

EuVisions met the President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), George Dassis, in November 2017, on the occasion of the interinstitutional proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), in Gothenburg, Sweden.

Alexander Damiano Ricci: What is your take on the inter-institutional Proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)?

George Dassis: Since its take off, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomed Jean Claude Juncker's effort to relaunch the social dimension of the European Union and, thus, the Pillar.

ADR: Some analysts claim that the EPSR will have little grip ...

GD: The EPSR needs soon to become an integral part of EU law.

ADR: What risks are involved in this process?

GD: We could experience what already happened in the 80s with the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

ADR: Could you explain further what you mean by that?

GD: At that time, the EESC proposed to the European Commission led by Jacques Delors to add a Charter of Fundamental Rights to the already existing European Treaties.

ADR: So what happened?

GD: European leaders and institutions gathered in Luxembourg for an important meeting and, whereas all of us were expecting that the Charter became mandatory EU law, we were left with a platonic declaration.

ADR: What were the consequences of that act?

GD: Well, we had to wait another 20 years for the very same Charter to become part of EU law.

ADR: Do you think history will repeat itself?

GD: I am optimistic about the fact that the European Commission will uphold the momentum. That said, European legislative processes, are not known for their speediness.

ADR: So what should we expect?

GD: Gothenburg and the Proclamation aside, civil society needs to put pressure on national, European institutions and leaders to fulfil the substance of the Charter.

ADR: Speaking of leaders, Angela Merkel didn't attend the Gothenburg Summit. A blast to the EC?

GD: That doesn't imply that the German Chancellor cannot subscribe to the Pillar. Moreover, we should not focus only on Head of States and Prime Ministers: we need a brother civil lobbying targeting MEPs.

ADR: That is easily said ...

GD: And easily done. If 60 years after its foundation, this Union still exists, it is not because of leaders per sé. The EU is alive because it brought real benefits to the citizens of Europe: peace, freedom of expression and economic prosperity.

ADR: Today many contend the capacity of the Union to continue to create wealth for its citizens.

GD: We need life-long learning opportunities for unemployed people, a basic universal income and investments to break unidirectional migratory flows within the EU.

ADR: How can you provide all that in a context of limited economic resources?

GD: There is the economic and financial capacity to provide these policies and outcomes.

ADR: Then again, what are the hindrances?

GD: If we want to spur an EU based on equality, freedom and social cohesion we need a better redistribution of wealth. Consequently, the first step would be a fiscal reform of the Union.

ADR: I would argue that we lack political incentives to do so.

GD: We can get to that point.

ADR: How?

GD: Being rational. We need to develop a European industrial investment plan and cohesion policies, so that rural do not feel abandoned. I think it is possible to find a collective agreement on these issues.

ADR: But you cannot dismiss that ever more citizens are backing reactionary political forces. Can you?

GD: In times of crisis, people are willing to believe the best offer.

ADR: Mr Dassis, you are a former trade unionist. Some would expect a stronger lead on this issues by the European trade unions. Don't you think so?

GD: Trade unions represent the vanguard of the European integration process. But trade unionists are influenced by the context within which they act. Not always do they share a European view on social issues. Moreover, the economic crisis hit the number of affiliates of trade unions and, thus, the financial resources to steer proper European campaigns. To not mention the fact, that multilingualism is not the most reliable skill of this professional sector.

ADR: What are the lessons trade unions can learn from the past?

GD: The new generations of national trade unionists have to put to the fore a common European strategy, delegate more powers and financial resources to the European Confederation of Trade Unions, to let the latter defend the interests of workers at the European level.

ADR: Coming back to the EPSR, what should become the top priorities after the Gothenburg Summit?

GD: Generally speaking, the EU needs to “get closer to its citizens”. The latter implies the development of a specific budget and legal instruments to foster the real implementation of the Pillar.

ADR: It might not happen though.

GD: If the EU keeps being an affair of “Eurocrats”, it won't survive. And we will risk moving

back to the perils of the past.


 *An Italian version of this interview was published by the Corriere della Sera in November 2017.*

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