



European identity, ownership and engagement cannot be enforced top-down

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Speaker

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Dear Mr. Otocan, thank you for your introductory words.

Dear guests,

Welcome to the European Social and Economic Committee.

I trust that you had a successful day already yesterday in our premises for your international final conference of the RE.CRI.RE project.

I am especially pleased to welcome you all: as what is truly unique about ALDA is that you are a bridge builder between local and regional democracy and civil society.

Our democratic institutions today, our European political system of representative democracies are currently facing a crisis of legitimacy, driven by a certain complacency and disinterest on the one hand and populist, anti-elite rhetoric on the other. This leads us to a situation in which citizens feel they are not heard by their own democratically elected decision-makers. Openness to different cultures, solidarity towards those newly arrived, freedom of expression are viewed by some with suspicion, as things dictated from above, from a 'political elite', an 'elite in Brussels' far from everyday lives, challenges and needs. Many citizens lack a sense of ownership and involvement.

This is where local democracy and participation play a crucial role. This is where the work of ALDA and its members and partners play a crucial role.

As you know, it is important to distinguish between Consultation and Participation.

Consultation, a very important aspect of civil dialogue, is a top down process, collecting the expertise of civil society players.

Put into the context of the participatory pillar of the European democratic model in the Lisbon Treaty, the EESC already reacted in its own initiative opinion in 2010 on 'The Implementation of the Lisbon Treaty: participatory democracy and the citizens' initiative (Article 11)' that consultation, as a top down measure, only indirectly facilitates civil society action. It must be clearly distinguished from 'Participation', which is a civic right.

European identity, ownership and engagement cannot be enforced top-down. They must be driven by a bottom up approach, by participation. Thus, I would like to thank all of you engaging in this key area for your work.

As the House of Civil Society, the local level is paramount for the EESC. We act with pride as the intermediary body between different levels of society and decision-making, convinced that structured exchange and an improved understanding between civil society and European decision making is paramount to the success of our European project.

As we stated in our Resolution on the White Paper on the Future of Europe and beyond (2017), I quote, "Policy-making must include and involve all levels of society. Objectives should be shared and the impact of decisions and policies should also be systematically evaluated at national, regional and local level to gain the support of the citizens."

But let me now address the three points which are the focus areas of your Annual General Assembly: 1) cultural heritage as a leverage for promoting European citizenship, 2) initiatives in the challenges faced in the EU and its neighbourhood and 3) Citizens' participation in the 2019 European elections:

Our cultural heritage is clearly something that EU citizens perceive as creating a sense of community. In the spring 2017 Eurobarometer they were asked to assess issues that are able to create a feeling of community among EU citizens. Europeans put culture on top: 31% of respondents mentioned Culture as one of the three most decisive issues, followed by History and Values.

However, cultural heritage is meaningless if it is not part of the everyday lives of our communities, if there is no sense of ownership on local level. We need to develop understanding, learning and co-governance to benefit from our cultural heritage. Only then can it unfold its potential for economic growth, for inclusion, community building, intercultural dialogue and the development of an open sense of identity and belonging. This is something I insisted on, in the 2016 EESC Study which I initiated on 'Culture, Cities and Identity in Europe'. Culture drives democracy, as numerous studies show. For this reason, I have placed culture as one of the 4 priorities of my Presidency, alongside Peace, Youth and Sustainability.

In the EU as well as in neighbouring countries, representative democracy is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy. One manner of addressing this challenge which puts at risk our democratic societies is to promote participation. Involvement in local democratic processes builds trust, generates an understanding of the complexity of democratic processes and empowers citizens.

This is of importance especially in countries which in their recent past have experienced - or are still struggling with - challenges of corruption, armed conflict or non-democratic political systems. Here more than ever, the engagement of citizens on local level is the first step towards stable democracies, growing it from the bottom up. This will benefit both these countries and the European Union, strengthening our European neighbourhood.

The importance of establishing proper partnerships with neighboring countries is one of the elements the EESC highlights in its Resolution on the Future of Europe- and work on local level is certainly a promising and crucial entry point.

On local and European level, we need to work together, on concrete projects, to build trust, cohesion and a multi-faceted, open sense of identity.

Networks such as ALDA are therefore key resources for our European democracies, reinforcing a European spirit, preventing isolationist points of view and driving learning through exchange.

The year ahead is decisive for the European Union, especially in view of the European elections in May 2019. The work you have been doing is an important foundation for encouraging people to go and vote, helping them understand the principles of democracy and participation on a local, and thus also regional, national and European level, and driving a sense of belonging to Europe.

I encourage you all to join forces and focus our efforts in the run-up to the elections, ensuring a high voter turnout and thus a clear and strong mandate for the European institutions in the years ahead.

I am informed that ALDA has over 300 members, 215 partners- and impacts 25 Million citizens in the enlarged Europe. Just imagine the relevance this has for supporting an informed, pro-European vote.

Engagement and participation are the very basis of the EU.

Our European Union is championed by people like you.

I wish you a successful General Assembly and count on your engagement in the year and years ahead.

Thank you.