twitter.com/EU_EESC/lists/ourmembers/members ●

Our social media map can be found at: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.take-part-social-media> (sb) ●

Delivering the EU aviation strategy – how can we get stakeholders on board?

by the Employers' Group

This is a turbulent time for European aviation. We are witnessing fast changes of the market, dynamic transformation of business models and a dynamic switch in the perception of the aviation industry by customers. A consequent, overall approach is missing, the European aviation desperately needs a consistent strategy.

Civil society representatives are taking an active role in the debate on the future of European aviation. In September 2015, the EESC adopted an exploratory opinion on an *Integrated EU Aviation Policy* that contained a number of proposals to be included in the aviation strategy on which the European Commission was working at the time. Its "Aviation Strategy for Europe" was made public in December and so the EESC is currently preparing an opinion on this document.

As part of this process, on 21 April a public hearing on the EU aviation



Jacek Krawczyk, President of the Employers' Group, and Violeta Bulc, EU Commissioner for Transport, at the previous public hearing on the EU aviation strategy

strategy will take place at the EESC. A variety of stakeholders representing many aspects of the aviation industry will have the opportunity to share their views on the Commission's proposal in the presence of the EU Commissioner for Transport, Violeta Bulc. "As underlined in the previous EESC opinion, only if particularisms in the European aviation value

network are overcome can it regain momentum and restart to build new valuable economic and social contributions to EU development. We call upon all aviation stakeholders to commit to the implementation of a new EU aviation strategy", said Jacek Krawczyk, President of the Employers' Group and EESC rapporteur for the aviation strategy. (lj) ●

From agricultural to food policy

by the Various Interests Group



Group III – Various Interests' Group

On Thursday 21 April, the Various Interests Group of the EESC will hold an extraordinary meeting at the Dutch Economic and Social Council (Sociaal-Economische Raad/SER) in The Hague. The conference will be entitled *From agricultural to food policy – Towards healthy and sustainable production and consumption*.

The Group wants to continue focusing on the issue of a **sustainable food policy** and engage in a dialogue with national institutional and civil society stakeholders, with the aim of drawing up conclusions that will be submitted to the Presidency of the EU Council and to the other EU institutions.

The title and content of the event are largely inspired by the report of the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy entitled *Towards a Food Policy* (<http://www.wrr.nl/en/publications/publication/article/naar-een-voedselbeleid/>), which was supported and promoted by the

Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs at the national and European levels. In fact, the Presidency of the EU Council will be holding an informal meeting of agriculture ministers from 29 to 31 May 2016, partly for the purpose of commencing discussions on the CAP after 2020, and has already requested an exploratory opinion from the EESC on *More sustainable food systems*, which should be ready just ahead of the May meeting.

The conference is expected to involve approximately 100 participants (EESC members, local civil society organisations and media representatives). Speakers will include prominent national and European players from the institutional, agricultural, consumer and environmental protection, research and business arenas. More information on the event is available from: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.group-3-events-and-activities> (cl) ●

Free movement and Schengen – defending workers' rights

by the Workers' Group

On 1 February 2016 the Workers' Group held an extraordinary meeting in Brussels entitled *Free movement and Schengen – defending workers' rights*. Gabriele Bischoff, President of the Workers' Group, opened the meeting, describing the challenges ahead: attacks on collective bargaining and freedom of movement, the ongoing austerity measures, the threat of Brexit, the inability of EU leaders to deal with the refugee crisis, etc. She warned that Mr Cameron's proposals endangered workers' rights and called for trade unions and civil society to take joint action to maintain existing rights, defend freedom of movement in a Schengen area without borders and strengthen the EMU.

Other challenges the Group discussed included the Commission's REFIT programme. Denis Meynent, rapporteur on REFIT, explained that efforts to simplify EU legislation should not lead to deregulation which could have a negative impact on workers.

The sustainable development goals included in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were also on the agenda. Isabel Caño Aguilar, SDO Vice-President, stressed the need for close cooperation between ETUC and the Workers' Group to ensure progress on the trade unions' priorities in this context.

A further debate centred on the common priorities of the Workers' Group and the trade union movement, with Luca Visentini, ETUC General Secretary, insisting that Schengen was the top priority, as the Schengen *acquis* was currently under threat due to the refugee crisis and the negotiations with the UK. Another priority, he said, was the fight against the dismantling of social rights and attempts to destroy the European social model in the context of the Brexit negotiations. He also stressed that the workers' movement needed to act to prevent any attempt to abolish established rights like the right to strike, which was currently under attack in several countries. (mg) ●



Gabriele Bischoff, President of the Workers' Group, and Luca Visentini, ETUC General Secretary

SOON IN THE EESC

Public hearing on the external dimension of the EU's energy policy – 30 March

On 30 March, the EESC's External Relations section (REX) will be holding a public hearing on the external dimension of the EU's energy policy at the EESC (Jacques Delors building) in Brussels.

Experts and representatives from civil society and the EU institutions will discuss key topics relating to the EU's energy policy, including the diversification of energy sources and completion of the single energy market.

The public hearing is being organised as part of preparations for the EESC's opinion on this subject requested by the Dutch presidency of the Council (January-June 2016). The previous EESC opinion on the topic (January 2009) needs to be revised to take on board the geo-political developments of the past seven years (including the Arab spring, increased tensions with Russia over the Eastern Partnership, crises in the Middle East and fluctuating oil prices) and other economic and technical factors (oil prices, new LNG terminals and the fracking debate). (mm) ●

The European Energy Union and its impact on civil society in Bulgaria

On 22 March the EESC will be holding a public hearing in Sofia together with the Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Bulgaria. High-profile representatives from key EU institutions, national governments and regulators, civil society organisations and experts will discuss the specific case of Bulgaria, how the country's energy sector could be affected by the Energy Union and how it could benefit from the policy programme.

The Energy Union has been identified as one of the key priorities of the current European Commission. This ambitious policy programme aims to create a European energy system that delivers secure, sustainable, competitive and affordable energy to Europe's citizens. It was launched in February 2015 and has already resulted in various policy initiatives, with the pace of delivery expected to increase further in the next years. Given the scale of the challenges faced by decision-makers in the energy sector, from decarbonising economies to reducing import dependence, and the high-reaching goals of the Energy Union programme, the EESC considers it important to promote an open dialogue on the topic between governments, EU institutions, citizens and organised civil society. (sg) ●

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