EDITORIAL

Dear readers,

YEYS and the 60 years of the Treaty of Rome

I am here in the Italian capital in the year marking the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, for a conference being held by the EESC on nothing less than the future of Europe. When people tell me there is little reason to celebrate, I wonder if they are thinking straight. The rationale for creating a united Europe remains, more than ever, at the heart of the economic, social and political decisions of the Member States - and even of other non-Union countries. Some might say that Europe has never been more divided, and its people are totally detached from the European venture. But is that true?

Can it be that the decades of peace - albeit with some violent outbreaks - are not enough to convince Europeans to give credence to a state of affairs that previously looked impossible given the differences between countries? Do the economic growth and substantial improvement in people’s well-being, even if there has clearly been real suffering on the part of some social groups, particularly the young and the elderly, not give us grounds to appreciate what has been achieved?

And should the spectacular development of knowledge, at the “cost” of free movement of people and goods, not make us proud and make our social, cultural, economic and political life easier?

I believe the answer to all these questions should be positive.

There has been a lot of “finger-pointing”, openly blaming government for people’s lack of belief in Europe, or “Brussels”. It is indeed much easier to blame Brussels for everything bad that happens in people’s lives, and at the same time to talk up governments’ claims of negotiating triumphs. The “Brussels bubble” is often held responsible for every ill and blamed for every tragedy.

I find this attitude deeply unfair towards those who created this plan for European peace and prosperity. The shared project those men and women put together was from the outset driven by the desire to make things better for people and nations.

I would urge those who - sometimes rightly - criticise European integration to carry out a necessary exercise: to analyse the cost of “non-Europe”. Yes, we have to be realistic: even as such an important partner as the United Kingdom is leaving, we must gauge the consequences for European citizens if this wonderful project were to come to an end. My impression is that Europe’s detractors have not thought this through.

It is not only a matter of saying “there is no alternative”. In my view, we need to continue seeking a solution which, despite its terrible “growing pains”, is best able to respond to the challenges currently affecting the auto industry for decades is at stake now”, argued the rapporteurs Georgi Stoев (BG – Employers’ Group) and Monika Sitarova Hrusecka (SK – CCM delegate).

The inevitable structural changes may disrupt all elements of the existing value chain and lead to new business models. “We want to emphasise the enormous challenges the car and automotive industry is facing, but also its huge potential for economic growth and new jobs, if we implement the right policy framework. A forward-looking policy approach and Europe-wide co-ordination and cooperation are key to help the sector quickly adapt to changing conditions”, said Mr Stoev.

The report analyses four major challenges currently affecting the automotive industry: electrification and de-carbonisation of transport, digitalisation of the production process, autonomous driving and connected cars. (sma)

A comprehensive policy to steer transformation in car industry

The transition to electro-mobility and the development of connected cars and autonomous driving will need a comprehensive industrial policy in conjunction with a balanced climate, environmental and energy policy. This is the main message of the EESC’s report The automotive industry on the brink of a new paradigm?, which calls on GEAR 2030 to draw up an ambitious long-term policy roadmap.

“The automotive industry is at a turning point. The challenges are manifold, including the future of the combustion engine, the supply chain or even who will drive the vehicle, if anyone. Nearly all that has been valid and universal in the car industry for decades is at stake now”, argued the rapporteurs Georgi Stoев (BG – Employers’ Group) and Monika Sitarova Hrusecka (SK – CCM delegate).

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Only a strong economy can allow Europe to weather the storm

It is vital to foster economic growth; only if Europe has a strong economy, can it better face the political and social challenges that stand before it. This was one of the main messages of the EESC opinions adopted in February. The EESC believes the Juncker plan is not enough and calls for more private and public investment.

In the opinion on the Euro area economic policy, the rapporteur Javier Doz Orrit (ES – Workers’ Group) and the co-rapporteur Petr Zahradník (CZ – Employers’ Group) stress that the EU should implement a balanced mix of monetary, fiscal and structural instruments to trigger investment and growth. The opinion supports the Commission’s original proposal of setting a positive aggregated euro area fiscal stance and calls for the creation of a European Deposit Insurance Scheme, a common backstop for the Single Resolution Fund of the Banking Union and a common budget specifically for the euro area.

In its opinion on the Annual Growth Survey 2017, the EESC also calls for flexibility in EU governance and recommends the use of tailor-made solutions. The rapporteur Etele Barath (HU – Various Interests Group) believes the EU needs a “beyond-GDP” approach to growth, which would require a result-oriented analysis with indicators for social, environmental and sustainability targets, combined with the promotion of social progress.

In the Committee’s view, a clear and comprehensible long-term overview of the political and strategic positions is essential, taking into account Juncker’s ten priorities and the EU’s 2030 targets. (mm)

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

March 2017 | EN

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EU must take the lead in linking trade in agriculture with SDGs

Trade in agriculture has never been so important – or so controversial. Back in the spotlight with the recent EP vote in favour of CETA, global attention is also turning to the forthcoming WTO Ministerial Conference later this year. Once again, the topic is expected to dominate, and the EU must play a key role.

However, agricultural trade is also crucial for the implementation of most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The EU is well positioned to lead this process, since it is the largest exporter and importer of agricultural products, and has a proven interest in trade and sustainable development and the credibility to play an active bridging role between developed and developing countries.

“It is time for the EU to take the driver’s seat to bring this agenda forward globally”, said Jonathan Peel (UK – Employers’ Group), rapporteur of the EESC opinion on Agriculture in trade negotiations adopted on 22 February. “The EU should build on several recent reforms of the CAP. It already showed at the previous WTO Ministerial Conference that it has the ability to produce fresh and balanced thinking – crucial when so few were expecting a positive outcome. Once more, we look to the EU to be one step ahead of our trading partners”.

In its opinion, the EESC provides recommendations for multilateral progress and urges the Commission to undertake an impact assessment of the possible effects on agricultural trade of the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and recent EU trade agreements. (sm)

Substantial investment needed in EU education and training systems

At its February plenary session, the EESC adopted an explanatory opinion on High Quality Education for All drawn up at the request of the Maltese presidency of the EU. While welcoming the presidency’s focus on this issue, the EESC made it clear that, if Member States were to pursue the austerity policies put in place following the crisis, they would not be able to make the investments required to make high quality public education effectively available to everyone. This must be a top priority in order to fight poverty, which is spreading rapidly in Europe, while the most recent studies and reports point to a close connection between educational poverty and low income.

The EESC identified a set of priority areas for action, among them:
- improving support for early childhood education and lifelong learning;
- ensuring education responds to the challenges of globalisation, digitalisation and changes in the world of work;
- creating training opportunities for young school-leavers, low-skilled workers and migrant workers;
- recognising non-formal and informal education;
- improving investment in teacher training;
- providing teachers with better working conditions;
- improving public investment in education and training;
- investing in educational infrastructure and tools, such as ICT;
- making better use of EU Funds to support quality E&T, research and innovation;
- strengthening EU-wide mobility opportunities for students, academics, teachers, trainers and researchers.

The EESC also took a stance on the European Commission’s New Skills Agenda. Today, around 70 million Europeans lack adequate reading, writing and numeracy skills, and more than 20% effectively cannot work with computers, while over 30% of highly qualified young people are working in jobs that do not match their talents and aspirations and 40% of European employers cannot find people with the right skills to grow and innovate. To address this skills deficit and mismatch, the Commission has proposed a new set of measures. However, in the EESC’s view, the new agenda is more of a step in the right direction than a game changer. More intrinsically, some solutions are already in place in some European countries and could be transferred to others. Social and gender perspectives also need to be brought into play, non-formal and informal learning need to be recognised and entrepreneurship should be promoted as a life skill.

The EESC suggests incorporating the Agenda into an enabling macroeconomic framework, where investments in education and training are treated not as a cost, but as an outlay which will bring positive benefits over time. In addition, contributions made by the Member States to cover expenditure in education and training should not be included in the framework used to calculate their budget deficit. (dm)

New video

Shaping Europe – how the EESC’s work shapes our everyday lives

A new six-minute video has been published showing how, through its members, the EESC provides a unique channel for the active involvement of civil society in the EU policy and law-making process. Based on real-life expertise, the Committee has adopted thousands of opinions which help improve the lives of ordinary EU citizens.

These opinions have shaped Europe by promoting employment and good practice in areas like the environment, energy policy, aviation and the social economy. They have encouraged the principles of democracy, freedom and human rights throughout the world and championed equal rights for all EU citizens, especially the most vulnerable.

Social economy enterprises, poverty and the EU aviation industry: these are some real-life examples of how the EESC’s work has shaped our everyday lives. The presidents of the EESC’s three groups discuss how the interests their members represent have been defended at EU level. (mm)

The EESC calls for participation of persons with disabilities in humanitarian response to migration crisis

The rights of persons with disabilities have to be mainstreamed in all EU policies and programmes for migrants and refugees, as prescribed by Article 11 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD), which entered into force in the EU in 2011. The EESC also calls for improved participation of persons with disabilities in the planning, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian response.

These were among the main conclusions of the public hearing on The situation of refugees and migrants with disabilities, held by the EESC’s Permanent Study Group on Disability Rights on 14 February 2017. The objective of the event was to draw attention to the situation of refugees and migrants with disabilities by raising awareness among organisations working with refugees on the rights and specific needs of persons with disabilities.

In the first working session, the focus was on the situation in Greece, as a follow-up to the EESC visit to Lesbos and Athens in October 2016. The second session looked at what the EU and civil society can do to tackle the refugee crisis, in particular with regard to vulnerable refugees and migrants.

“We need to do everything to welcome refugees, especially those with a disability. The belief that they will take our jobs is simply wrong”, said Georges Dassisis, EESC President, in his opening speech. “The Member-States have a legal and moral obligation to welcome refugees with solidarity and in a humane way.”

“There is a need for a common reception framework for persons with disabilities, as well measures and programmes to integrate them into society”, added Ioannis Vardakastanis (EL – Various Interests Group), EESC member and President of the European Disability Forum.

The most moving testimony was undoubtedly that of Ibrahim Al Hussein, a Syrian refugee that lost a leg while trying to save a friend during a bomb attack and then fled to Greece, where he became a paralympic athlete. “I was like an injured bird, trying to fly away who couldn’t use his wings anymore. In Greece I was born again, thanks to the solidarity of the Greek people.”

Local people are the main drivers of rural development

Vision and leadership are the most important conditions for rural development. Targeted, easily-managed public support schemes will ensure its success. This was the most important lesson of the EESC hearing Villages and small towns as catalyst for rural development, held on 14 February in Brussels. The main findings of the hearing will feed into the EESC’s own-initiative opinion on this subject.

The revitalisation of rural areas is a major project that Europe must accomplish by means of a collective effort. “The countryside belongs to all citizens; therefore the involvement of all is necessary. We want to develop the right concepts with the people on the ground and to raise the profiles of villages and small towns,” said Tom Jones (UK – Various Interests Group), rapporteur of the opinion. Piroska Kallay (HU – Workers’ Group), president of the study group, added: “Villages are supposed to be communities where social values and skills are taught and cohesive society is demonstrated”.

The challenges are daunting. Rural areas have been in decline for the last 30-40 years, leading to poor basic infrastructure, few job opportunities, underdeveloped public transport systems, an ageing population, etc. However, innovation can provide solutions for nearly every problem. The hearing presented examples of best practices from two rural villages: Tre’í Ddol (Wales, UK) and Kozard (Hungary). In addition, ECOVAST mentioned good examples from Croatia and Austria illustrated its successful approach which consists in seeking partnerships with villages. (sma)
Migration needs fair responsibility sharing

The 3rd Migration Forum, a joint event organised by the Commission and the EESC, brought together over 200 experts from civil society organisations in the EU. These representatives urged Member States to honour their common agreement on relocating migrants and to change the narrative on migration as an antidote to the fears and worries spread by right-wing populists.

Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos opened the event together with EESC President Georges Dassis, who stated that “We have not only a moral, but also a legal obligation to welcome refugees, based on the Geneva Convention.” Speakers argued that integration efforts need to be stepped up, and the city of Mechelen was presented as a role model of a successful policy on migrant integration.

Participants also called for safe and legal avenues to facilitate family reunification. EESC member José Antonio Moreno Díaz (ES – Workers’ Group) commented on the problem of labour policy segmentation, calling for a consistent European approach to facilitating migrants’ access to work and to education and vocational training.

A Syrian refugee, Muhannad Bitar, was invited to tell the story of his journey to Europe - an odyssey of violence, fear and loss which Mr Bitar summed up as follows: “During my journey I’ve seen the best and the worst of Europe.” (sma)

Your Europe, your say! 2017

EESC members visit the schools

In February and March, members of the European Economic and Social Committee visited their countries’ schools to prepare them for Your Europe, Your Say (YEYS). YEYS is a European youth assembly bringing together 33 schools from EU and candidate countries to debate the future of Europe, and it took place at the EESC in Brussels on 30-31 March 2017.

Members worked with students and one teacher in advance of the March meeting to prepare answers to some of the key questions concerning Europe at the present time:

- the benefits, achievements and failures of the European Union;
- the challenges and opportunities facing the European Union;
- the future of Europe from the perspective of young Europeans and what they would do to improve it.

EESC members provided the students with guidance on how the Brussels debate will be run and informed them about the EESC’s activities and how it represents the voice of civil society across Europe.

On 30-31 March 2017, the students will have the opportunity to put forward their recommendations on the future of Europe to EESC members. At the end of the two-day event, all students will then vote for the three proposals which they believe will be most effective in changing the future of Europe. (ks)

New economy models and social innovation: an opportunity for a better Europe

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has joined forces with the New Economy and Social Innovation (NESI) Global Forum and the Global Hub for the Common Good to enrich the European debate with input from communities directly involved in the collaborative, circular and functional economies. On 16 February, they brought together representatives from the public and private sectors for an event in Brussels entitled New Economy Models and Social Innovation: an opportunity for a better Europe.

According to ABI Research, the number of internet-connected devices will go up from over 10 000 million in 2015 to 30 000 million in 2020. The digital revolution is changing the way we live, buy and even work, with 15% of the self-employed in the US and UE-15 countries having earned income through P2P digital platforms.

In the meantime, Europe continues to be at the forefront of the fight against climate change, with cities such as Paris and Madrid taking substantial action to reduce CO2 emissions and countries committing to minimising their - and their key industries’- environmental impact. Can these two trends – the digital revolution and the fight against climate change - be made to converge?

Can Europe harness their combined potential and turn it to its best advantage?

As the voice of European civil society, the EESC has recognised both the potential of the new economy models and the uncharted social and legal challenges they bring. The event in Brussels analysed the implications of these changes, introducing a practical dimension by inviting small and medium-sized enterprises and other stakeholders to share their experience and exchange best practice.

The main outcome of this event will feed into the NESI Global Forum’s discussions in a follow-up event to be held in Malaga, Spain, on 19-22 April, with a view to co-creating guidelines for government action plans and consolidate efforts to ensure fully-fledged implementation of labour law and international labour standards.

The CSP representatives assessed the state of implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement. They appealed to Georgian public institutions to increase their internal cooperation and to the EU Member States to support Georgia in developing the communication capacities of its civil servants.

Georgian First Deputy State Minister Archil Karadashvili welcomed progress achieved in Georgia over the past year, but noted that the government had “no right to relax, as corruption is not sleeping”.

“Georgia has been and remains an excellent partner for cooperation, and we hope that the people will be able to feel the tangible benefits of the Association Agreement very soon”, said Dirk Schubel from the EEAS. The EU is expected to lift visa requirements for Georgian citizens with biometric passports this month. (mm)

The EESC celebrates sixty years of Europe with its sights set on the future

On 13 March 2017, the EESC held a high-level conference in Rome to mark the 60-year anniversary of the founding treaties of Europe. The conference, entitled Sixty years of European Community - Let’s shape the future!, took place in the Italian Chamber of Deputies. In his opening address, Georges Dassis outlined Europe’s main achievements and the current difficulties, stressing that: “This 60th anniversary should be the occasion for a fresh start - that of a Europe which is much more united, which champions the cause of solidarity and which genuinely thinks of the well-being of the people of Europe. The future must be in the hands of the forces of social progress, of businesses, workers and all those who want to live in peace and dignity. I hope that by helping to shape the future of the EU, the EESC will play its part in making this vision of Europe a reality”.

There were three working sessions at which the following topics were addressed:

- Social Europe as a tool for tackling inequalities
- Completing the Economic and Monetary Union for a stronger Europe
- Integration policies and immigration

Following the proceedings, Mr Dasss paid special tribute on behalf of the EESC to Dr Pietro Bartolo, in charge of the health services on Lampedusa and known for his award-winning film Fuocoammare, for the great example of humanity shown in coming to the aid of refugees and migrants who embark on the dangerous Central Mediterranean route.

In the coming months, the conclusions of the conference will provide input to the EESC’s work on the White Paper on the future of the EU. More information on the event is available at http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities.60-years. (dm)
Explain the real benefits of CETA: an important role for business
by the EESC’s Employers’ Group

The vote for CETA in the European Parliament opens a new chapter of closer relations between Canada and the EU. There is still a bumpy road ahead, however, with ratification of the agreement needed in all EU Member States. CETA is a progressive agreement for inclusive growth that brings substantial benefits for SMEs. Business has an important role to play in promoting it and providing real-life examples of its benefits. These were just some of the views expressed at the debate with Canada’s ambassador to the EU, Daniel Costello, which took place at the Employers’ Group meeting on 22 January 2017.

On International Women’s Day 2017
by Gabriele Bischoff, President of the Workers’ Group

“Equal pay for men and women is a key principle of the EU, which was enshrined in the Treaty of Rome in 1957. As we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Treaty, we must also celebrate the progress that has been made in terms of gender equality: maternity rights and equal treatment in concern regarding access to work, training, promotions and working conditions. We now have more women in the labour market and in decision-making roles than ever before. However, the crisis has shown that we must never use these advances for granted. The austerity measures imposed in the wake of the crisis have undermined gender equality and women’s rights. Often, it is the poorest and most vulnerable women who have been the most adversely affected. Single mothers are among those at greatest risk of poverty and social exclusion. Gender inequality is not just for the good times – it is arguably even more important when societies are under pressure. The gender pay gap remains significant 60 years after the principle of equal pay was enshrined in the Treaty. Closing it completely must remain high on the agenda. Europe can only prosper if it recognises and supports the talents of all. European workers need a pay rise and we must renew our efforts to ensure that women get their fair share.”

For more info about the Workers’ Group initiatives on Women’s Day, see http://www.eesc.europa.eu/tic_portal/en/group-2-news.41724

New CESlink portal

The CESlink Portal represents the online community of the Economic and Social Councils (ESCs) in the EU and at the EESC.

Managed by the EESC, the Portal is a one stop shop for news about initiatives and events organised by the EESC and the national ESCs. It provides information on the ESCs and their websites, including a directory of their presidents and secretaries-general. Users can retrieve documents issued by the ESCs by consulting the dedicated database, which makes available opinions, reports, resolutions, studies, agreements, newsletters and other documents of interest published by the participating organisations.

Available in English and French, the Portal now also proposes joint Twitter and RSS feeds, which make it easier to keep up to date with new developments as they happen. (M)


On 3 April 2017 the Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship (QE) will be holding a debate on autism, linked to World Autism Awareness Day on 2 April. In connection with this debate, the EESC is organising a photo exhibition on autism in partnership with Autism Europe, an organisation whose main objective is to advance the rights of people with autism and to help them improve their quality of life. The exhibition features photos by three photographers from the UK (Graham Miller), Poland (Michał Awin) and Luxembourg (Andre Weisgerber), as well as some photos by young autistic artists from Scotland.

The exhibition will run until 21 April 2017 in the JDE building, Foyer 6. (j)

Film screening at the EESC: PASSAGE INTO HISTORY: Ancient Nemea and the Nemean Games

“...And there, at the end of the tunnel, the anticipated moment: a passage into history. In a very personal way, one picks up the thread of history and, losing all sense of age, nationality, race and colour, gets swept into something which is both an instant and an eternity.”

Appraising in the myth of Hercules and the lion, Nemea was the location of famous sporting competitions such as the Olympics. The film tells the story of an abandoned archaeological site, forgotten ancient games – and archaeologist Stephen Miller. As we discover this fascinating centre of ancient Greek athletics and religion through Dr Miller’s eyes, people from all over the world gather for a revival of the Nemean Games. We follow their unique experience of a “passage into history”.

The film will be shown on 29 March 2017 at 7 p.m. in Atirion 6, followed by a Q&A session with film co-producer Ms Tachmiztis. (j)