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Economic and Social Committee (Members)

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Members of the Economic and Social Committee

In 2013, Henri Malosse became the thirtieth president of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), probably the least famous among European institutions. He is not the first president to seek ways to promote a committee that he describes as “too well-behaved, too conformist, too private” and that he would want to become more “proactive” instead of being content with an advisory role. Since the Rome Treaty, the EESC has been given the right to initiate its own reports, but more importantly, it has also been confronted with new institutions providing competing venues for representation, for negotiation between socio-economic interests and for lobbying. The direct election of the European Parliament since 1979 has offered it more democratic legitimacy, while members of the EESC are still chosen by governments. These members represent both their Member State and organizations that generally work at the national (sometimes regional, rarely European or international) level. Most of them speak for rather widely defined interests, e.g. those of employees or small and medium enterprises (SMEs), unlike more focused lobbying groups. In addition, EESC customs promote the search for consensus: most reports are passed unanimously. This tendency has rapidly led employers’ organizations, especially UNICE/BusinessEurope, to stay away from the institution. The European Trade Union Organization (ETUC) is more present in that EESC members representing trade unions generally vote according to ETUC positions, but the EESC is certainly not key to ETUC strategies.

However, the EESC is still there and more than 1,000 persons have held a seat since 1958. Not only is it still there, but in many respects, it looks unchanged. From the very beginning, it has been customarily organized around three groups: employers, workers and “various interests”. The list of organizations represented for each country has seldom changed, and the same is true for the career profiles of members, which are also remarkably similar from country to country. Because of these enduring characteristics, the EESC has contributed to the perpetuation of a European standard of legitimacy for interest groups and their representatives. This standard that gives a prominent place to the representation of workers and employers (and, among the others, of farmers and SMEs) is firmly rooted in the 1950s. The standard profiles of EESC members are produced by the preferences of governments, which tend to choose their national partner organizations, and of people who accept or do not accept their nomination. Being a member is indeed not an easy task; although some choose to report more than others, all have to be present in Brussels, which often takes a quarter or half of their time.

Who are and who have been the members of the EESC? Despite attendance requirements, Brussels is rarely their main place of work. Henri Malosse is an exception in this respect. A member since 1995, he reported on dozens of diverse topics and speaks several foreign languages; he has never owned a firm, but began his career as an intern in the European Commission, then worked for chambers of commerce and represented them in the EESC. On the contrary, for most members, holding a seat in the EESC merely represents a European stint in the context of a national career of interest representation. Only a small minority of members have been in charge of European or international issues in their previous positions before being appointed. Such experience is however more frequently found among representatives of workers (who also include more women, scarcely present in the rest of the membership). Andrzej Adamczyk, a current member appointed as the head of the Foreign Affairs office at Solidarno c , exemplifies this profile.

Why do members devote a few years to the EESC (the four or five years of one term of office for half of them, but up to twenty years for some)? They use it to test new ideas or mottos, or to hear about those produced in other organizations and by the European institutions. They also have more personal career strategies – or retirement strategies, as half of the members are over 60 years old when appointed, and a third more than 70 years old when leaving office. One sixth of the members have an individual seat in the EESC, in the sense that they do not represent any organization. The vast majority of these members has always come from the British delegation – the only one that significantly differs from all the others, and whose members do not seem to weigh much in the EESC. They are university professors, former members of Parliament, consultants or directors of firms; for example, current members Bryan Cassidy and Rose D’Sa are presented respectively as a former member of the European Parliament and a consultant in international, European and Commonwealth law.

Conversely, the other (non-British) delegations include many representatives of national confederations of workers, such as Solidarno c , and employers/firms. These organizations generally choose one of their vice-presidents or permanent staffers as members of the EESC. The latter are picked by trade unions, and, since the 1990s, by all organizations. It is however for other types of organizations that the EESC appears as a focal European institution: those that represent agriculture, transport, the SMEs and professions. They have always held many seats in all delegations, benefitting from the possibility to become either members of the Employers’ Group or of the Various Interests’ groups. Their seats have also been given, more often than in other organizations, to national presidents – who also often were members of national Economic and Social Committees and active in chambers of agriculture, commerce or trade. Among this third type of EESC members, we consistently find very young French farmers who then climbed the hierarchical ladder in the national agricultural federation and sometimes pursued a political career: Joseph Daul became a member of the EESC at

33, in 1980, then ended up in the European Parliament. However, the EESC was more often one of the last representative positions held in a long career, after becoming the president of a national organization, sometimes during or before a term of office in a European or worldwide interest group. For example, René Bernasconi, the president of the French general confederation of SMEs, represented it in the EESC from 1982 to 1990, from the age of 66 to 74, then joined the direction of the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises.

What happened to these well-established profiles after the enlargement of the European Union in 2003? Since the 1990s, the EESC presidency as well as European treaties have put forward a new vision of “civil society”, more focused on non governmental organizations (NGOs) rather than on workers and employers. Did it impact the new delegations more than the others? In Romania, for example, explicit directives were given to represent the interests of women, disabled persons, or the defense of the environment, as well as farmers, employers or workers. These directives, however, have had little aggregate impact, partly due to the small size of each delegation (the EESC still only has 344 members). Seats are still given to the interests that are most strongly organized at the national level. Even in the Romanian delegation, only a third of the current members represent NGOs, and among the 29 members currently representing farmers, 10 were chosen by recent members of the EU. In practice, many NGOs are reluctant to recognize the role of the EESC as a forum for civil society, due to this enduring domination of socio-economic organizations. Neither new discourses nor the enlargement of the EU have had much impact on the EESC, which remains a little-known organization. For its members, it still represents an opportunity for European socialization, in that they learn about the Brussels bureaucracy and observe delegations from other countries. Overall, this has contributed to the persistence, and even the propagation to new countries, of a model of interest representation and discussion among interests that had been invented in the mid-twentieth century.

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Renvois à d'autres notices : BusinessEurope, European corporate elites, NGOs, ETUC, Farmers, Lobbyists, Unionists

Legal references:

Rome Treaty, articles 193-198, modified with the same numbers by the Maastricht Treaty;
Nice Treaty, articles 257-262;
Lisbon Treaty, article 256 bis; Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, article 300.

Websites:

Official EESC websites: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/>