President Dassisi’s statement concerning the terrorist attacks in Brussels

On 22 March in Brussels, a handful of wanton murderers caused death and suffering in the EU.

They committed this appalling crime right where many of us – members, delegates, alternates, experts, guests of the Committee and staff – pass every day. Once again, they have cowardly killed, mutilated and wounded the people of Europe; they seek to strike and tear down Europeans who want to move about freely in a democratic society which upholds the values of peace, dialogue and well-being.

They will not defeat us – ever. There are human beings capable of the worst, but there are also and more importantly people capable of the best – and it is they who will be victorious. The only thing that terrorists will achieve is to make us unite against them: they are few in number but horrifyingly dangerous. The people who deserve to be given the spotlight are the millions of people, whoever they may be and wherever they may be, who have shown unity and determination by giving in to violence even when they are caught up in an unfair situation. These people need to be given the protection of a just society: a society which embodies the first articles of the Treaty.

I devoutly hope that the public displays of solidarity by our national and European leaders will have the effect of rallying as many people as possible to the democratic ideal of a united Europe. I hope that this trying experience will make us unite against them: they are united and victorious. The only thing that terrorists will achieve is to make us unite against them: they are few in number but horrifyingly dangerous. The people who deserve to be given the spotlight are the millions of people, whoever they may be and wherever they may be, who have shown unity and determination by giving in to violence even when they are caught up in an unfair situation. These people need to be given the protection of a just society: a society which embodies the first articles of the Treaty.

EESC info special issue on migration

To mark the presentation of the EESC’s final report on the current migration and refugee crisis, EESC Info is publishing a special two-page supplement featuring some vivid accounts of the fact-finding missions behind the report, an interview with EESC Vice-President Gonçalo Lobo Xavier, the missions’ initiators, a reflection by Pavel Trančina, co-author of the EESC’s strategy on migration. A review of Your Europe, Your Say! 2016 together with previews of a Giles Duley exhibition at the EESC and the EESC Civil Society Media Seminar 2016 – all centred on refugees and migration – complete this special edition on migration.
New forms of employment require social policy measures

On 31 March 2016, the EESC held a public hearing entitled The changing nature of employment relationships, the sharing economy, zero-hour contracts and the living wage to discuss the growth of non-standard forms of employment with a focus on workers’ protection.

Changes brought about by popular online platforms in the field of transportation or accommodation, for instance, have important implications for the labour market and tax and social security systems, as well as the living wage, the EESC meeting heard.

It is for decision-makers to frame these trends so that these new forms of employment can lead to positive outcomes for all members of society. Therefore, the EESC wants the European Commission and social policy measures to discuss the growth of non-standard forms of employment with a focus on workers’ protection.

On 29 March 2016, the EESC released a study, entitled The Influence of Lifespan Labelling on Consumers, which demonstrates the effect of lifespan labelling on consumer purchasing behaviour. Products labelled as long-lasting, such as suitcases and printers, would see a huge boost in sales, by 128% and 70% respectively, but less so for smartphones, with an increase of 41% in sales for models indicating a longer lifespan.

90% of the study’s participants said that they would be prepared to pay more (+ €102) for a dishwasher (priced between €300 and €500) that would last two years longer. Labelling types makes a difference, with a ranking from A to G being the most effective, with an increase in sales of 84%. The study also highlights the social dimension of programmed obsolescence, with people on low incomes having to purchase cheaper products and therefore facing planned obsolescence. Finally, 80% of participants think that producers have a very high degree of responsibility for the lifetime of a product.

The study covers Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Spain and the Netherlands, involves nearly 3,000 participants, and concurs with the EESC’s 2013 opinion Towards more sustainable consumption: industrial product lifetimes and restoring trust through consumer information.

The EESC calls on the European Commission to draft EU-wide legislation on planned obsolescence, to recommend that industry establish voluntary certification schemes, and urges Europeans to mobilise and campaign for change.

56% increase in product sales when labelled “long-lasting”: new EESC study on planned obsolescence

The EESC calls for new thinking to prevent radicalisation

On 16 March the EESC adopted an opinion entitled European Agenda on Security (rapporteur: Cristian Pirvulescu) calling for the development of new tools to prevent radicalisation as part of a broader EU anti-terrorism strategy. The opinion responds to both the Commission’s EU Action Plan against illicit trafficking in, and use of, firearms and explosives and its proposal for a directive on combating terrorism.

The EESC underlines that it is possible to be both secure and free in Europe, and considers it dangerous for any democracy to legislate against anticipated crimes. Article 3(2)(c) of the proposal (on threatening to commit a terrorist act) should therefore be removed. The EESC also urges the EU institutions and Member States to abide by the proportionality principle, and to reflect the serious workload and less costs for users and taxpayers and but it is not a dispensation from complying with regulations designed to protect consumers and workers, or from upholding environmental standards. The EESC urged the Commission to take better account of civil society’s views via public consultations and impact assessments. Representatives of consumer organisations, policy-makers and European institutions gathered at the 18th annual conference, organised by the EESC, to discuss better regulation and its impact on consumers.

According to the EESC, the Commission should focus on quality rather than quantity and prioritise cutting red tape, which is expensive for businesses and is a brake on their competitiveness and an obstacle to innovation and job creation, especially for SMEs. At the same time, the Think Small First principle is not intended to exempt micro- and small enterprises and SMEs from the requirements of the Environmental Code. The EESC has always insisted on the protection of the 500 million European consumers, who have legally binding rights enshrined in the Treaty. Consumer protection is one of the greatest and most tangible achievements of the EU and it should not be compromised.

The EESC supports cutting red tape and removing constraints on small, medium and micro-enterprises though better regulation, but at the same time this process should not mean complete deregulation, warned the EESC during European Consumer Day on 10 March 2016. Better regulation aims to make rules simpler, workable and less costly for users and taxpayers, but it is not a dispensation from complying with regulations designed to protect consumers and workers, or from upholding environmental standards. The EESC urged the Commission to take better account of civil society’s views via public consultations and impact assessments. Representatives of consumer organisations, policy-makers and European institutions gathered at the 18th annual conference, organised by the EESC, to discuss better regulation and its impact on consumers.

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European Consumer Day 2016: EESC for smart and better regulation, but not at the expense of consumers

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EMU: EESC encourages European Commission to go further without delay

The EEU’s economic and monetary union should be deepened as a matter of urgency, said the EESC at its 18th annual meeting, having adopted a package of four opinions on the matter.

In its opinion on Steps towards completing EMU, the EESC raised the issue of democratic legitimacy, proposing a tripartite social dialogue to bridge the gap. The EESC also made several recommendations on the Establishment of National Competitiveness Boards within the Euro Area, notably on the definition of competitiveness to include “beyond-GDP” objectives, and the set-up of better-balanced boards.

In its opinion on the European Deposit Insurance Scheme, the Committee recommended that the introduction of further risk-sharing should be accompanied by additional risk reduction in the banking sector. In Euro area external representation, the Committee highlighted the clear need to strengthen the area’s relative weight in international financial institutions and gave it a more prominent position in international financial markets. The EESC also recommended clearly and explicitly defining the role of euro area external representation and coordinating it with that of the EU as a whole, with a view to preserving the integrity of the single market.

Embracing change in the world of work

Gonçalo Lobo Xavier urges Portuguese people to see changes in work patterns as opportunities

The EESC Vice-President Gonçalo Lobo Xavier was among the guest speakers at the opening session of Viewpoints on work, a series of debates with key members of Portuguese society held in Braga on 26 February.

Sharing the floor with the Portuguese Minister for the economy, Caldeira Cabral, and the Portuguese sociologist, university professor and former leader of the Portuguese Confederation of Workers’ Trade Unions (CGTP-IN), Carvalho da Silva, Mr Lobo Xavier warned that changes to work patterns threatened half of the world’s existing jobs: the 4th industrial revolution, the Internet of Things and new consumption patterns are endangering many jobs. “It is estimated that over the next ten years, 50% of the jobs we are accustomed to seeing will be wiped out by these changes – changes that we cannot stop,” he said. “Therefore, ‘we must adapt, defend jobs and prepare workers for these changes that, in my view, are irreversible, but they are also an opportunity, as many new jobs will be created, requiring different skills’.”

He stressed that the need to anticipate change, the demand for new skills and the need to modernise traditional professions by offering new solutions and services must be seen as opportunities. He also expressed the hope that Portugal would not rest on its tourist laurels and abandon other strategic sectors which are vital for the country’s economy.
"A strong document that will make a difference" – Gonçalo Lobo Xavier talks about EESC migration report

We believe that civil society organisations (CSOs) must play a role and can contribute solutions regarding health care, education, protection, legal status and the integration of families wishing to come to the European Union, with its rights and duties.

What specific role do you see for the EESC in the migration crisis?

At last March’s plenary session the EESC presented a report summing up the results of its 11 country missions. The report was drafted by Vice-President Gonçalo Lobo Xavier with members Pavel Trantina, Christa Schweng and Anne Demelene. It was agreed by a 12 member ad hoc group appointed by the Bureau. EESC Info has interviewed Gonçalo Lobo Xavier on this major collective effort.

What are the EESC’s main concerns regarding the migration crisis?

Europe is facing a tremendous challenge. The EESC believes that all citizens must be mobilised to face this crisis. This particular test can be seen as an opportunity as well as a threat.

A project in line with the EESC’s core mission and long-standing concerns

The results of the EESC Going Local initiative on refugees show one basic thing: it was mainly thanks to the extraordinary mobilisation of civil society organisations and volunteers in many Member States and the leading role they took that Europe has largely avoided an unmitigated humanitarian catastrophe. That is why we wanted to give them a voice at EU level, because the role of civil society organisations and volunteers is often underestimated and they themselves have to contend with significant difficulties and sometimes even hatred – to such an extent that they are sometimes prosecuted for assisting refugees, which defies all understanding. The European Commission must therefore work with the Member States to give them better protection and support.

Our initiative of undertaking eleven country missions to Member States to look at the situation of refugees did not come out of the blue. The Committee’s work on refugee issues and migration has been a long-term one – I would say even groundbreaking – commitment. Our permanent working groups – especially the Labour Market Observatory and the Permanent Study Group on Immigration and Integration – support and will continue to support the development of a common European immigration and integration policy while stressing the protection of fundamental rights, solidarity and strong civil society involvement. We are currently drafting a number of opinions and the personal experience our members have gained from their missions is essential for putting together useful proposals and recommendations to the other EU institutions.

Pavel Trantina, President of the Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship

At the European Migration Forum hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the platform for dialogue between civil society and the EU institutions, co-organised with the European Commission.

This year, the Forum was tasked with translating civil society’s feedback into a practical, long-term migration policy for the European Union, with a focus on employment, integration, skills recognition, education and training, and we need to help them integrate into the labour market. The cost of the non-integration of migrants and refugees would be disastrous for all sides.

Dimitris Avramopoulos, European Commissioner in charge of Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship argued that “While we cope with the immediacy of the refugee crisis now, we also have to think long term (…) Making sure that those who have arrived and have a right to stay become a full part of our society is crucial. Ensuring swift and full integration is essential and we need different stakeholders – not least civil society – involved in this process”. (cad)

Georges Dassis, EESC President, opened the Forum by calling on “European decision-makers to listen and take on board our recommendations: Europe needs to adopt long-term immigration policies that encompass migrants’ and refugees’ skills recognition, education and training, and we need to help them integrate into the labour market. The cost of the non-integration of migrants and refugees would be disastrous for all sides.”

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Members back from missions share their experience

The following articles represent the personal views of EESC members who took part in the missions and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EESC.

Irini Pari, member of the Employers’ Group, about the mission to Greece

“In December, I went on a mission that I will never forget. I went with EESC colleagues to Lesbos, an island in the Aegean, and to Eidomeni, a little village on the northern border of Greece. This is the entry route for thousands of migrants fleeing war and seeking a better future.

It was impressive to take stock of, see and feel the unprecedented numbers of refugees. In Lesbos alone, an average of 5 000 to 6 000 are arriving every day on this island of 86 000 inhabitants. It is a monumental task to welcome them, meet their primary needs, start the registration and relocation process... and from what everybody said, more are expected to come as time goes by.

We met with a lot of people working on the ground – national and local authorities, Frontex, EU, UNCHR, IMO officials and local and international NGOs. They were all deeply involved, motivated and committed.

From the discussions we had, I believe that Europe has an enormous role to play. First, it is essential to create safe routes for refugees and migrants so that they are not exploited by smugglers and lose their lives at sea. Secondly, we need to strengthen the role of Frontex, which needs to have the means and resources to save lives and help in the complex registration process. Thirdly, the Dublin II regulation has to be revised; the responsibility cannot be shouldered by just a few Member States: it has to be shared on a permanent basis.

But above all, I met refugees who had just crossed the sea the night before, a cold night during which 15 people lost their lives. I met with refugees just before they crossed the borders or were denied passage on their way to Central Europe. I saw pairs, sorrow and hope in their eyes. Let’s not disappoint them!”

Peter Schmidt, member of the Workers’ Group, about the mission to Germany

“At the beginning of January, me, in collaboration with colleagues of the Employers’ Group, went on a mission on behalf of the EESC to investigate the situation in Passau and Munich with regard to incoming refugees and cooperation between the authorities and civil society.

What impressed us most was how enthusiastic such a wide variety of organisations were about helping the people who were arriving, and the way the various voluntary groups within mainstream society organised themselves, with no need for specific instructions. This commitment has made it possible to avoid a humanitarian disaster, despite the huge numbers of people arriving. Even the competent governmental authorities and the federal police have (after a few initial difficulties) not only acknowledged the capabilities of the people, but accepted them as the most important element in addressing the issue.

One key prerequisite for achieving this was social media, without which none of this self-organisation would have been possible.

We also visited some existing integration projects. Everyone agreed that this was going to be the greater challenge. It became clear that there were two essential points. First of all, examples have shown that greater deployment of language teachers a) helps refugees to integrate more quickly, and b) reduces boredom, which can be a source of conflict.

Secondly, there is an urgent need for coordinators: the efforts of the various aid organisations are very admirable, but they often lack the coordination that would make the aid they provide more direct and immediate.

Moreover, the creation of refugee ghettos is strongly advised against, as they prevent integration. The scale of arrivals has created fear and led to the closure of internal borders. The media and public authorities have an important role to play in alleviating this fear.

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The lessons we are learning the hard way will hopefully prepare us for the future. Sustainable solutions cannot be found at national level, only at EU level.”

José Antonio Moreno Díaz, member of the Workers’ Group, about the mission to Turkey

“As a result of the visit, I have changed the way I look at the migrant crisis. In one meeting, for example, we began by talking about migrant pressure on border areas. Civil society bore out what we said – but by talking about Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey itself, where the situation is truly critical. Turkey – 3 000 000 refugees, Lebanon – 1 070 000, Jordan – 640 000. To talk about a “crisis” in the EU, with a population of 500 million and which took in some 1 000 000 people in 2015, is not serious.

What impressed me most was the commitment of NGOs working with refugees, especially in the Izmir area. Even so, I was struck by the hopelessness felt by many of these activists – they are very pessimistic about how the situation is unfolding and especially about the role that the EU might play. Regrettably, their fears have been entirely justified by the EU-Turkey agreement.

I personally believe that integration is impossible given the legal and political environment in Turkey: a stable and comparable legal status with the ability to stay, finding a job, establishing a family and which often take the hope for a better life to the depths with them. The EESC also sent a delegation to Italy. My colleagues Vladimir Drbalová and José Antonio Moreno Díaz accompanied me. We met with the heads of agencies and organisations active in the field of reception and integration in Milan and Rome on 18 and 19 January. What struck us most was the view held by everyone we spoke to that Europe is facing a dramatic, long-term problem, coupled with the realisation that without strong commitment by every state and the EU as a whole, it will be quite impossible to cope with the challenge of the problem. Refugees arriving in Italy, particularly in the south with the symbolic case of Lampedusa, have always shown enormous solidarity, but this is not enough to provide lasting solutions.

The “Casa Suraya” in Milan was one of the most interesting projects, a reception facility where public measures and private volunteer work dovetail to good effect providing excellent reception for families, with legal assistance, help learning Italian, psychological support and job training. There is no shortage of difficulties, particularly when immigrants do not want to provide information on their legal status and place of origin. The social partners and civil society have a fundamental role to play as regards integrating these people, in terms of initial assistance, often largely carried out by volunteers, and in the later stages, providing training and getting migrants into school and work.”

Christa Schweng, member of the Employers’ Group, member of the mission to Austria

“The discussions we had in the Member States we visited produced very similar messages:

The EU needs a functioning asylum system, a uniform application procedure and a common list of safe countries. Hotspots must be fully operational around the clock and their number increased. The Dublin Regulation must be revised, countries of first arrival must be given additional support and the relocation system must be made operational.

Common criteria for international protection should be defined. Tackling root causes should be a priority in EU foreign policy and more support should be given to countries bordering Syria.

A distinction needs to be made between refugees and economic migrants. People whose cases are judged unfavourably must be sent back to their country of origin. Readmission agreements should be concluded as a matter of priority.

Civil society organisations often perform tasks which are the responsibility of Member States. There must be better coordination between civil society organisations and national authorities and easier access for CSOs to EU funding.

Integrating large numbers of people into our societies and labour markets is both a challenge and an opportunity. Integration is vital in order to avoid parallel societies and should start as early as possible.

The scale of arrivals has created fear and led to the closure of internal borders. The media and public authorities have an important role to play in alleviating this fear.

The lessons we are learning the hard way will hopefully prepare us for the future. Sustainable solutions cannot be found at national level, only at EU level.”

Dilyana Slavova, member of the Various Interests Group and president of the REX section, about the mission to Bulgaria

“The Red Cross is one of three NGOs – along with Caritas and the Council for Refugee Women in Bulgaria – that run integration-related activities. These include free language courses, as well as assistance throughout the job-seeking process. The organisations work with small groups of people, as most refugees do not speak Bulgarian and so have few job opportunities and are often subject to discrimination. Regular language classes for refugees take place in the Red Cross Information Centre in Sofia. The main challenge for refugees is to fit into society and find a job – for which they must be able to communicate in Bulgarian. A total of 170 people completed the language course successfully during the first half of 2015. These NGOs thus make a real contribution to the integration of asylum-seekers.”

Antonio Longo, member of the EESC Various Interests Group, about the mission to Italy

“Owing to its position in the Mediterranean, Italy is the first point of contact for the hundreds of thousands of people fleeing Africa and war-torn countries such as Syria in search of a better life. The island of Lampedusa has come to symbolise both reception and the drama of struggling boats which land day after day bearing children, children and men of all ages and which often take the hope for a better life to the depths with them. The EESC also sent a delegation to Italy. My colleagues Vladimir Drbalová and José Antonio Moreno Díaz accompanied me. We met with the heads of agencies and organisations active in the field of reception and integration in Milan and Rome on 18 and 19 January. What struck us most was the view held by everyone we spoke to that Europe is facing a dramatic, long-term problem, coupled with the realisation that without strong commitment by every state and the EU as a whole, it will be quite impossible to cope with the challenge of the problem. Refugees arriving in Italy, particularly in the south with the symbolic case of Lampedusa, have always shown enormous solidarity, but this is not enough to provide lasting solutions.

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YEYS 2016: Teenage refugees are the future “workers and geniuses” in Europe

The EESC invited a group of outspoken 16 and 17 year-olds from all over Europe to debate one of the hottest topics on the political agenda right now: migration and integration.

The debate took place in Brussels back to back with the EESC’s March plenary session. The youngsters explored a range of issues, from the role of schools, sports clubs and cultural outreach in countering discrimination, to the way information about the refugee crisis is communicated, the role of the media and the importance of a well-defined, humane way of handling integration.

After an open and lively debate on ten different proposals, the youth delegates agreed on three overarching proposals to better integrate migrants, especially children, into European societies:

- **Media and migrants, media reform using investment from the EU:** ideas to impose stricter guidelines for reporting on migrant issues and other measures to raise awareness and reduce discrimination.
- **Revision of Dublin agreement:** hotspots, faster processing of asylum applications and language and cultural training before allocating refugees.
- **Education plan, no grading at first, exchange of culture, adjusting at own pace:** easing refugees into the education system, recognising the importance of education for integration.

“Out of the discussions, it is of the essence in implementing the proposed changes to the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) are adequate to cover the human and financial resources required to respond quickly enough to pressing humanitarian and security needs.

A more efficient and cost-effective coastguard system would enable Member States to loosen or even forego permanent controls and allow Schengen to be fully and properly reinstated, suggests the opinion by rapporteur Jan Simons from the Employers’ Group.

Among the measures proposed by the Commission, the Committee endorses the use of remotely piloted aircraft systems (RPAS) to support the sometimes patchy surveillance from satellite coverage alone – smaller wooden or rubber boats are difficult to spot.

Members and EU policy-makers were struck by the young ambassadors’ thought-provoking ideas and practical suggestions to promote a more integrated response to the migration crisis.

EESC member José Antonio Moreno Díaz said he was impressed by the proposed solutions to some hard questions, “even for adults and politicians to answer”, and he applauded the common sense on display. “You are the spirit of Europe,” he concluded.

Timely boost for maritime security efforts

The EESC is backing moves by the European Commission to boost cooperation and information exchange between various EU agencies and national bodies currently carrying out coastguard functions. But it stresses that “time is of the essence in implementing the proposed measures”.

“The situation whereby the flow of refugees continues to claim lives at sea, the irregular influx of migrants persists and Member States take unilateral measures by introducing permanent border controls cannot and must not be allowed to continue,” the Committee stressed in an opinion on the proposed amendment to the Commission’s regulation, adopted at the EESC plenary session in March. It further calls into question whether the proposed changes to the incoming Dublin agreement:

- revision of Dublin agreement: hotspots, faster processing of asylum applications and language and cultural training before allocating refugees.
- education plan, no grading at first, exchange of culture, adjusting at own pace: easing refugees into the education system, recognising the importance of education for integration.

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Upcoming activities of the Workers’ Group

The Workers’ Group is convinced that the current crises, whether it be the challenge of terrorism, the economic and social crisis or the refugee crisis, can only be solved by a strong, united, caring Europe that is profoundly democratic. This is why the Workers’ Group welcomes the launching of a public consultation on the European Pillar of Social Rights that will strengthen the Union’s democratic character. The workers fully endorse the goal of this initiative, which is to deliver a deeper and fairer EMU, in particular by guaranteeing fair and properly functioning labour markets and social protection systems. To make Mr Juncker’s idea of a ‘social AAA rating’ a reality, the Workers’ Group has made this initiative its first and foremost priority. For this reason, its president, Ms Bischoff, will be one of the rapporteurs of the relevant EESC opinion (together with the two Group presidents and several EESC members).

Social rights are at the centre of the Workers’ Group’s concerns also in relation to the “Brexit” issue. In this framework, in its recent declaration of 18 February 2016 it warned against the possible undermining of the principle of freedom and repeated efforts to reduce social rights. As a follow-up to this resolution, the Workers’ Group is organising an extraordinary bureau meeting in London on 21 April 2016 to talk about the risks of the UK’s EU referendum not only for UK workers but for all European citizens. An in-depth evaluation of views with the UK trade unions will take place on this occasion.

Finally, on 31 May 2016, the Workers’ Group will hold an extraordinary meeting in The Hague to carry out a detailed evaluation of the Dutch EU Presidency with the participation of representatives of the Dutch government. (mg/f6)

What future for EU SME policy?

The original vision of the Small Business Act (SBA) should be revived to be used more effectively as a tool for boosting SME competitiveness. The needs of SMEs must be taken into account systematically as a tool for boosting SME competitiveness. The SBA should be revived to be used more effectively – these are the major points raised by EU employers’ organisations (BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME, EuroChambres, Eurocommerce, Copa-Cogeca and CEEP) called for a reinforced EU SME policy and SME Action Plan to ensure a revival of the SBA and to energise national SME policies. They identified a number of priorities that must be addressed, such as promoting entrepreneurship, completion of the Single Market, improving access to finance for SMEs and facilitating trade, including accessing non-EU markets.

“SMEs are major job and growth generators in Europe and their further growth is crucial for the European economy. By organising the Round Table, we wanted to draw the attention of policy makers to the variety of challenges that SMEs are facing and to propose concrete measures to improve their business environment”, stated Jacek Krawczyk, President of the EESC Employers’ Group, that organised the meeting. He underlined that both EU and national employers’ organisations are eager to cooperate closer with the European Commission to make sure that legislation responds to the needs of businesses. (ij)

Providing enough food for all requires a radical change in food production and consumption

The global population is projected to reach a staggering 9.6 billion by 2050, but the global food production system is struggling to feed the current population of 7.5 billion. In addition, the way we currently grow, produce, transport and consume food is unsustainable.

The EESC is currently preparing an opinion on More sustainable food systems at the request of the Dutch EU Presidency. Stakeholders’ and experts’ views on this issue were gathered at a hearing organised by the EESC in Brussels on 11 March 2016.

In the EESC’s view, one of the major themes is the issue of reducing food waste, which currently stands at 100 million tonnes in Europe and 1.6 billion tonnes (around 30% of production) globally. Eating healthier food and consuming less meat is also good for the health of the planet. But it does not end there. The food sector is the world’s largest producer of greenhouse gas emissions – and the EESC will propose measures to address this.

In addition, more coherence is needed not only across policies but also across sectors. EU food and policy must be comprehensive and encompass agriculture, trade, the environment, health and social policy, and combine different tools, such as legislation, economic incentives and taxes in order to develop a truly sustainable food system. (sma)

EESC and French CESE seeking closer links

The EESC and the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE) are looking forward to closer links. In January an EESC delegation presented the EESC’s activities to the recently renewed French CESE following an invitation from incoming President Patrick Bernasconi, who from the beginning of his mandate has proposed that the CESE should centre its work on strategic priorities. One of these is “mainstreaming the European dimension into all CESE opinions and reports. This calls for some genuine joint work with the EESC”.

Several other steps have been taken since then, most notably a working meeting between President Dasis and President Bernasconi held in Brussels on 10 March, followed by one in Paris on 21 March between French members of the EESC led by Thierry Libaët, EESC contact point for France, and the CESE leadership. At these meetings the two bodies decided to work together in a variety of areas. Major issues for cooperation will include the follow-up to COP21, migration, social Europe, posted workers, Europe 2020 and the EU network of national ESSCs and the EESC. They also agreed to encourage direct contacts between their respective presidents, section administrators and rapporteurs and to facilitate and multiply exchanges between their consultative sections, commissions and delegations, while expressing the wish to hold similar meetings on a regular, biannual basis.

The next step will be Mr Bernasconi’s attendance of the EESC’s May plenary. (dm)


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To be or not to be in the EU? That is the question...

by Luca Jahier, President of the EESC’s Various Interests Group

On 8 March 2016, the Various Interests Group organised a debate on The UK in the EU: What Matters to You? in which 130 people took part and which was moderated by Shirin Wheeler, former presenter of the BBC programme The Record Europe.

With speakers from academia and think tanks, the voluntary and environmental sectors, social enterprises, trade unions, local and national authorities and EESC Members, it has to be said that our event stimulated one of the liveliest discussions that we have ever had at a thematic conference of our Group. Whether discussing about jobs, growth, economic and social cohesion, security, sovereignty and identity, or whether discussing the “founding Alters” and the consequences of a majority vote to leave the EU, one thread of thought was common throughout: the referendum on 23 June will be about people and people’s quality of life. Arguably for this reason, despite the facts and the partisan political dimension to the Leave/Remain campaigns, the discussed agreed that most UK citizens will vote based on their emotions. It is the sentiments, perceptions, fears, passions and values to be passed on to the next generation which will ultimately determine the referendum result. We could call it “project hope”, for the European Union is a common journey for the development of our society, for justice and dignity. However, this journey is obviously not without its challenges.

Almost five centuries ago, William Shakespeare wrote: “All the world’s a stage” and life is a play that we must enact. On 23 June, UK citizens will be the principal actors! So “to be, or not to be” a member of the European Union? That is the question! Personally, I stand firmly in the camp “To Be” in the EU. I am a fan of ‘YUK IN!’.