



**CONFERENCE of the Bureau of the Various Interests Group
of the European Economic and Social Committee at the Seimas,
Vilnius, 23 October 2013:**

***'Lithuania in the Driving Seat of European Integration:
a Fresh Look at Europe'***

PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

On 23 October 2013, the members of the Bureau of the Various Interests Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) met with representatives of the Lithuanian authorities, civil society and media, to discuss how the Republic of Lithuania, its civil society and citizens perceive the European Union and the role of Lithuania within the EU. Views were exchanged on the current and future opportunities and challenges facing the EU, and on the necessity for an equitable, social and accountable Europe, notably in the wake of the 2014 elections to the European Parliament. Based on these discussions and on the work of the EESC to date, the following principal conclusions were drawn up and shared among the participants:

Implementing sustainable solutions for a cohesive and effective Europe of tomorrow

- Stress that despite recent tentative improvements in the economic situation in Europe, the challenges facing European societies are multiple and the EU finds itself at a historical turning point which requires fundamental structural changes;
- Highlight that European values and standards are undermined by significant increases in prejudice and by the continued economic, financial, social, environmental, energy, poverty and demographic crises facing the continent. Condemn in particular the deepening income and social inequalities in austerity-hit countries and insist on effective measures to prevent and to tackle poverty;
- Stress that if Europe is to fulfill its ambitions and potential, it will be necessary to invest in a united, independent and politically stable Europe, which is mutually reinforcing and stronger than the sum of its individual parts;
- Insist that as demonstrated by the struggle for freedom and independence of the Lithuanian and Baltic people, and by the determination of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU to bolster a democratic Europe, the main priority of the EU is to preserve and to reinforce freedom, peace and independence, which are fundamental values for a common European future;
- In view of the forthcoming end of mandate of the European Commission and European Parliament, call on the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU to pursue an ambitious strategy for the rapid implementation of legislation/measures stimulating growth, competitiveness, the real economy, SMEs, access to credit and employment, notably youth employment;

- Highlight the necessity to invest in social capital and social innovation. Within this context, a multitude of civil society actors should be involved in Europe's recovery, including SMEs, the liberal professions, the green economy, the Social Economy, etc;
- Insist that additional EU funds be made available for the European Youth Guarantee Scheme. The scheme should be extended to young people aged 30 and to regions where youth unemployment is less than the current requirement of 25%;
- Urge the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU to take the lead in progress towards completing the Internal Market and further developing the EU's trade relations, on implementing the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Compact for Growth and Jobs. Priority should be placed on concrete steps towards Market Act II, the Connecting Europe Facility, introducing the Digital Market by 2015, the telecoms package, re-industrialising Europe, innovation, research & development;
- Highlight that the multiannual EU budget (Multi-annual Financial Framework) must be implemented from January 2014, so as to ensure the necessary innovative funding for sustainable growth at the local level;
- Insist on the necessity for equitable and inclusive approaches to Europe's recovery, protecting consumer rights, promoting gender equality and addressing both the economic and social consequences of the crises;
- Urge the rapid introduction of additional measures to facilitate greater mobility within the EU, for example by simplifying procedures for the provision of unemployment benefits for citizens seeking employment in another Member State;
- Strongly urge the October 2013 European Council to introduce a system of automatic support to the social security systems of crisis-hit countries;
- Within the context of Article 9 of the TFEU call for a new European Social Action Programme which would set out clear tangible targets, updating the targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy and exploring the right of European citizens to a minimum guaranteed income, the rate of which would be decided by each individual Member State;
- Support socially responsible investment in economically-viable social projects, through the establishment of European Social Bonds, to be sponsored by individual citizens, businesses, trade unions and civil society;
- Call for the creation of a European Education Network for Unemployed Workers, which would offer unemployed persons the opportunity of a two-year educational programme and cross-border education vouchers;
- Highlight that particular emphasis should be placed on establishing the banking union and for the European Central Bank (ECB) to begin supervising all European banks, including Regional banks, in Autumn 2014. Within this context, the rapid introduction of the Single Resolution Mechanism is imperative;
- Stress that the European Investment Fund should be re-capitalised, in order to enable it to provide development capital for European SMEs, notably when banks are unable or unwilling to meet the requirements of SMEs;
- Welcome the prioritisation of the internal energy market, external energy policy and regional cooperation by the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU, as these are instrumental to the EU's geopolitical security, its competitiveness, growth and employment. Call for

substantial progress to be made to the EU's trade relations during the Lithuanian Presidency, notably with the US.

Ensuring an accountable Europe of active citizenship

- Highlight that the European Union must be underpinned by greater political legitimacy, trust and democratic accountability, if it is to overcome dwindling public support;
- Call on the EU to urgently step up its activities promoting the European Year of Citizens and to ensure that concrete results are attained, in order to increase the credibility and understanding of the EU;
- Welcome the trust in and positive attitudes of Lithuanian citizens towards EU membership and citizenship. Call on the EU and Member States to help strengthen Lithuanian civil society at the local and national levels, through capacity building and the exchange of good practices. One possible outcome for the future could be the creation of a Lithuanian Economic and Social Council. An ESC could complement existing social dialogue and through the active participation of wider civil society could provide a constructive bottom up approach to inter-sectoral discussions;
- Express the hope that the forthcoming European elections will generate substantial interest among European citizens representing a wide political spectrum;
- Call on all European political parties to effectively communicate to citizens and notably to young Europeans, on the common cultural heritage that Europeans share, on the benefits of EU membership, the solutions that the EU has brought to the European, national and local levels and on the cost of 'non Europe' to growth, sustainability and competitiveness.

Vilnius, 23 October 2013
