

“The past is a good teacher but not a destination for the future”

First EC Vice-President Frans Timmermans speaks on the rule of law and a sustainable Europe at the EESC’s last plenary in 2018

“We need a swift change to a sustainable Europe, and to achieve it the support of local and regional authorities and civil societies is crucial,” said EESC president **Luca Jahier** at the outset of a debate with First Vice-President Frans Timmermans on sustainability and the rule of law during the EESC’s December plenary. “We need to dare a new future for Europe, or as we call it a rEUnaissance. In order to have the support of our citizens, it is crucial that we focus on opportunities rather than new liabilities for our citizens,” Mr Jahier added.

The EU is based on the rule of law

In his speech, Mr Timmermans noted that the rule of law was not “a sort of luxury” but the very foundation for the existence of the European Union. He warned against setbacks not only outside Europe, but also within the European Union. “We can see autocratic tendencies where democracy is used against the rule of law, where governments who achieved a majority in the last elections use this majority for instance in order to go against an independent justice”, Mr Timmerman said, stressing that democracy was a “day-to-day-thing” and could not be reduced to the issue of voting. He condemned Hungary’s recent decision to let employees work 400 hours overtime a year, without having involved trade unions in this decision, and was also worried about Poland’s attempt to forbid its lawyers to seek guidance from the European Court of Justice when there was doubt.

Involvement of civil society in the transition to a sustainable Europe

With regard to sustainability, Mr Timmermans referred to the Commission’s reflection paper which would be ready in mid-January, underlining that there **was only one way forward – which was the way towards a sustainable society**. He thanked the Committee for its remarkable role in the multi-stakeholder platform, where the EESC acted as a bridge builder and which could be an example for future involvement of civil society, for instance in platforms on energy transition, plastic, taxation, social protection inequalities – where the dialogue needs to be strengthened. “We have reached success and good consensus; however the work is not done yet,” Mr Timmermans concluded.

Taxation and the social pillar – the main instruments for social sustainability

“We also need to include social sustainability”, Mr Timmermans added. The *gilets jaunes* protests were the voice of people who felt they were being squeezed. “Inequality has increased in nearly all Member States. We must care about the people and this can only be done with the active participation of

civil society." Taxation and the social pillar were two important instruments. "We must make taxation policy a highly political issue. It cannot be that every little shop, every pub pays its taxes and the big enterprises don't. The next Commission will need to have a precise programme that ensures that these big companies pay their taxes where they make their profits. This must become a principle, together with the creation of a tax base that we can all agree upon – then tax havens will disappear," the Commissioner argued.

The EU has limited competences on social issues but huge political scope to urge the Member States to work on the social pillar and explain, for instance, that collective bargaining was an essential element of the European social model and for safeguarding the rights of all employers and employees.

"Unfortunately, with growing inequality, too many people are following the backward-looking path, **but while the past is a good teacher it cannot be the destination for the future,**" he concluded, ending with a Jean Jaurès quote "It is by flowing to the sea that a river stays true to its source."

In his statement, **Arno Metzler**, president of the Diversity Europe group, urged the Vice-president to ensure closer cooperation: "Let us, the EC and EESC, work more closely together. The European institutions in general need much more structured collaboration. We should definitely cooperate more closely on fighting the upsurge of populism and promoting the rule of law and fundamental rights in our Member States."

Gabi Bischoff, president of the EESC's workers' group, referred in her statement to SDG No 10 whose implementation was crucial. She argued that "For us as the workers' group, the fight against inequality has priority, but what we are seeing now is growing inequality within and between countries", blaming the Commission for having failed to address this issue successfully.

For group I, **Tellervo Kylä-Harakka-Ruonala** emphasised that "sustainable development is not a zero-sum game. We need to seek measures that create economic prosperity, social welfare and environmental benefits simultaneously. The EU needs to be a forerunner, and champion for a favourable business environment to innovate, invest and trade in sustainable solutions."

In their statements, members called for an overarching strategy for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which was still missing, and stressed that it must be inclusive, involving businesses, civil society organisations and citizens. Social and environmental justice must go hand in hand. With regard to obvious set-backs concerning the rule of law, they called for a more proactive approach and better support from the Commission where civil society's rights were under threat.