WHITE PAPER ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

DEBATE - report

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In Slovenia, the debate on the proposed White Paper on the Future of Europe was held on 22 May 2017. Participating were all the Republic of Slovenia Economic and Social Council members from employers' and trade unions' organisations. Likewise taking part in the discussions were representatives of non-government organisations, pensioners' associations, the Slovenian Student Union (ŠOS) and the National Youth Council of Slovenia. There were 57 participants in all.

The debate was based on a questionnaire which had been sent out to participants beforehand; however, it unfortunately has to be said that the debate did not produce answers to all the questions. In particular, no direct answers were forthcoming to the question on the expected outcome of the consultation.

What was clear was that the participants were very sceptical vis-a-vis the proposed scenarios and that they deemed none of them to be realistic. In any case, it was felt that much needs to change in the European Union, because otherwise the future of the EU looks very uncertain. This means that Europe will lose influence and importance if it continues on the same path and keeps on operating in the same way (there was even pessimism expressed about whether the EU would continue to exist if it were not to radically change its way of working).

None of the proposed scenarios were deemed acceptable and no solutions were put forward. The way the institutions operated was described as inefficient, bureaucratic, overly administrative, non-transparent and in a manner unknown to the public. The European institutions were deemed to be remote from ordinary people and from reality and to give the impression that they operated for the benefit of large multinationals and subject to a great deal of influence from lobbyists. All this is however damaging to the image of a social Europe. That is also why there are so many incomprehensible and illogical difficulties in implementing the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the provisions of Article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union. The European Union would come over as more likeable if it were to have a golden rule for social policy, because the golden rule for fiscal policy is dependent on the way that national budgets operate and is an excuse for weakening social rights. Of course, we have to realise that the European Union's economy needs the right conditions for competing on the global market. For this it requires the single market, trade agreements and above all less bureaucracy. Also urgently needed are changes in legislation to accompany changes in the economy (e.g. digitalisation). The leisurely times are long gone, for competition is fierce in global and national economies.

Because of the above, Europeans are noticeably sceptical about the EU and nationalism too is on the rise. European firms are much more aware of the importance of the European Union and the way it works than is the public. The reason for this is above all the fact that measures take to date by the European Commission and other European institutions have been directed first and foremost at securing the single market, and more particularly the free movement of goods, services and capital. People and their rights are however being forgotten. It is also for this reason that Europeans do no identify with the values of the European Union.

An additional problem comes from the fact that the European Union is misunderstood and remote and that there is a gap between what it promises and what it delivers. No mention of this is made in the white paper at all, however.

The scenarios do not provide any response to these challenges. They do not offer any solutions - neither for the economy nor for people. We need Europe to be for the people; a common currency, the euro, should not be the only thing that unites us. As a consequence there has to be more social protection and justice; the democratic deficit in the way the European institutions work must be reduced. However, we do have to enable the economy to develop in this globalised world. Balanced economic and social development, based on the principles of equality and solidarity, are urgently required.

Against this background, it was concluded that it is at any rate necessary to raise the profile of the European Union, but above all the way its institutions work needs to be made more democratic and transparent.

To achieve this it would be necessary to enhance the role of civil society organisations in shaping and taking decisions. It would have to be mandatory for the social partners at European level to discuss economic and social policy rules applying throughout the European Union before they were adopted; on specific issues or topics, before the final adoption of decisions, the opinion of national economic and social councils could also be sought. This could ensure a stronger presence for civil society, its organisations and the social partners in the European Union's decision-making process.

There must be a special place in the European Union for young people. The youth representative pointed out that young people have many expectations, but also resentment about the way the European Union works (deterioration in social rights during the crisis). Young people are calling for a social, sustainable Europe. They see Europe is as an area of opportunities; key problems are the remoteness of the institutions and the abstract nature of Europe, as well as a lack of social and cultural protection and of a forward-looking approach. They are expecting an ambitious approach. The European Union must be a social and just Europe; changes are required in education to meet the challenges of digitalisation; mobile social rights are needed, because it is mainly young people migrating every day to other Member States. The Erasmus+ and Youth in Action programmes are commendable, although other projects do need to be adopted and implemented.

Participants emphasised above all that in order to boost the effectiveness of the way the European Union works, it is in any case necessary to have a single policy, particularly for the economy, tax rules and social issues. A single, or common, foreign policy would also need to be much better defined. Europe cannot just wait to see how events turn out, but must become an active player in world-wide events.

We do not want a multi-speed Europe, because this would lead to inequalities between Europeans and social dumping. The differences between east and west and north and south Europe are growing, and this is not a good development. A situation is developing where there are first-, second- and third-class citizens.

One of many solutions would be a federal structure for Europe. Here it is necessary to be careful that when shaping common policies bigger countries do not obtain privileges or exceptions. There should be as few exceptions from common policies as possible; smaller countries should not be put in a position of dependence. Equality between each member of the European Union at all levels should become a guiding principle behind the way it operates. A common social policy, introducing minimum standards, is urgently needed if the European Union wants to regain people's trust.

**Media coverage of event:**

Slovenian press agency: Brez konvergence gospodarstva in socialne politike razvoja EU ne bo (Without convergence in the economy and social policy, the EU will not develop): <https://www.sta.si/2390024/brez-konvergence-gospodarstva-in-socialne-politike-razvoja-eu-ne-bo>

Activity on Twitter on the day of the debate:

EESC: <https://twitter.com/EESC_PRESS/status/866585870249472000>

European Commission Representation in Slovenia:<https://twitter.com/ECinSlovenia/status/866566815522193408>

Slovenian Minister for Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Anja Kopač Mrak: <https://twitter.com/AnjaKopacMrak/status/866570004136939520>

**APPENDIX I**

**Debate regarding the White paper on the Future of Europe – Slovenia,**

**22 May 2017 – Participants list:**

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| --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Organisation** |
| Jože Smole Andrej ZorkoPrimož Šporar Jakob PočivavšekDare StojanNadja Götz | EESC members |
| Jana Valant | EESC secretariat (INT)  |
| Anja Kopač Mrak Damjana ŠarčevičNeva GrašičPolona Križnar | Slovenian Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities |
| Zoran StančičTina Vončina | EC Representation in Slovenia  |
| Irena ŠtamfeljLučka BöhmDušan Semolič | The Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia (ZSSS) |
| Tatjana Pajnkihar Napret | The Association of Employers of Slovenia (ZDS) |
| Maja RigačTatjana ČerinSamo Hribar MiličIgor Knez | Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia (GZS) |
| Karmen Fortuna | Slovenian Chamber of Commerce (TZS) |
| Urška Ahlin Ganziti | Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia (KGZS) |
| Anka Tominšek | ZDUS (Slovenian non-governmental umbrella pensioner organization)  |
| Anton DobrinaDarko HribarMitja MrzljakMarijan PapežDavid Klarič | Pension and Disability Insurance Institute of Slovenia (ZPIZ) |
| Martin ZdovcŽiga Lavrič | Slovenian Ministry of Finance |
| Slovenian Press Agency (STA)Delavska enotnostRadio Slovenia | Media  |
| Jožica Maučec ZakotnikZvezdana Veber-Hartman | Slovenian Ministry of Health |
| Mitja Perko | Slovenian Institute of Macroeconomic Analysis and Development (UMAR) |
| Tanja Bogataj | Slovenian Ministry of Public Administration |
| Nina Cinkole | Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs |
| Jasmina Opec VörösTin KamplTibor Vörös | National Youth Council of Slovenia |
| Aleksandar SpremoLuka Špoljar | Slovenian Student Union (ŠOS) |
| Oskar Komac | National Council of the Republic of Slovenia |
| Franc Zupanc Slavko Pangeršič | Zveza delavskih sindikatov Slovenije – Solidarnost (Workers Trade Union of Slovenia - Solidarity) |
| Bojan Goljevšček | SZS Alternativa (Slovenian Trade Union Association – Aternativa) |
| Bojan Hribar | KSJS (Slovenian Confederation of Public Sector Trade Unions) |
| Peter MajcenBojan Žvinkart | KS 90 (Slovenian Trade Union of Postal Workers) |
| Aljoša Čeč | KSS Pergam (Slovenian Trade Union Confederation - Pergam) |
| Miroslav BarbEvelin Vesenjak | KNSS – Neodvisnost (Trade Union of Ljubljana region) |
| Andreja RajhNatalija Berlec | Economic and Social Council of the Republic of Slovenia (ESS), The Secretariat-General of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia |

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