

MEUSAC events on future of Europe: Where do we go from here?

Event feedback will help formulate the government's position on the European Commission's reflection papers

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Earlier this month, MEUSAC organised a string of events on the future of Europe. These events also coincided with the official re-launch of MEUSAC. MEUSAC has recently been established as a government agency tasked with, among other things, pushing forward the debate on the future of Europe on a national level.

All three events attracted a good number of attendees as well as a number of experts who participated in panel discussions and workshops.

The events focused on three of the five reflection papers presented by the European Commission following the publication earlier this year of a White Paper on the Future of Europe that set out possible paths for the future of Europe following Brexit. It offered five scenarios as to how the Union could evolve by 2025, with the aim of starting off a European-wide process of reflection and discussion on the EU's future.

The reflection papers deal with harnessing globalisation, the social dimension of Europe, the future of EU finances, the deepening of the European Monetary Union and the future of European defence.

Since its re-activation in 2008, MEUSAC has striven to engage the social partners, civil society and members of the public in discussing EU-related issues in an effort to help bring about changes, including far-reaching ones and to help government formulate the country's position on EU policy and legislation.

Thus, the aim of this month's events was to gather feedback that may contribute towards the government's position on the different reflection papers. In fact, both European Affairs and Equality Minister Helena Dalli and Parliamentary Secretary for European Funds and Social Dialogue Aaron Farrugia participated in the events. The outcome of the events is being documented and will be forwarded to the EU Secretariat within the Ministry for European Affairs and Equality for further consideration.

During the first event, which focused on harnessing globalisation, a number of participants spoke of the need for the EU to embrace the changes brought about by globalisation while also calling for the EU to take a more forceful approach during trade discussions when fair competition is at stake. The issue of migration was also raised, with one panel member suggesting that it could bring about opportunities in view of changing demographics in Europe, and that integration at the place of work was vital. Another panel member spoke about the fact that 90% of jobs in the EU now required digitally skilled workers.

The second event tackled the social dimension. In his opening remarks, MEUSAC Head Vanni Xuereb questioned whether we are focused as much as we should be on the social dimension of the EU given that although the reflection paper starts by taking a positive attitude on various aspects of today's society, it also picks up on the anxiety citizens are feeling on the future. He also spoke about the Union's efforts to redirect its focus on its citizens through the European Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed jointly by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission during the Social Summit held in Gothenburg, Sweden on November 17, which sets out a number of new and effective principles and rights for citizens to support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems.

On a positive note, the fact that digital technology is transforming the labour market in terms of making it easier to have flexible work-related arrangements, such as teleworking, was raised during the discussion. On the negative side, it was highlighted, yet again, that the rate of female participation at executive level remains relatively low in Malta.

The third and final event focused on EU finances. The reflection paper deals with the important issue of seeking to find ways to fund more with less in view of the fact that the UK's withdrawal from the EU in 2019 will mean that the EU will lose a major contributor to the EU budget.

The fact is that many Europeans have first-hand experience of projects funded by different EU funding programmes. Young professionals study abroad thanks to one of the EU's funding programmes – Erasmus+; farmers receive support from the Common Agricultural Policy; researchers and universities benefit from EU grants to further their work. Therefore, the future of EU finances is a major issue which needs to be tackled seriously and urgently. Owing to the particular nature of the subject, this event took a different form from the previous ones and included workshops to discuss how the future of EU finances would affect public entities, civil society, and enterprises respectively.

The aim of these events was not to say all that needed to be said but to kick start a discussion in Malta within the wider debate on the future of Europe. The public may also contribute directly. You may ask yourself, how do I join the debate? What is my favourite scenario for the future of Europe? There are plenty of ways and every idea counts, be it through citizens' dialogues, Facebook live dialogues, or by simply visiting the European Commission's website https://ec.europa.eu/commission/feedback-future-europe_en and giving your feedback. Join the debate on the EU's future – Your future!