Irregular crossing will not stop - EESC report on refugees in Turkey

As part of its fact-finding missions on migrants and refugees (see April issue of EESC Info), the EESC, represented by Manthos Manvmomatis (Employers’ Group), Josè Antonio Moreno Díaz (Worker’s Group) and Panagiotis Gkofas (Various Interests Group), undertook the project ‘Turkey: Into and from Europe’ (11 March to 11 March) to meet authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs) working with migrants. The EESC mission report contained 13 practical recommendations to address the current situation. According to the report, irregular crossing will not stop as long as in Syria continues. Protecting persons seeking protection is a key concern that calls for a rights-based approach in concluding agreements with Turkey or any third country. The report also included the following conclusions:

- Status of Turkey as a safe third country: several CSOs doubt whether Turkey can be regarded as such, since many people fleeing international protection have been deported to their home country despite the risks for their lives.
- Few integration possibilities: Turkey’s geographic limitation to the Geneva Convention means that Syrians can only obtain temporary protection and other third country protection have been deported.
- Limited social rights for refugees: they cannot apply for a work permit and must rely on employers, who have no incentive to employ them as Turkish law forces them to hire a number of Turks for each foreigner they engage. Non-Syrians have to live in ‘satellite cities’, which restrict their freedom of movement and jobs opportunities. Most refugee children living outside camps leave school in order to work.
- The fight against smuggling is limited. Although the number of officers, vessels and equipment available to combat smuggling has increased, the conviction rate is very low.


EU Border Guard: right to intervene and need to prioritise the protection of fundamental rights

Improving the management of the EU’s external border is no longer just an aim, it is an urgent imperative, according to an EESC opinion adopted at the EESC’s May plenary (rapporteur: Giuseppe Luliano and co-rapporteur: Cristian Pirulescu). But this should not be done to the detriment of fundamental human rights, notably the right to asylum and the right to free movement for EU citizens.

A new form of border management must be shaped and go hand in hand with a transformation of Frontex into a “European Border Guard”, akin to a civilian police force. This agency should have the right to intervene – upon a Commission decision – in emergency situations. In the EESC’s view, such intervention should be strictly limited to well-defined emergencies and should entail a duty to report to and inform the European Parliament and the Council of the EU.

Further research is also needed to identify vulnerable groups and to address issues relating to accident liability, damage and service failures in relation to online platforms, crowdsourcing and other new forms of self-employment.

Involving civil society and social partners is crucial if the European Commission is to deliver appropriate provisions to protect workers and employers alike. (cad)

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However, the EESC does not support the European Commission’s proposal to establish systematic checks of EU citizens at the EU’s external borders, as this would dramatically affect the fundamental right to free movement.

CIVIL SOCIETY DAYS 2016: Dialogue and solidarity at EU level are key to a prosperous and peaceful Europe

Representatives from European civil society organisations gathered in Brussels on 31 May and 1 June for Civil Society Days 2016, hosted by the EESC. At the focus of discussions was migration, with the challenges it involves for European society.

“Civil mobilisation has the force to change the course of history. The vital role civil society organisations have played in the recent migration crisis is proof of what is possible with citizens’ support,” said George Dassis.

Gesine Schwan shared this view: “People and citizens in Europe are a lot more open and fair-minded than European governments would have us believe. To avoid moving backwards under the pressure of right-wing forces, we need to engage in social dialogue and we need a democratic movement that involves both local municipalities and civil society organisations.”

Participants discussed various aspects of migration: youth and education, social integration, eradicating the causes of migration, freedom of expression, living together or in parallel in societies and freedom of movement in the EU.

The EESC: an influential voice in shaping the EU’s future urban policy

EU ministers responsible for urban matters met in Amsterdam on 30 May 2016 to adopt the new EU Urban Agenda. The EESC was duly represented there by Joost van Iersel, president of the EESC’s ECO section, and Roman Hakken, rapporteur for the opinion on The future of the EU Urban Agenda seen from the perspective of civil society. Their attendance represented a continuation of the EESC’s pivotal role in shaping the EU’s urban agenda.

The EU Urban Agenda aims to establish a new form of multi-level cooperation between Member States, regions, representatives of urban authori- ties, and civil society organisations. The European Parliament, the EU’s advisory bodies (EESC and COR), the EIB and other relevant players in order to strengthen the urban dimension of EU policy. Designed to stimulate innovation and growth, the agenda will directly influence the lives of the 80% of EU citizens projected to be living in towns and cities by 2050.

The collaborative economy promises multiple benefits but must be regulated to ensure trust

Globally, the volume of trade in the sharing economy is estimated at around EUR 17.8 billion, with rapid annual growth forecast until 2025. In response to a request from the Dutch presidency, the EESC has voted an opinion on the sharing economy. The opinion calls for the sharing economy to be developed and implemented in the European area.

New business models, such as the collaborative economy, bring with them regulatory issues which must be addressed if social benefits are to be delivered. In particular, they must comply with national and EU legislation. Key issues include workers’ rights, taxation, data protection and privacy issues, social rights, fair competition and the fight against monopolies and anti-competitive practices. The range of exchanges taking place on platforms created to facilitate the sharing economy need to be closely examined.

The opinion also calls for the rights of all partners operating in the sharing economy to be protected, including producers (producer-consumers). The EESC calls on the Commission to publish without further delay the long overdue EU agenda for the collaborative economy.

The President of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council at the EESC plenary

On 26 May, Patrick Bernasconi, president of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, gave a speech at the EESC entitled The Economic and Social Councils and the expectations of European civil society. He also took part in the discussions of EESC members on this issue of crucial importance for European citizens and those who represent their organisations at all levels.

Mr Dassis, also speaking at the plenary session, argued: “Against a background of crisis in Europe, with considerable public distrust of the political class, the economic, social and environmental councils have a crucial role to play in the public dialogue and the democratic debate, whether at national or European level.”

Patrick Bernasconi agreed, saying: “It is essential to strengthen the dialogue and cooperation between our two assemblies, since the issues that really affect people’s lives, on which we are working in the social, economic and environmental areas, have a systematic European and even international resonance.”

EESEC-ESEC cooperation expands

On 15 June 2016, the EESC hosted a delegation from the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC) for an exchange of information on transport and energy, foreign affairs and Horizon 2020.

The meeting was part of a process of closer working relations initiated by Georges Dassis, President of the EESC, and Patrick Bernasconi, President of the French ESEC.

On the EESC’s side, it was attended by the Unit for inter-institutional relations and relations with national ESECs (REL), Pierre-Jean Coulon, president of the TEN Section, José-Maria Zufiaur Navarre and Jonathan Peel, vice-presidents of the REX Section, and Etele Bárth, president of Europe2020 Steering Committee. There was a lengthy debate with the members of the French delegation, headed by Jean-Marie Cambacérès, president of the French ESEC’s Section for European and International Affairs.
Socio-economic actors to play a key role in post-Cotonou

A new EU-ACP partnership needed that puts civil society in the driving seat

The EESC’s May plenary put forward recommendations for reshaping EU trade, aid and development mechanisms to make them more effective in dealing with current and future challenges in relations with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. These recommendations will feed into the new framework which is to replace the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, due to expire in 2020.

In order to effectively implement the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals and deliver better outcomes to both ACP and EU citizens, the EESC calls for a new framework that recognises the important role of civil society participation in the development process. The EESC believes that the role of civil society should also extend to monitoring and assessing the impact of implementation of the future agreement, for which it should receive the necessary financial support.

The EESC’s debate with Joseph Chilenga, President of the African Union’s ECOSOCC, and Commissioner Neven Mimica discussed the priority that the EU assigns to ACP countries and the need to shift the paradigm from negotiation to dialogue, given the universality of challenges across the EU and ACP.

EU-China Round Table results in joint statement on innovation, rural development, “One Belt, One Road” and investment

The 14th EU-China Round Table meeting, hosted by the EESC on 18-19 May, recognised that the Europe 2020 objectives and China’s 13th five-year plan are compatible. Participants agreed that innovative science parks.

Driving innovation and industry in Europe

by the Employers’ Group

Business, industry and academia - closer ties are beneficial for all and there are a number of factors that could boost innovation: this was the conclusion reached by participants in the seminar on Driving innovation and Industry in Europe, held on 16 June in Cambridge. Representatives of academia and high-tech innovative companies tried to identify what is needed to boost innovation in the EU.

Promoting the STEM agenda (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) in education is key to boosting innovation as there is a chronic dearth of highly educated and skilled engineers in the EU labour market. It was also pointed out that lack of failure acceptance is another factor undermining innovation in Europe. The speakers also deplored the excess of red tape, especially when applying for EU funds for research.

"Cambridge was chosen as the venue for this event because of the overwhelming presence of top-quality research and education; Cambridge is thus a real European – even global – centre of excellence," said Brenda King, UK member of the Employers’ Group.

The seminar was organised by the EESC’s Employers’ Group in partnership with the Cambridge Network, and was flanked by study visits to Cambridge’s innovative science parks.

An EU that works for workers: our alternative to Euroscepticism and nationalism

by the Workers’ Group

On 31 May 2016, the Workers’ Group organised an extraordinary meeting at The Hague, in the premises of the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER). It was among other things an opportunity to evaluate the new EU Presidency, which was nearing its conclusion.

Following introductory speeches by SER President Mariette Hamer and EESC Workers’ Group President Gabriele Bischoff, one of the key issues for discussion was the future of the European Pillar of Social Rights, an initiative on which the European Commission has recently launched a public consultation.

Trade unions consider this initiative as crucial for the development of the EU in the face of Eurosceptic trends that are challenging its very existence.

The afternoon session focused on the danger of rising Euroscepticism and nationalism, trends which were experienced by the Netherlands itself during the Dutch referendum on the Ukraine–EU Association Agreement. Journalists, trade unions and academics from different EU countries discussed the effects of these phenomena – which seriously risk jeopardising the social acquis at national and European level – on trade union and workers’ rights. The impacts are already being felt in several countries including the UK, where the government is pushing forward very anti-trade union legislation.

Concluding the meeting, Gabriele Bischoff stressed that Europe must deliver a positive project for workers and citizens, and called on trade unions to reach out to workers who feel marginalised and ignored by traditional political groups.

The EESC sets out its strategy to make the EU a better neighbour

An urgent overhaul is needed to ensure that the EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is an effective tool for cross-border cooperation. The ENP was launched in 2004 to build on common interests and values with the EU’s southern and eastern neighbours and promote political and economic cooperation, but its “one-size-fits-all” approach has not been able to account for or deal with ongoing fragmentation in both regions.

In its opinion on the Commission’s proposed review of the ENP, adopted at the May plenary, the EESC calls for a more proactive, dynamic approach, focusing on regional stabilisation and greater social and civil dialogue. “It is true that the EU has been confronted with disruptive, sometimes dramatic developments in both the Mediterranean and eastern neighbourhoods. However, lack of vision will not help overcome the deadlock. We suggest defining a new, bold, dynamic ENP agenda, including the prospect of EU accession for some partner countries which have such aspirations and are able and willing to meet the requirements,” said EESC rapporteur Andrzej Adamczyk.

A hope for Europe! Culture, cities and new narratives:

Culture as the 4th pillar of sustainable development

On 20-21 June, the EESC’s Various Interests Group organised a conference entitled: A hope for Europe! Culture, cities and new narratives: organised in partnership with Bozar and the Education and Culture Committee of the European Parliament.

The conference welcomed over 200 participants and emphasised the enormous potential culture has for becoming a unifying and mobilising instrument in Europe. At a time when extremism is increasing unabated, at a time when our citizens are questioning their common identity more than ever since 1945, now is the moment to place culture and cultural policies at the heart of the European political agenda, to invest in the sector and to support the plethora of actions engaged in cultural governance.

Now is the time to include culture as a tool of soft power in Europe’s external relations and to promote culture as the 4th pillar of sustainable development.

Within this context, a study was commissioned by the Various Interests Group and presented during this conference. At the heart of this study are the following questions: can culture help us overcome the systemic, political and identity crises which are currently shaking the EU? What role can culture and cities play in strengthening social and territorial cohesion, engaging in dialogue and building trust in our complex societies? Can culture bring hope, new narratives and a second renaissance to Europe?

As Luca Jahier, President of the Various Interests Group concluded, we need a new and powerful narrative for Europe, capable of reshaping our future. Culture can help create the hope that we need for our future, for sustainable development and progress on our continent and for a narrative which is convincing and inspiring to us all.

NEW BROCHURE

EESC priorities during the Slovak presidency

On 1 July Slovakia will assume the presidency of the Council for the first time since its accession. The EESC brochure published to mark the occasion sets out the priorities of the Slovak presidency, of European civil society and the Slovak EESC members, along with some key facts about Slovakia.

Migration, a story of two worlds

Luca Jahier, President of the Various Interests Group, at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum in Bonn

On 15 June the EESC hosted the panel "Migration, a story of two worlds" at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum. It was chaired by Michael Meyer, former Communication director for Ban Ki-moon. Two refugees, Prince Wale Soniyiki from Nigeria and Suhrab Balkhi from Afghanistan, told the heart-breaking stories of their escape and described the hostilities they were confronted with in their host countries. Mona Hemmer reported on how her village managed to host 100 Iraqi and Afghan refugees and what an enriching experience it has been for all despite initial doubts and resistance.

Alexandra Föderl-Schmid, chief editor of the Austrian newspaper Der Standard, emphasised the importance for journalists of maintaining a professional balance in reporting on the topic of migration. "We need to report on stories such as Prince and Suhrab described, but we also need to look at the negative implications migration can have".

Luca Jahier, President of the EESC's Various Interests group, emphasised that "it was civil society that saved Europe during the migration crisis". They were confronted with in their host countries. The EESC wants to counter growing fears in Europe with practical proposals for EU institutions and Member States, and to EU citizens, helping them learn -- in a fun way -- about the EU and the EESC's place in it.

The EESC at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum in Bonn

On 10 June, EESC President Georges Dassis went to the Elysée Palace at the invitation of the French President. He was there to make the case for the Appeal of 9 May for a European renaissance, together with nine other signatories - Lionel Berès, Maïresse Bressol, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Guillaume Klossa, Maria João Rodrigues, Roberto Savi- ano, Gesine Schwan, Guy Verhofstadt and EESC member Philippe de Buck (Employers' Group).

"I am very much counting on President Hollande's support to promote these proposals", said Georges Dassis, "and I am delighted that he has invited me, marking the beginning of a broader movement to reflect and take action at the level of heads of state and government. The appeal is clear: the general interest is not just the sum of national interests. That is my firm belief, as a committed Euro- pean who is striving to bring EU cit- izens ever closer together. Together, and in all our diversity, we will build a prosperous and peaceful future."

Discover the EESC by playing R EU Ready!

The EESC has developed an educational game - R EU Ready? - that allows young people to play the role of an EESC member in Brussels.

The aim of the game is to bring the EU - and therefore the EESC - closer to its citizens, helping them learn - in a fun way - about the EU and the EESC's place in it.

This educational game is available in all EU languages on the dedicated Facebook page (R EU Ready) and on the EESC website (web version) and can also be downloaded from Google Play and App Store.

For more information, see our flyer: R EU Ready!

Joint meeting of the EESC Communication group and contact points in Porto

A joint meeting of the EESC Communication group and contact points was chaired by EESC Vice President Gonçalo Lobo Xavier and hosted by the Mayor of Porto, Rui Moreira, on 2-3 June 2016.

The meeting started with a presentation by José Manuel Fernandes, a journalist working for the Portuguese newspaper Observer, on The media in Portugal, followed by speeches by João Távora, head of the Commission Representation in Portugal, on the Commission Communication Strategy, and Luis Planas, EESC Secretary General, on The policy priorities of the EESC Secretariat. The agenda also included a panel on the role of the Communication contact points, with EESC members presenting best practices.

The outcome of the meeting was the reaffirmation of communication priorities, focusing on promoting policy areas rather than the organisation itself and to use Going Local possibilities according to guidelines.

EU civil society: Europe’s feet on the (agricultural) ground

Gonçalo Lobo Xavier gave an overview of the role of the EESC and explained ongoing initiatives and the work taking place to boost the importance of organised civil society in Europe.

Margarida Marques emphasised the importance that the Portu- guese government attaches to the EESC, and proposed several ini- tiatives to strengthen cooperation between them, namely meetings at national and EU level aimed at giv- ing a voice to civil society and raising its profile for the Portuguese public.

The speakers addressed a large audi- ence of Portuguese farmers and local authorities and gave their views on how their work at the EESC affected organisations and unions in Portugal.


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Just like the other EU institutions, on 28 May the EESC opened its doors to the public. Twenty EESC members and 75 members of staff welcomed 2 424 visitors who had the opportunity to talk with EESC members and take part in the many family activities which had been laid on. The guiding theme this year was “United in diversity”.

Visitors were asked to vote on the issues they saw as priorities. They were particu- larly interested in the migration crisis (specifically setting up a common European asylum system, provid- ing support to refugees in coun- tries bordering conflict zones, and implementing integration policies based on education and training).

EU institutions’ Open Day 2016

Gonçalo Lobo Xavier, EESC Vice- President for Communication, attended the Annual Portuguese Agriculture Fair in Santarém on 11 June 2016 and took part in the panel The importance of civil society in Europe, organised by Employers’ Group mem- ber Luis Mira, along with Workers’ Group member João Dias da Silva and the Portuguese State Secretary for European Affairs, Margarida Marques.

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