

REPORT ON THE 2ND INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON COOPERATIVE LAW, ATHENS, 26-28 SEPTEMBER 2018

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The 2nd International Forum on Cooperative Law followed the one organized in 2016 at Montevideo, Uruguay. The fruitful outcome of the Montevideo Forum – both as concerns the number of participants and the positive feed-back – led to the decision to organize such meetings biannually.

In particular, the 2nd International Forum on Cooperative Law was organized in 2018 at Athens by Ius Cooperativum, with the support of the International Co-operative Alliance and of two local co-organizers: the Hellenic Open University (Athens) and the Peoples' University on Social and Solidarity Economy (Thessaloniki).

The dialectic relation between the cooperative law and the cooperative principles was the overarching forum's theme, an indicator of the centrality of cooperative principles in forming, applying and reforming the legal environment that surrounds all cooperatives, irrespective of their country or sector of their activity.

Under the above theme, a variety of topics were addressed during the 3-day forum by the attendees coming from different countries, such as Canada, Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Finland, Holland, Belgium, Turkey, Israel, India, Indonesia, Australia and Greece¹. Topics included - among others - the legal relevance (if any) of the cooperative principles for other fields of law (e.g. constitutions, administration law, tax law, bankruptcy law, labor law, competition law, audit regulations, book-keeping and accounting standards), the legal requirements for specific types of cooperatives, such as agricultural, banking, energy, workers' and social cooperatives, the relation between cooperative law and the legal framework of the social economy, as well as policies and tools on research and education in the field of cooperative law.

Furthermore, two new activities were introduced that took place during the first day : a workshop for students and a round table between economists and lawyers. The first activity was the outcome of a collaboration with the European Law Students' Association and in particular with its Greek branch. More than 20 Greek undergraduate and post-graduate students joined the workshop with varied backgrounds, such as agronomy, management, law and economics who shared a curiosity in hearing more about cooperative law, most of them for the very first time. The goal of the event was to communicate what is a

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cooperative enterprise, why is it deemed different from other enterprise types and what are the national and international developments of the law that is applicable to them. Of a particular interest for the students were recent types of platform cooperatives that emerge using newest technologies.

The second activity brought together economists and lawyers in order to explore a common ground of approach to cooperatives and how can both economists and lawyers benefit from each other. The debate was guided by a list of questions on how cooperatives can be defined, how can we address their ever-growing complexity and whether they have grown from children of need to children of choice. The main conclusion of the debate was that in the current context, there seems to be a significantly different way of understanding cooperatives from both disciplines and further attempts are needed in the next forums in order to gradually form a common language.

A panel on the Greek legal framework took place leading to a rather heated discussion on whether the legislation should allow the formation of “women-only” cooperatives, if such provision falls in line with the first cooperative principle on voluntary and open membership and if it is still justifiable under the current context and the position of Greek women. The other point that was highlighted was the degree of the Greek cooperative legislation’s fragmentation and its problematic liaison with the law on social and solidarity economy (SSE), based on which several cooperative types, such as credit unions or agricultural cooperatives cannot easily fulfill the criteria that are introduced in order to be acknowledged as a SSE actor, resulting in their exclusion from the SSE universe.

The forum ended on a high note with its attendees giving their next rendez-vous in Asia in 2020, where the 3rd International Forum on Cooperative Law shall possibly be held.