Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'The Future of the EU: Benefits to citizens and respect for European values'

(exploratory opinion at the request of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union)

(2019/C 228/08)

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1 More than 60 years from the signing of the Treaty of Rome, Member States (MS) are expected to take a political position on the Future of the EU in Sibiu, in May 2019.

1.2 Human dignity and human rights, democracy, freedom, social justice, equality, the separation of powers and the rule of law are the values on which the EU has been built. They must remain non-negotiable and be the starting point from which the EU is reformed and the political decision in Sibiu is taken.

1.3 The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union is one of the most important documents in guaranteeing the rights of our citizens. Major political decisions, like the improvement of the Treaties, must take into account this document and incorporate it into the new text.

1.4 The European project has brought the longest period of peace in the continent's history, created a region of unprecedented wealth and social development, facilitated free movement of people, goods and services and created the largest single market in the world. All this ensures that European citizens have a significantly better standard of living, social welfare and increased opportunities compared to most parts of the globe.

1.5 These and other benefits are sometimes taken for granted or played down by populist and Eurosceptic movements. One should never forget that due to the EU we benefit from:

- free movement of people, goods, capital and services;
- the largest single market in the world;
- increased economic interconnectivity, and free and frictionless trade;
- common trade agreements negotiated from a position of strength for all MS;
- high-quality and improved social welfare guided by the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR);
- the European social model;
— increased cooperation in intelligence, military matters, and law enforcement activity;

— improved environmental norms, air and water quality;

— protection of citizens’ fundamental right to privacy in the digital environment;

— improved health and safety standards;

— reciprocal healthcare systems across the Union;

— anti-discrimination rules and policies, especially regarding minorities and women;

— extraordinary educational opportunities based on exchange programmes such as Erasmus+;

— etc.

1.6 The Union must act to increase convergence between regions and/or MS. Upward convergence of living and working conditions, based on sustainable growth, is paramount to improve the functioning of the single market and to decrease inequality, poverty and social exclusion.

1.7 EU citizens must regain the sense that acting at European level does not mean renouncing national policies, rather acknowledging that some projects have a better outcome when decisions are made together. Equal rules and equal opportunities for all MS and citizens should never be negotiable with the European method ensuring freedom and sovereignty in a globalised world.

1.8 Adopting the euro should be a priority in the construction of the EU as the euro area can only reach its full potential when all the MS have joined. Together with a strong Economic and Monetary Union, the upgraded European Stability Mechanism (ESM) can play a more important role in political accountability and strengthened fiscal responsibility. Moreover, the EU Member States must take immediate and courageous action to make the EU more resilient should another economic and financial crisis occur.

1.9 In an ever-changing world, the EESC believes that significant investment in R&D, skills supply and infrastructure are needed if the EU is to leverage its competitive advantages. Europe needs to address its challenge of a shrinking and ageing population as this has an impact on the supply of labour. Nevertheless, migration policies have to be accompanied by strong reception and integration assistance policies to avoid social and societal huge difficulties. If the EU is to remain competitive, it needs to address the labour shortage as well as the skills shortage. Europe needs a well-managed migration policy, to prepare the labour force for the skills required by the new technologies, while at the same time supporting companies’ growth and development. European workers must be provided with training, re-skilling, up-skilling and life-long learning programmes, in order to fully benefit from technological change.

1.10 In recent years, protectionist currents have emerged, with trade wars brewing. The EESC believes that the EU should continue to promote free, fair and sustainable trade in a multilateral system and trade agreements that respect social, consumer and environmental rights, while supporting businesses to grow and evolve. Protectionism would not benefit the citizens. Furthermore, the EU has an important role to play in reforming the World Trade Organisation.

1.11 Sound economic growth must be achieved together with a stable social dimension, while the EPSR represents one of the main driving forces for social cohesion. Its implementation at national level should be accelerated and should involve all relevant civil society organisations. Social partners and other civil society organisations (CSOs) are crucial players in the European democratic project.
1.12 The EESC believes that all EU citizens should be provided with equal opportunities and equal treatment in the labour market. While encouraging fair mobility, citizens should also have access to quality employment and decent living standards where they live to avoid the brain drain and social dumping.

1.13 Climate change and environmental matters are of increasing concern for EU citizens. Several EESC opinions have shown that Europe can and needs to deliver on the implementation of the sustainability goals. It is also essential to respect the commitments made in the various agreements on climate, biodiversity and water. EU can drive the ecological transition while safeguarding social cohesion and inclusion of all, in the context of a just transition.

1.14 The EESC believes that active programmes that facilitate youth education and inclusion in the labour force play an important role for the future of the European Union. Programmes like Erasmus+ must be encouraged in order to equip young people with knowledge, skills and competences. The EESC believes that alongside these other similar programmes supporting those with less economic resources must be immediately developed. Raising awareness among citizens about these programmes while always promoting the direct benefit offered by EU membership is crucial. Furthermore, Erasmus+, among others, can and should be used to achieve Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Africa in order to equip young people across both continents with knowledge, skills and competences.

1.15 External security challenges have grown significantly but they are perceived differently by individual MS, which assign different financial resources and have different views on the use of military power. The EESC believes that the EU must provide a collective and coordinated response, proving to our citizens that we are an effective security provider. Equally important for citizens' security are measures that prevent cybercrime in the new digital environment.

1.16 The plight of thousands of migrants fleeing conflict and poverty by putting their lives in peril to cross the Mediterranean was shocking. The political fallout has created the impression that the EU does not know how to handle such a crisis. The EESC welcomes the Commission's plan for a balanced, comprehensive and common migration policy that will help the EU to seize the opportunities of migration while tackling the challenges.

1.17 European citizens often take for granted the positive effects of EU membership or associate them with national governments, while many hardships are blamed on the European institutions. The EESC believes that this is because of the insufficient communication of what European membership provides for its citizens, hence the EU and the Member States should make much more of an effort to better communicate European policies, goals and objectives.

1.18 The path forward means simultaneously providing more funds for communication while using all the available channels: European, national, but also the social partners and other representative organised civil society bodies. Citizens must always be informed of the benefits they are receiving from EU membership, while keeping in mind what life was like without the Union – war, strife and economic difficulties.

1.19 In order to get close to its citizens, the EU must continuously listen and understand what the core expectations of Europeans are and try to deliver accordingly. Hence, the EESC believes that communication, cooperation platforms and public consultations should be promoted and used as often as possible and should include all MS.

1.20 Combating fake news represents another important challenge in a world where mis-information, dis-information and mal-information represent a growing trend. Therefore, the EESC asks for common and firm action in order to increase people's power of analysis, safeguarding freedom of expression, prevent dissemination of fake news, and build fact checking and verification tools.

2. Introduction

2.1 Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union states: ‘The Union’s aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples’. The European Union began as a project whose aim was to ensure peace and which has evolved into the largest single market in the world, with free movement of capital, products, services and, most importantly, of its citizens. This dream has taken shape from the ashes of two world wars and has ensured development across the continent, ushering in the longest period of peace in its history.
2.2 Now, in 2019, a year of European elections and crucial changes for the Union, all European actors must show their determination to ensure unity, prosperity and well-being for our citizens by defending democracy, human rights, separation of powers, the rule of law and the European social model (1).

2.3 The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2) enshrines certain political, social, and economic rights for citizens across the EU. Ratified in 2000, it has added one important element omitted until then by the Treaties: the obligation that the EU must act and legislate according to the rights and values of the Charter as described in its seven chapters: Dignity, Freedoms, Equality, Solidarity, Citizen's rights, Justice and General Provisions.

2.4 Even though the benefits for European citizens are evident, some unfortunately seem to be unaware of or even question them, and in the past few years we have experienced growing tensions within MS and different views regarding the way forward. This has naturally prompted questions such as: what should the future of the European Union be? Should we do more or less together? Where should the balance lie between the different cooperation projects that MS are ready to accept? Different political forces, not least within the MS that created the EU, are questioning the direction, governance and even the principle of European integration.

2.5 This political turning point coincides with growing trust in the EU (3) after a long trend of mistrust in the way things are done by the European institutions. Recent challenges, be they the financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis, the migration situation or Brexit have shown how vulnerable the EU institutions are to shifted blame. Eurosceptic movements have used recent events to push their agenda regardless of whether the EU was at fault or not. Populist political parties that have come to power in several MS have called the benefits of the EU into question or have provided misinformation about the Union.

3. **Benefits for European citizens**

3.1 Economic interconnectivity, increased social and political cooperation and free movement have eliminated the spectre of war from Europe, and we are enjoying the longest period of peace in the history of the continent.

3.2 The European single market has allowed free and frictionless trade between the MS, contributing to economic wealth, prosperity and some of the highest standards of living in the world. Notwithstanding, this has not eliminated social and territorial inequalities.

3.3 As a single economic negotiator, the EU has become a very influential player on the international stage, being able to negotiate strategic trade agreements and influence economic policy at global level. Jobs are created due to the increased connectivity and reduced operational costs for companies.

3.4 Free movement of citizens across the Union has helped to eliminate mistrust between nations and has opened up countless educational and professional opportunities. A citizen can work, live or retire in any of the MS. It is a very common sight to see for instance a Romanian who has studied in the UK, works in Belgium and lives in the Netherlands.

3.5 The citizens also benefit from the creation of an area of freedom, security and justice as European nations have a form of mutual protection. The EU provides a level of security that allows for local intelligence services and law enforcement authorities to have access to improved data sharing and resources.

3.6 Since its inception, the EU in all its forms has worked towards improving the environment. For example, air and water quality all over the continent have improved dramatically since the 1950s due to Union-level coordination of efforts and regulation.

3.7 In the digital age, privacy is highly protected in the EU, with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) having been adopted recently. It represents one of the most robust data privacy laws in the world, protecting citizens’ fundamental right to privacy.

3.8 The EU has one of the world’s strictest product and food safety regimes. National authorities send information about dangerous products found on the market to the rapid alert system for dangerous non-food products. The EU is also committed to the detection of unsafe products before they are sold to consumers. In the EU, employers need to ensure health and safety for workers in every aspect of their work.

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3.9 EU citizens benefit from reciprocal healthcare when they are in any of the EU's Member States. These rights apply whether they are travelling temporarily on holiday or studying abroad, residing permanently in another EU country, or travelling to another EU Member State specifically to receive medical treatment.

3.10 All citizens of the EU have the right to vote and to run in European Parliament elections and/or municipal elections in the EU country in which they reside, under the same conditions as nationals of that country. Furthermore, EU citizens are entitled to be recruited under the same conditions as nationals of the country in which they are seeking work and cannot be asked to meet any additional requirements.

3.11 As an EU citizen, you can register a company and launch a branch of an existing EU-based business in any EU country, Iceland, Norway or Liechtenstein quickly and easily. There are many different EU funds and initiatives available to support start-ups and SMEs.

3.12 The European social model is helping to improve the living and working conditions of a large part of the EU population. The recent introduction of the European Pillar of Social Rights aims to further improve this.

3.13 The EU is at the forefront of promoting equal economic independence for women and men. The Union continuously strives to advance on gender equality, counter pay gaps and establish effective anti-discrimination rules and policies.

3.14 The European accession process and the prospect of joining the Union have encouraged the building of viable market economies, raised social standards and generated stable democratic institutions in Europe.

3.15 EU citizens are entitled to protection by the diplomatic or consular authorities of any other EU country when they are in a non-EU country where their own national state has no representation. This right is enshrined in Article 46 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. There are only three countries in which all the MS are represented diplomatically, namely the United States, China and Russia. During emergencies, EU Member States must help EU citizens evacuate as if they were their own nationals. Protection also covers everyday situations, like a passport being stolen, a serious accident or an illness.

3.16 Education is strongly supported within the European Union. The world-famous exchange programme Erasmus+ gives students and academics the opportunity to boost their skills and employment chances by experiencing academic life in a different country, with over 3 million people having taken advantage of it since 2014. Moreover, the exchange of ideas and culture has brought people together, helping to shape the European identity.

4. European values and fundamental rights

4.1 The EESC believes that in order to best protect our citizen's interests, any reform of the treaties must incorporate the text of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and no Member State should be able to opt out of enforcing it. Currently, the Charter is referenced by the Lisbon Treaty as an independent document and the United Kingdom and Poland are opting out.

4.2 Although Europe faces many challenges and common decisions are always needed, the values on which the EU was built and which are enshrined in the treaties are non-negotiable and must represent the starting point for any new EU architecture: respect for human dignity and human rights, democracy, freedom, equality, the separation of the powers and the rule of law.

4.3 Equal treatment and rules for EU citizens should never be negotiable and the EU has made significant and unnecessary compromises in this respect: visas for the United States for some MS only, dual food-quality standards etc. The EU must strive to equally protect the interest of all its people regardless of their nationality.

4.4 The EESC takes the view that acting at European level does not mean renouncing national interests, nor does it mean that European and national interests collide; it simply means that some things can be delivered better jointly. Whichever direction the Union takes, it will have to envisage important reforms and clear rules for the governance of the Union in order to deal with existing political tensions and growing diversity. It is the European method that ensures freedom and sovereignty in a globalised world. The citizens benefit from the EU membership because it provides them with a legal space of opportunity and same rules for all, while strictly forbidding any discrimination on nationality grounds.
4.5 The plight of thousands of migrants fleeing conflict and poverty by putting their lives in peril to cross the Mediterranean was shocking. The political fallout has wrongly created the impression that the EU does not know how to handle such a crisis. The EESC welcomes the Commission's plan for a balanced, comprehensive and common migration policy that will help the EU to seize the opportunities as well as migration while tackling the challenges. The Committee especially supports the Commission's new policy of keeping Europe as an attractive destination for migrants in a time of demographic decline as well as reducing the incentives for irregular migration. This implies also strong reception and integration assistance policies.

4.6 The biggest challenge for the EU is to continue to be the Union that defends, protects and empowers its citizens. Therefore, it must offer solutions for the issues that people really worry about: The Committee remains convinced that a good future is possible and that a stronger EU can help to better shape globalisation and digitalisation so as to provide good prospects for all citizens (4).

4.7 The founders of the European project have recognised that it has a long way to go to have similar levels of legitimacy as the established democracies of its MS. We have come a long way, but any new treaty must ensure more transparency and democratic control in order to best legitimise the Union in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, more compliance of the Member States with European Union law must be ensured.

5. Sustainable economic development

5.1 Europe is home to the world's largest single market and second most used currency. It is the largest trading power, accounting for 16.5% of the world's imports and exports (5), and the largest development and humanitarian aid donor. Thanks in part to Horizon 2020, the world's biggest multinational research programme, Europe is at the cutting edge of innovation. However, competition with the United States and Asia seems more intense than ever. One thing is clear: no Member State can play a prominent role on the world scene by itself.

5.2 The euro is almost 20 years old and can only reach its full potential when all MS have introduced it and when Economic and Monetary Union is complete. This would mean clear rules accepted by and applicable to all, the upgrade of the ESM to a more important role, such as the one the IMF plays internationally, as well as political accountability and strengthened fiscal councils (6). Adopting the euro should be a priority in the construction of the EU.

5.3 The EESC has argued in the past that the EU was slow to react to the financial crisis and that reforms are necessary in the Economic and Monetary Union (7). Since then, there has been a constant drive for reform and to finalise the Banking Union and the Capital Markets Union. As in the past (8), the EESC welcomes further market consolidation but warns against the creation of positions that concentrate too much decision-making power in the hands of a small number of people. A completed EMU should usher in a new single currency era for European Union businesses and citizens, significantly reducing transaction costs and eliminating foreign exchange risks, improving price transparency in trade, while reducing investment risks.

5.4 In an ever-changing world, if Europe is to leverage its competitive advantages, it needs to focus on areas such as R&D, skills supply and infrastructure. Europe needs to address its challenge of a shrinking and ageing population as this has an impact on the supply of labour. If the EU is to remain competitive it needs to address the labour shortage as well as the skills shortage. Europe needs a well-managed migration policy and a long-term perspective to prepare the labour force for future challenges while helping companies grow and evolve. Nevertheless, migration policies have to be accompanied by strong policies to avoid social and societal difficulties.

5.5 The EESC has also called in several of its opinions for more investment in infrastructure and public services, projects that would generate growth and well-being for its citizens. The EESC has also voiced its support for a 'common consolidated corporate tax base (CCCTB), as well as taxation of financial transactions, fuels and carbon dioxide emissions which, if levied at European level, would be able both to act upon a transnational tax base and to counteract the global impact on the environment' (9). This would decrease tax avoidance and provide uniformity in fiscal policy. The EESC has also noticed that 'Europe seemingly has a strong position in growing innovative high tech firms, but when these companies are in need of robust capital investments, they usually go bankrupt' (10).

(4) OJ C 81, 2.3.2018, p. 145.
(5) EU by topic – Trade.
(7) Independent fiscal institutions.
(10) OJ C 81, 2.3.2018, p. 131.
5.6 The EU has signed comprehensive trade agreements aiming to increase exchanges of goods and services while protecting and improving workers' rights and taking account of environmental challenges. However, in the past few years, protectionist currents have emerged, with trade wars brewing. The EU needs to continue on its path of promoting free, fair and sustainable trade in a multilateral system and trade agreements that respect social, consumer and environmental rights, while supporting businesses to grow and evolve. Protectionism does not benefit the citizens. The World Trade Organisation will have an important role to play, and it is crucial that the EU plays its role in its reform (13). Closing borders and blocking trade cannot be the way forward in any circumstances.

5.7 In a world affected by climate change, the EESC has repeatedly made recommendations to improve the protection of biodiversity and the vital resources necessary for our existence. The EESC points out that protecting biodiversity is as important as preventing climate change. The EESC calls for more political will and legislative consistency in this area, and therefore recommends that all the necessary resources be rapidly made available.

5.8 For the EESC, a climate change policy must be based on a just transition, which necessitates measures to mitigate the effects of climate change and also compensate for damages and loss. The circular economy model should be favoured as much as possible and its regulatory framework improved. Short supply chains, particularly in the food sector have to be promoted and a redefinition of the mobility policies, making them more efficient and sustainable, needs to be completed. As part of the 2015 Climate Change Conference in Paris, the EU is committed to meeting targets to reduce global warming. The EU has already made significant progress and can reinforce collective efforts to fulfil the commitments made at COP21 and address current needs. Nonetheless, the EESC has taken note of student and youth movements in several Member States calling for more action to protect the environment.

6. Social progress and education

6.1 'By global standards, European societies are prosperous and affluent places to live. They have the highest levels of social protection in the world and rank highly in terms of wellbeing, human development and quality of life' (15). Yet, growing inequality and enormous gaps exist in social cohesion across the Union and we must strive to reduce the differences between MS. Upward convergence of living and working conditions based on sustainable growth, will lead to improved social conditions and decreased inequalities and should be the core objective for the future of Europe.

6.2 An important driving force for social progress must be the European Pillar of Social Rights, an initiative strongly supported by the EESC, within a comprehensive and overarching strategy to realise the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. In order to secure a prosperous future for our citizens, the EESC reaffirms its strong commitment to any effort that will deliver 'a fair and truly pan-European labour market to achieve a 'triple A social Europe' and to serve as a compass for renewed convergence' (16). Implementation at the national level needs to be accelerated and accompanied by awareness that sound economic growth must be achieved together with a stable social dimension. Together with the EU and the Member States, all relevant civil society organisations have an important role to play. The EESC believes it is important for the wellbeing of the EU citizens that the EU continues to monitor the progress made in the implementation of the EPRS within the European Semester process, with the full involvement of social partners and other civil society organisations.

6.3 Moreover, the EESC reaffirms that: 'The European Union should make full use of the experience and capacity of the social partners and other civil society organisations (CSOs) operating at local, national and European level by involving them, alongside service users and according to their different roles, in the tasks of programming, implementing, monitoring and evaluating EU funding. Social partners and the other CSOs are crucial players in the European democratic project' (17). The EU should promote collective bargaining and respect the autonomy of the social partners.

6.4 Digitalisation, automation, artificial intelligence, etc. require a rapid and sustainable response. As well as the urgent and massive need for investment in quality education and R&D, with the EU lagging behind compared to other economic powers in spending as a percentage of GDP (18), the EU economy needs a labour force equipped with skills that meet the challenges of a changing competitive environment. This means that there is a shared interest and a shared responsibility of employers and employees to contribute to training, re-skilling, up-skilling and life-long learning for young people and adults, leading to successful enterprises and appropriately skilled workforce, along with the EU, Member States, social partners and other relevant organisations from the civil society. Making the EU economy more digital should be delivered within a just transition framework for technological change, ensuring that this contributes to better living and working conditions, including the creation of quality jobs and more equal societies.

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(13) OJ C 159, 10.5.2019, p. 15.
(14) Reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe.
(17) OECD data, gross domestic spending on R&D.
6.5 Based on the principles of the EPSR, it is essential that action be taken to address the future challenges arising for the labour market. Embracing opportunities enabled by technological progress should therefore go hand in hand with addressing the challenges of industrial change and labour market transformation. If these challenges are not addressed, there will be huge resistance to change or a significant proportion of the population will not benefit from the development of new technologies.

6.6 The EESC has already asked that growing inequalities, poverty and social exclusion should be fought at all levels and by all stakeholders. With a view to this, the EESC believes that further efforts aimed at defining common principles, standards, policies and strategies at appropriate levels are needed with a view to better convergence of wages and establishing or increasing minimum wages to adequate levels with full respect for the autonomy of the social partners. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that all citizens are covered by a minimum income. The EESC stresses that funding earmarked for social cohesion and social investment should be increased to face future challenges (16).

6.7 The EESC believes that all EU citizens should be provided with equal opportunities and equal treatment in the labour market. While encouraging fair mobility, citizens should also have access to quality employment and decent living standards where they live to avoid the brain drain and social dumping.

6.8 The future of the EU relies on active programmes that would facilitate youth education and inclusion in the labour force. Programmes like Erasmus+ and its predecessor Erasmus, have had an incredible impact in forging a European identity, while at the same time equipping young people with knowledge, skills and competences. The intention of the Commission to double its funding is a definite step forward, but the EESC asked in October 2018 (17) for even more funding. This kind of programme must continue and be expanded to those young people who otherwise would struggle to access quality education and cross-cultural connectivity due to economic hardship.

6.9 As it has stated in a previous opinion, the EESC believes that ‘the Youth Strategy should be more connected with existing EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, the Youth Guarantee and the European Solidarity Corps’ and ‘should also promote a broader civic engagement, including voting, volunteering, youth-led NGOs, workplace democracy and social dialogue’ (18). It is paramount to raise awareness of these programmes while always highlighting the fact that they represent a direct benefit offered by EU membership.

6.10 The EESC stresses the importance of subsidiarity and regional governance in delivering cohesion policies. Given the wide welfare and development gaps between different regions, even within single MS, it is vitally important that policies are delivered by those who best understand the core problems and are therefore the best equipped to act. The EU institutions must continue to safeguard against discrimination of any kind, racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

6.11 The European social model is unique in the world and remains one of the most important benefits for European citizens. The EU, together with the Member States, must build on policies that would safeguard, defend and promote it, further facilitating economic progress and social cohesion, bearing in mind that fundamental rights must go hand in hand with the social rights.

7. Security and defence

7.1 Europe is a remarkably free and stable place in a world of discord and division. Of the 25 most peaceful countries, 15 are in the EU. However, terrorist attacks, ungoverned and unstable spaces across the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa, and resurgent hostile powers to the East have demonstrated that we must take firm action to preserve our peace and security.

7.2 Although internal and external security challenges have indeed grown significantly, they are seen differently by the MS, who do not have the same perception of external threats, assign different financial resources for security and defence, and have different views on the use of military power. As many of the threats we face have transnational characteristics, the EESC believes that Member States and the EU must act as closely as possible, moving towards a collective and coordinated response, thus demonstrating to our allies that we are an effective security provider.

(16) OJ C 81, 2.3.2018, p. 145.
7.3 A coordinated defence effort not only provides credible hard power for our MS but also helps to create jobs in high-tech sectors and foster innovation and technological development. The EESC urges MS and the European Commission to support joint action in this area, while recognising that steps have been already taken (19).

7.4 Cyber-attacks are estimated to cost the world economy 400 billion euros every year (20) and pose a real threat to citizens’ privacy and safety. The EESC believes that the EU should aim to strengthen the fight against cyber espionage, cyberterrorism and any other forms of cybercrime directed at European citizens and businesses alike.

8. Communicating with citizens

8.1 European citizens often take for granted the positive effects of EU membership or associate them with national governments, while many hardships are blamed on European bureaucracy and its over-interference. This is mainly due to poor communication and a disconnect with the average citizen. Hence, the EU and the Member States should make much more of an effort to better communicate European policies, goals and objectives.

8.2 The EU needs to provide more funds for communication, and has to make use of every channel available: not only through MS, but also through the social partners and the other representative organised civil society bodies. The EU must focus more on reassuring leaders and citizens alike of its role in providing peace, stability economic and social development, using all the official languages of the European Union to promote its messages.

8.3 In 2012, the EESC pointed out that ‘full implementation of Article 11 is of paramount importance if the Union is to reinforce its democratic legitimacy vis-à-vis its citizens. Ultimately, it is only through greater transparency, ownership and participation by citizens and organised civil society at both national and European level, that Europe will be able to avoid extremism, defend its democratic values and establish a community of destiny’ (21).

8.4 If the EU wants to get close to its citizens (and if it fails to do this, it will fail as a whole), it has to listen and understand what its citizens really want and try to deliver accordingly. People want protection, fair rules for workers and businesses, healthy living and working conditions and a clear answer to external challenges. In order to achieve this, Europe must continue to be a catalyst for economic and social development and democratic stability and make sure that everybody is aware of their commitment.

8.5 Mis-information, dis-information and mal-information are more and more used by numerous actors including states, lobby groups, the media and individuals. These techniques are old, but the development and possibilities of social media have allowed the phenomenon to reach a wide audience. The best way to counter false news is to present facts and help develop people’s critical faculties. However, freedom of opinion and expression must be respected at all times, just as the fight against lies must not let up.

8.6 Communication and cooperation platforms should be promoted and should include all MS. What works in one Member State may also work in another, and what one Member State has researched can be used or enhanced by another.


The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Luca JAHIER

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(20) Reform of cybersecurity in Europe.
The following amendments were rejected during the discussion but received over a quarter of the votes.

Amendment 12

Point 5.5

Amend as follows:

5.5 The EESC has also called in several of its opinions for more investment in infrastructure and public services, projects that would generate growth and well-being for its citizens. The EESC has also voiced its support for comprehensive measures being implemented to prevent Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) by multinational corporations including the introduction of a common consolidated corporate tax base (CCCTB) and for combating VAT fraud by closer cooperation between Member States on a daily basis, as well as taxation of financial transactions, fuels and carbon dioxide emissions which, if levied at European level, would be able both to act upon a transnational tax base and to counteract the global impact on the environment (1). This would decrease tax avoidance and provide uniformity in fiscal policy. The EESC has also noticed that ‘Europe seemingly has a strong position in growing innovative high tech firms, but when these companies are in need of robust capital investments, they usually go bankrupt’ (2).

Reason

In order to avoid misunderstandings, we should stick to general statements. There have not yet been any discussions in the Committee either regarding the taxation of multinational corporations as a source of own resources, or regarding a common European tax base for, and the taxation of, fuels and carbon dioxide emissions. The Financial Transaction Tax would decrease the pensions of workers and the since many years ongoing Council work through Enhanced Cooperation has completely stalled. Similar remarks to this amendment was made to Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Reflection paper on the future of EU finances (COM(2017) 358 final) (3).

The amendment was rejected by 76 votes for, 98 votes against with 16 abstentions.

Amendment 11

Point 5.6

Add as follows:

5.6 The EU has signed comprehensive trade agreements, such as with Japan, aiming to increase exchanges of goods and services while protecting and improving workers’ rights and taking account of environmental challenges. However, in the past few years, protectionist currents have emerged, with trade wars brewing. The EU needs to continue on its path of promoting free, fair and sustainable trade in a multilateral system and trade agreements that respect social, consumer and environmental rights, while supporting businesses to grow and evolve. Protectionism does not benefit the citizens. The World Trade Organisation will have an important role to play, and it is crucial that the EESC plays its role in its reform (4). Closing borders and blocking trade cannot be the way forward in any circumstances.

Reason

To improve readability by giving one specific example of the EU’s free trade agreements – to make a reference to the EU-Japan EPA

(1) OJ C 81, 2.3.2018, p. 131.  
(3) OJ C 81, 2.3.2018, p. 131.  
(4) OJ C 159, 10.5.2019, p. 15.
As we know, the EU-Japan EPA entered into force on 1 February 2019 and it’s the biggest trade deal concluded by both sides.

It covers 640 million people of EU and Japan, almost a third of global GDP, and 37% of global trade.

74,000 EU companies export to Japan and 600,000 jobs tied to EU exports to Japan. It is also good for consumers as there will be more choice at lower price. In addition, it also sends a clear signal that 2 of the world biggest economies strongly support free, fair and rules-based trade.

The amendment was rejected by 73 votes for, 111 votes against with 11 abstentions.