

Active Citizenship

For a better European society



European Economic and Social Committee



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Foreword



What makes an active citizen? It is not easy to define rules or instructions, and yet I am sure the vast majority of readers would recognise an active citizen when they meet one!

Active citizenship is the glue that keeps society together. Democracy doesn't function properly without it, because effective democracy is more than just placing a mark on a voting slip. The European Economic and Social Committee's mission is rooted in the principle of participative democracy, operating in addition to representative democracy, on the basis of a continuous dia-

logue between civil society and decision-makers. By definition, participative democracy requires people to get involved, to play an active role ... in their workplace, perhaps, or by taking part in a political organisation or supporting a good cause. The area of activity does not matter. It is the commitment to the welfare of society that counts.

The EESC encourages active citizenship through ongoing contact, consultation and exchange with a vast range of interests and organisations at all levels, together known as organised civil society. As a result, ordinary people are empowered, particularly when they choose to organise and express their views together. Participatory democracy broadens the public debate on European integration and on specific policies, and encourages more people to be active in community life. The EESC is the institutional channel that enables citizens and their organisations to make their voices heard and have an active say in EU policy-making.

By encouraging communication between the EU, its citizens and the organisations representing their interests, the EESC keeps people informed about the decisions that have an impact on their lives, and enables them to act and react at the appropriate level. The Committee brings the EU closer to its people, boosts transparency and gives it greater democratic legitimacy.

When we speak about active citizenship, over and over again it comes down to solidarity with other people; to giving something back to society; to breaking down barriers and demonstrating that Europe's 500 million inhabitants are mutually dependent, and that what we do for others we also do for ourselves.

Volunteering is one important element of active citizenship, which benefits the volunteers as much as those they support. As highlighted also by the European Commission: "In some countries the sector is increasingly seen as an instrument for tackling problems or providing services that the state cannot provide anymore." This tendency is likely to grow in the current economic crisis, which will increase the demand for these services. However, volunteers should not replace paid workers.

Young people need to find a worthwhile place in society, through all forms of active citizenship. These days, life is not easy for young people in many EU Member States, with latest unemployment figures rising to over 20%. It is only too easy for jobless youngsters to feel alienated and unwanted by society. Through volunteering, as an important element of active citizenship, they can get involved, make a constructive contribution, and at the same time acquire new skills and experience that will make them more employable and be of long-lasting value.

There are many different forms of active citizenship, and this book illustrates the wide range of activities undertaken by EESC members in the professional, political and voluntary spheres. It could be an incentive to readers to take up some of the examples featured and to develop their own activities to make a contribution to European society. We want to promote the legacy of the 2011 European Year of Volunteering and to continue contributing to the proper implementation of the Policy Agenda on Volunteering in Europe, for instance by including a European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers. We will definitely take our work on active citizenship further during the 2013 European Year of Citizens.

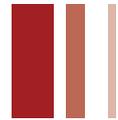
Active citizenship is the most powerful source of renewable human energy, which can visibly brighten up people's lives. We hope you will be inspired by the stories in this book to find your own role as an active citizen.



Staffan Nilsson
EESC President

March 2012

*"Active citizenship is
the glue that keeps
society together."*



Get up and get active!



Anna Maria with some children from one of the Morning Tears project

Active citizenship is a broad concept, hard to define, and yet crucial to the welfare of society and its members. Many people, when asked, will say it is about 'giving something back', about recognising that we are all mutually dependent and that by making a positive contribution to the direction society takes, we are helping ourselves as well as others.

In a democratic society, all individuals and groups have the right to participate in democratic practices and institutions. That seems to imply a responsibility to ensure that no one is excluded. It could be argued that active citizenship is all about balancing

rights and responsibilities. But whereas rights can be set out in lists and charters, responsibilities are more difficult to enumerate.

A catalogue of the activities that could qualify as active citizenship would be wide-ranging and extensive, and together they build a healthy, participative democracy. They cover voting and standing for election, teaching and learning, donating to good causes, recycling and caring for the environment, campaigning and volunteering. They may take place in a professional, political or personal context. They can be on an international scale, or simply target the neighbour next door.

One thing is certain: that active citizenship is crucial to society at all levels and for many reasons – bringing political, social, cultural and individual benefits, to name just a few.

Active citizenship is central to the role of the European Economic and Social Committee. In this book, 24 EESC members talk about their personal contribution, as business people and trade unionists, campaigners and volunteers, revealing a vast and fascinating range of different interests and priorities. What they all have in common is that they express a sense of solidarity with others in society, and concern for their welfare.

Society's glue

Active citizenship is the glue that keeps society together, because if everyone merely focused on going to work, earning a living, and promoting their own individual interests, society would fall apart. It brings together people of

different generations and different backgrounds, forging a solidarity that – as life expectancy grows by the year – is becoming increasingly important for the long-term welfare of European society.

It is also a form of literacy, because it implies being aware of what is happening around us, acquiring knowledge and understanding so as to make informed judgements, and having the skill and courage to respond in the appropriate way, individually or collectively. Active citizenship embodies the conviction that every individual can make a difference to the community he or she lives in – whether that means the local, national or global community.

True active citizenship is underpinned by a set of fundamental values that includes respect for the rule of law, democracy, justice, tolerance and open-mindedness, and regard for the rights and freedoms of others.

Consequently, it makes a very important contribution to fostering social cohesion. In its 2010 opinion on 'Integration and the Social Agenda', the EESC draws attention to the way increasing the civic, cultural and political participation of immigrants – in other words, promoting their active citizenship – can help to accelerate their integration. But it is not just people from different ethnic communities who can find common cause in active citizenship. It helps to break down differences and misunderstandings, and build solidarity between rich and poor, weak and strong, people from diverse social backgrounds, and especially between different generations.

Social awareness at an early age

Indeed, the EESC has consistently underlined how active citizenship can help draw children and young people into society and make them feel part of a wider community. The Committee has put forward specific proposals designed to reinforce the relationship between organised civil society and schools. In its opinion on 'Voluntary Activity: its role in European society and its impact', it urges: "In primary education, more attention must be paid to educational activities aimed at developing social awareness and involvement in solving social problems of general interest. Practical activities could be provided as an option for young people, to encourage them to carry out important and useful voluntary activities." Teaching active citizenship in schools is vital, but equally important in fostering a sense of social solidarity is the education youngsters receive at home.

In 2011, in its opinion on the 'Youth on the Move' initiative, the Committee reiterates the need for "instruments promoting youth participation in society". In this context, the EESC has swung into action itself, organising since 2010 the 'Your Europe, Your Say!' initiative. Every year, the Committee

works through schools across the EU to bring together 100 pupils and teachers, in Brussels, to take part in a simulated EESC plenary session. The students learn not only how to formulate policy and argue their case, but they also get to know their contemporaries in other European countries, encouraging a broader understanding and a lifelong sense of fellowship. “We must promote active citizenship and specifically volunteering as a natural part of our lives, already from childhood. Supporting good habits among young people in this sense is crucial,” says Pavel Trantina from the Czech Republic, rapporteur of this opinion.

The EESC has already pointed out that active citizenship strengthens the “social capital” of both individuals and communities, through building social networks, contacts and mutual trust, and contributing to social and economic development.

Participation and rebels with a cause

The EU is a parliamentary democracy, where citizens elect their representatives in the European Parliament. But as Dana Štechová, from the Czech Republic, points out, active citizenship is about more than casting a vote every few years. The EESC embodies another, parallel but equally important model: participative democracy, which encourages people to be active on their own behalf. “Cultivating participative democracy is a task that is never finished,” argues Ms Štechová in her interview. “It is important to stop those forces who would like to take over too much power, often also at the expense of the most vulnerable in society and in contradiction to European values. We sometimes forget to underline the fundamental principles of the EU: peace, solidarity, social justice and a decent life. They are big words, but I believe in them. It is important to remember these principles and be always vigilant in defending them.”

A well-functioning participative democracy is a two-way street. It draws on the input of individuals, groups and organisations, and in turn it encourages and empowers people to become more engaged, when they realise that they can make a difference. Through their ongoing dialogue with civil society, EESC members help citizens to find out more about the decisions that affect them, and in turn channel their views and reactions back to EU decision-makers. The Committee is the house of civil dialogue – a bridge between the EU and civil society.

Active citizenship does not necessarily mean toeing the line or adhering obediently to the status quo. Indeed, in many cases, active citizens are those who use democratic processes to challenge the rules. Georgios Dassis, from Greece, highlights how trade unionists have, over the years, taken to the streets to win improved working conditions, and in referring to his

own experience as the victim of an undemocratic regime, he also warns indirectly of the danger of failing to defend the rights and freedoms we tend to take for granted.

Going to another level

But society is changing rapidly. With the impact of the single market and greater mobility, communities are breaking down and with them, very often, people's sense of being able to shape their own environment. At European level, we see the corrosive rise of Euro-scepticism in public opinion – exacerbated by the financial crisis – or even worse, the spectre of nationalism. This confirms the importance of changing policies through a bottom-up approach which involves active citizens and heightens their sense of ownership of their communities. Henri Malosse, from France, and Anne-Marie Sigmund, from Austria, both highlight the need to develop active European citizenship. Ms Sigmund believes that the European Citizens' Initiative – described in more detail on page 54 – could be a tool to inspire cross-border action and participation. In its opinion on 'Making European citizenship visible and effective', the EESC points to the need to forge a strong European identity, based on shared values, dialogue, and support for EU-wide citizens' networks.

The Committee puts forward a number of suggestions for fostering transnational action, such as a European voluntary service scheme for young people, and upgrading consultation procedures. As the opinion makes clear, citizens need to feel closer to the EU, and to know more about their rights within it. "European citizenship should be seen as ... a 'new frontier', opening up more rights, more freedoms and more responsibilities."

The EESC's opinion on the EU's Active Citizenship action programme highlights the importance of learning from history and preserving the memory of the past, in forging a common European identity. This is something that concerns Andrzej Adamczyk, from Poland. In Western Europe, people have grown accustomed to exercising democratic rights, over decades if not centuries. It is easy to become blasé. But in countries like his own, these same freedoms are still relatively new and novel and he, like many other people, vividly recalls the time when being an active citizen could carry grave risks.



What role for volunteering?

The EESC points out that “voluntary activity is inextricably linked with active citizenship . . . People take part in the life of society not only through political participation but also through the specific solution of social problems. By working for society they can translate a desire to help shape society into action. It is this very form of European active citizenship which gives people a strong sense of belonging to society. Voluntary activity can therefore be regarded as one of the best examples of participation and thus an essential component of, or even a precondition for, active citizenship.” In its opinion, the Committee itself pioneered the idea of a European Year of Volunteering.

Voluntary action has many benefits. It promotes personal development, solidarity and mutual understanding, as well as having an economic value. In a European Parliament survey of voluntary work in the EU, in June 2011, 34% of respondents said its most important role was in maintaining and strengthening social cohesion. “For volunteers the benefits of voluntary action include meaningful use of leisure time, developing social skills and making contacts, as well as acquiring and exchanging experience,” says the EESC.

Such experience should make young people, especially, more employable. The European Commission, in a September 2011 Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering, recognised the need for greater recognition of the competences and skills gained through volunteering. It announced plans for “a Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, including the recognition of competences acquired through volunteering”.

Just as important, perhaps, this activity brings enormous personal satisfaction. Waltraud Klasnic, from Austria, emphasises this aspect in her interview, when she says: “Helping people helps me as well, it makes me happy.”

But the EESC has stressed repeatedly that volunteering must not replace paid work, and volunteers should never be exploited. This is a particular concern in the current economic crisis. “Great care should be taken to resist the knee-jerk urge to fall back on volunteers to mitigate adverse social impacts of the crisis,” said the EESC in its 2009 opinion on the ‘European Year of Volunteering 2011’. Paid and voluntary work should be complementary activities, not alternatives.

Rights, not privileges

One problem is that while the principle of active citizenship is widely understood, when it comes to volunteering, “each country has different notions, definitions and traditions”, admits the Commission.

Across the EU, more than 100 million people are estimated to engage in some form of voluntary work, with sport and culture being the most popular areas of activity. By the end of 2011, Commission Vice-President Viviane Reding wants the number to have risen significantly. But within this figure there are big national variations, often due to the way volunteers are counted.

Furthermore, almost one in five Member States lacks a clear legal framework and rules for volunteers and volunteering. The EESC has called firmly for an enabling environment and for the removal of financial and legal barriers to volunteering.

The EESC is involved in the debate on a European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers, which would need to be endorsed and implemented by the Member States. A rights-based approach is necessary to reflect the fact that volunteering and active citizenship are rights, and not privileges. We should be looking at volunteering through the volunteers' eyes and taking into account their needs and aspirations.

Voluntary activity is unpaid, but not cost-free. The EESC has called for investment in infrastructure and resources to cover training, support and reimbursement of expenses.

“Active citizenship is central to the role of the European Economic and Social Committee.”

The EESC points out that companies and employers have a role to play in promoting voluntary activity. More and more large firms are demonstrating corporate responsibility by encouraging their staff to become active citizens. But small businesses can also do their bit. Madi Sharma, from the UK, runs an SME that offers training in entrepreneurship. But she also takes that expertise into schools, or shares it with women who have suffered domestic violence. And she illustrates how some EESC members extend their active citizenship beyond European borders, through her work to change the lives of young Africans affected by civil war. At the same time, Juan Mendoza from Spain helps Europeans to broaden their horizons through social tourism.

The next steps

2012 is the European Year of Active Ageing and intergenerational solidarity. This offers many opportunities not only to sustain the work launched during the 2011 Year of Volunteering, but also to raise awareness about active citizenship in the EU. Indeed, it is a topic of special importance to older people. The EESC has drawn attention to the link between active ageing, solidarity between generations, and active citizenship: “On the one hand it enables older people to continue to be involved in the life of society, to make use of their life experience and to continue to feel useful.

“Voluntary action promotes personal development, solidarity and mutual understanding.”

This has a positive effect on their health and quality of life. Secondly, voluntary activity can promote understanding between generations when young and old act together, exchange experience and support each other.”

Waltraud Klasnic from Austria and André Mordant from Belgium both testify to the fact that retirement from paid employment is no barrier to active citizenship. There is a plethora of ways in which older people can continue to use their knowledge and experience to the benefit of society.

Throughout the European Year of Volunteering, the EYV Alliance, a coalition of 39 European networks with some 2000 member organisations reaching hundreds of thousands of volunteers, has been working on a European Policy Agenda on Volunteering, to be presented to the Commission. The Committee has consistently supported the work of the EYV Alliance and called for a White Paper, which would set out specific proposals and actions for the future.

In addition, it is important for the EESC to be actively involved in implementing the European Citizens’ Initiative, introduced under the Lisbon Treaty, and due to come into force in April 2012. This measure means that a minimum of 1 million European citizens, from at least one-quarter of Member States, will be able to call on the European Commission to put forward new legislation on an issue that concerns them. A citizens’ committee made up of seven EU citizens or more, in at least seven different countries, will have one year to collect certified statements of support. The Commission then has three months to examine the initiative and decide how to act. As Luca Jahier, from Italy, points out, the Committee is the EU’s institutional platform for dialogue with organised civil society, and the European Citizens’ Initiative is a further tool to enable citizens to make their voice heard in Brussels. Members have an opportunity to raise the profile of their work, helping to foster a true European identity.

There are many outstanding examples of active citizenship waiting for you in this book. We hope you will enjoy reading about them. In the meantime, we on the EESC will continue working to promote active citizenship in the EU, one of our core tasks, because without active citizenship there can be no citizens’ Europe.



Anna Maria Darmanin

EESC Vice-President, President of the Communication Group

Comité économique et social européen
Economic and Social Committee



EESC members talk about their active citizenship initiatives

Giving back to society

Pedro Augusto Almeida Freire



Pedro Augusto Almeida Freire has devoted most of his adult life to founding and participating in a large number of associations. And through it, he has accumulated a vast array of skills and expertise in trade, commerce, and education – skills that he now shares with his university students and with his former colleagues. He collaborated on a book, *The Code of Ethics*, on active ethics for commerce in Portugal. It was an endeavour, he says, that took a lot of patience, spending a considerable amount of time interviewing and discussing the subject with various stakeholders. The book is now part of the university curriculum.

“As Vice-President of the Confederation of Portuguese Commerce and Services, I am involved in lots of activities. I give expertise and counsel which take up quite a bit of my time. It is a contribution to society,” he says, adding that the unfortunate victims are his family, who do not see enough of him. “One-third of my time is for me, one-third I give back to society, to other people, and this is true as well for my activities in general,” he explains. The rest is for his family.

He is a member of several associations in Portugal. He sits on the management board of Lisbon’s School of Commerce and is a member of the National Education Council. Higher education puts him in immediate contact with a lot of young people, who hold the key to Portugal’s future. He sees to it, as internship coordinator at the University of Lusophone Humanities and Technologies, that young people get a decent start on a career path. But their futures are not always guaranteed. Few companies are hiring and many remain unemployed despite years of education.

In his EESC opinion on the ‘Retail market and monitoring report’ published in January 2011, Mr Almeida Freire writes that the risk of long-term unemployment remains high because the current financial crisis has “triggered closure, restructurings, mergers and take-overs of commercial activities across Europe”. For instance, the top five grocery retailers made up more up than 70% of the market in 2005. The near monopoly has negative knock-on effects on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

SMEs, according to Mr Almeida Freire's opinion, "play a fundamental role in terms of employment, value creation as well as life of rural areas and city centres". In these moments of financial hardship, active citizenship becomes even more important.

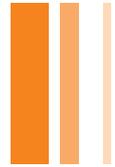
Sharing knowledge

"Active citizenship in my opinion means taking responsibility for our own destiny. We cannot just let the government decide everything for us. It is important that when we develop certain skills that we also use them for the benefit of society," says Mr Almeida Freire. At the Lusophone University of Humanities and Technologies, where he also teaches as a visiting professor, he often discusses his experiences with his students.

The textbooks provide valuable facts and knowledge he explains. But his experiences supplement this knowledge. The students, as a result, become more interested and engaged in the subject. "I tell the students about some key decisions in Portugal where I was involved. My students like to hear about what really happened," he says, adding that he has, for instance, negotiated on national social security issues. "Students prefer classes where we discuss these experiences more than what is written in the textbooks."

Taking control over one's own destiny may indeed be a form of active citizenship. But so is being a professor, explains Mr Almeida Freire. Sharing knowledge, sharing skills, and helping young people to get a better chance in life takes dedication, time and a real desire to make a difference – not only for Portugal, but for Europe.

"Active citizenship in my opinion means taking responsibility for our own destiny."



New rights are worth defending

Andrzej Adamczyk



Andrzej Adamczyk (third from left)

“Active citizenship is very important. It’s vital to be engaged in the things you think matter, to improve your life and the lives of others, and to make the world a better place to live in. It means understanding what rights you have and what role you can play; using those rights and being involved in activities.”

Andrzej Adamczyk understands as well as anyone the value of his civil rights. As a trade union activist under the Communist regime in Poland, he took an integral part in his country’s struggle

for democracy. His union, Solidarnosc, was a key player in the transformation of the country. “Just that might be enough,” he reflects. “But now I am engaged in the work of the EESC. So it goes beyond the national level to the European level, which is especially appealing to me and to the Polish public. Poland is one of the most enthusiastic nations in the EU. This involvement means that I believe in trade unionism and in European integration. I believe it’s useful not only for Poland but for Europe as a whole.”

Mobilisation

Mr Adamczyk argues that it is more important than ever, in the recent crisis, to be involved in the European movement. The European Union should be seen as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Solidarnosc started in 1980. “Everybody mobilised,” he remembers. “There was a lot of enthusiasm. Ten million people were involved in the movement. Then after it was banned, in December 1981, I was still active – nothing special, but things like distributing leaflets, which of course

was completely illegal!" After the union was legalised once more in 1989, Mr Adamczyk started working first as a Solidarnosc press officer, and then in the international relations department.

"When the whole transformation started in 1989, one of the slogans repeated most often was: 'We belong to Europe'. Everybody understood that our place is within the European community. We were somewhat disappointed because it took rather longer than we expected!" But in 1989, nobody could foresee that the whole Eastern bloc would collapse, he points out. With a long list of new countries waiting to join, the accession process was a lengthy one. "But maybe it was good," he adds, "because we had the time and we used it to prepare better for membership."

An end to scepticism

Many events are taking place to mark Poland's first EU Presidency in 2011, and they are well covered by Polish media, he says. But citizens' active support is due more to the changes that have taken place in Poland since 1 May 2004. "People can see them – especially when you look at the infrastructure that is developing. Poland was not hit by the crisis as badly as other countries. People live relatively well and they know that – they know that it is linked to our membership of the EU. Before accession there were fears that agriculture would collapse, that land would be bought up by people from other countries, that prices would rise quickly ... but nothing happened. In fact the farmers benefited most. Now the scepticism has virtually disappeared."

Mr Adamczyk's activities now focus mainly on international relations, through the International Trade Union Confederation and organisations like the ILO, the IMF and World Bank. "We have lots of contacts with trade unions in Eastern Europe, especially in countries where they are under pressure, like Belarus. We try to support them – we did the same in Russia and Ukraine. And we have regular contact with trade unions in Georgia. They have similar problems to the ones we had in Poland in the past."

"It's vital to be engaged in the things you think matter, to improve your life and the lives of others, and to make the world a better place to live in."



A healthy economy

Milena Angelova



The long-term consequences of Bulgaria's large informal economy are dire. Sometimes referred to as the grey economy, it operates beyond legal structures and jurisdiction. Valuable tax revenue required to build much-needed infrastructure, fund social programmes, and kick-start a damaged economy is simply lost. The most affected are all too often the most vulnerable.

"Without active citizenship, the phenomenon of the informal economy will continue to operate to the detriment of every individual citizen and the state as a whole," says EESC member Milena Angelova. Active citizenship in Bulgaria is essential for the country's development. People are understandably concerned about their future. Young people often have difficulty finding secure employment upon graduation and are forced to explore other avenues of income. The situation leads to a vicious circle, yet people implicitly understand that a large informal economy creates barriers and obstacles which work to the detriment of society.

Removing those barriers is a task Ms Angelova dedicates her life to. The widespread informal economy engenders criminal activity. The loss in tax revenue is evident. But the associated criminal network places additional burdens on a state already struggling with high unemployment and low wages.

Better business, better society

Ms Angelova is the Secretary-General of the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association (BICA). BICA acts as a moderator in the negotiations between social partners and businesses. Its principal aim is to represent employers' organisations on the national level and help foster the competitiveness

of Bulgarian businesses on the global market. Creating a proper business environment that respects regulations has positive knock-on effects for society as a whole.

“One of our goals is to improve the socio-economic environment,” she says. “We can do this by reducing and preventing the informal economy and by improving working conditions.”

People with contracted jobs have guaranteed rights. They pay into a pension; they pay into a health-care system and, when they need it, the state provides services to guarantee their well-being. A healthy society means rooting out corruption and promoting equal rights. It also entails getting people a proper education, improving labour conditions, and guaranteeing social security and a decent income. At its core, BICA and Ms Angelova’s work is about people.

“We conducted numerous surveys, interviews and research with over 4 000 people from a number of different sectors.”



Understanding the informal economy

Indeed, for the past few years BICA has been working on a long-term project to shed light on Bulgaria’s informal economy. Its goal is to restrict and prevent Bulgaria’s informal economy from expanding. Getting results and understanding how the informal economy operates requires engaging people from all walks of life.

“We conducted numerous surveys, interviews and research with over 4 000 people from a number of different sectors, as well as over 650 companies. Apart from this, we get calls from hundreds of citizens on a designated hotline. They provide us with valuable information on the informal economy,” says Ms Angelova. So far, the research indicates that Bulgaria’s informal economy thrives in tourism, infrastructure construction, health care and milk processing. Finding solutions requires reaching out to people, finding their concerns, and providing tailored solutions.

A mirror to society

Laure Batut



Laure Batut says she has been a militant trade unionist all her professional life. In the 1980s, she left the French customs service to start working for the union movement, and is now focusing on European Union and international relations within her organisation the CGT-FO. It is through her union work that she expresses her commitment to active citizenship.

One of her most important duties was training trade union members to understand and participate in the EU. "As a senior customs officer I was already closely involved in European issues because the customs union was one of the first aspects of European unity to become a reality," she points out. From 1985 to 2004, Force Ouvrière ran two-week seminars each year on the EU and the trade unions' role within it.

There has been a long history of Europe-wide trade union activity, ever since the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951. "All our activists, young and old, should be aware of and understand that history," explains Ms Batut, "so as to know what position to take. That was one of my tasks, and it was a pleasure for me, because the EU was the first model of international political solidarity in the twentieth century."

Comparing experiences

She made a point of inviting trade unionists from other countries to take part in the seminars, hosting guests from Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy and the UK. She also called on attachés from different embassies in Paris to come and speak about social rights in their own countries, enabling French trade unionists to compare their own experiences. "Those moments were

memorable," she adds, "because our members saw a stranger arrive, but by the time they left they had become a friend, sharing the same problems.

"I don't know how to evaluate the benefits," admits Ms Batut. But she believes that by the end of the sessions participants had a full knowledge of the EU. In the past there used to be a great deal of demand for such courses, because nobody else offered them – neither schools nor workplaces, anywhere in Europe. "Frankly, anyone who wants to be a European citizen has to be self-taught, wherever they are," she says, "and I have confirmed that with my colleagues."

Some of her activities drew in people from France's overseas territories. "They were even more demanding – because they were even more interested in the topic. For many years they had a favourable attitude towards Europe. But then with the Treaty of Lisbon and the reorientation of the EU towards economic growth, neglecting social Europe, people turned away. We don't run information courses any more because there is no demand."

"Active citizenship is always a plus, and I think the digital society will help develop it."



A growing disillusionment

Trade unions are a mirror of European society, she points out, representing all professions, young and old, women and men; so decision-makers should pay attention to their views. Now, especially since the crisis, she senses a deep unease among members, who feel their opinions are no longer listened to. "Governments don't want the EU any more," she argues. "They want intergovernmental relations. But that doesn't motivate people."

Ms Batut says she made good use of European funds in the past, to produce information on women's rights, for example, but now these too are harder to obtain. NGOs and trade unions need small subsidies for their activities, but the EU is only interested in funding large projects, so the ETUC has taken over management of budgets.

"Active citizenship is always a plus, and I think the digital society will help develop it," she believes. Through the internet, citizens will increasingly be able to set their own agenda, rather than accepting "top-down" policies. But people need better digital training in order to benefit fully from the opportunities.

European integration at stake

Jean Monnet wrote: "We are not forming coalitions of states, we are uniting peoples!" But after more than 50 years of constructing Europe, one can see that his recommendations have not been followed. The feeling of a common European identity is very vague. There are neither European media, nor channels of cultural exchange, nor real mobility for young people other than students. Active European Union citizenship is therefore still an illusion today, as can be seen by the falling numbers of voters in European elections. At stake is the survival and the future of European integration. That's why I call on the EESC to take up the challenge of European identity and put forward concrete plans to make Europe more visible, meaningful and effective for citizens. That is the aspiration I would like to give the EESC for the coming years.

Henri Malosse

President of the Employers' Group of the EESC



A manager, a soldier, a professor

Pietro Francesco De Lotto



Throughout most of his adult life, Pietro Francesco De Lotto has been engaged in active citizenship. It is more than just a duty, he says, adding that the value of active citizenship remains unfortunately largely underestimated in Europe. "It is difficult to adequately measure the social activity of people," he says. But for Mr De Lotto, the experiences and the people he has met and will continue to meet through his activities are of immeasurable value. "It is the most enriching thing in my life," he says of active citizenship. "There is nothing that could surpass it professionally," he adds smiling broadly.

A hard work ethic

He is a manager, a university professor and a soldier. For the past 25 years he has taught International Economics at the University of Trieste. For the past four and half years, he has been an officer in the all-volunteer Italian Army reserve. And today, he is the Managing Director of Confartigianato Vicenza, an association that represents and protects small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the northern Italian region of Veneto. At its heart, the association, which was founded after the Second World War, espouses values that promote work, well-being and quality of life. Hard work and dedication, encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship, are its basis. Indeed, the region already benefits from an ingrained sense of entrepreneurship that encompasses traditional economic sectors with export-oriented products. Social cohesion binds the whole. And so it should: Veneto is Italy's third richest region in terms of total GDP.

A region devastated by floods

Mr De Lotto believes that the sense of solidarity is deeply rooted in the Italian psyche. "There are so many people in Italy who believe in solidarity,"

he explains. "As humans, it enables us to grow to become more active." Such solidarity is especially accentuated in times of crisis. When people suffer, perfect strangers help either directly or through donations. Mr De Lotto has seen such solidarity in action – even in his own region.

"I believe in personal engagement. I believe the dimension of the European Union could grow with a new social ideal for all people."

Last November, floods ravaged the Veneto region destroying thousands of acres of farmland. Agriculture in the region is one of Italy's most productive. But more than 150 000 livestock perished in the disaster and vegetable and fruit crops were submerged. Many farmers watched in horror as their livelihoods were literally swept away. In the immediate aftermath, Mr De Lotto and his association worked with the Red Cross to organise local groups who then helped those most affected. The work was gruelling. But eventually, people began to regain and rebuild their lives.

Reaching out to the world

But such actions are not limited to Veneto, or the rest of Italy. For the past two years Mr De Lotto and his association have also organised intensive international training seminars on human rights and creating and building SMEs. Many of these take place in Guatemala and Madagascar, areas where civil duty and active citizenship are just as vital.

"I believe in personal engagement. I believe the dimension of the European Union could grow with a new social ideal for all people," he adds. Mr De Lotto joined the European Economic and Social Committee in September 2010. Fluent in both English and French, he is a member of Group I where he specialises in the single market, production and consumption as well as external relations. He also worked on the recent EESC opinion on EU counter-terrorism policy.

A knighted volunteer

Sir Stuart Etherington



In June of last year, Queen Elizabeth II knighted Sir Stuart Etherington in recognition of his work supporting active citizenship. His commitment to the community, youth, and civil society empowers people to engage in activities that benefit all in society. Along with this commitment comes hard work and dedication, not only for the marginalised youth he works with at London's University of Greenwich, but also for the arts.

He is fond of the classics, of ancient Greek theatre in particular. He recalls having seen a performance by a small Greek theatre company in London. Captivated by what he had seen on stage, Sir Stuart sent

them a small donation. Eventually, he became the chair of the company's inner circle of supporters. Through their contributions and fund-raising activities, the young company is able to survive and stage politically charged classics like Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* or Euripides' *Medea*.

Classical Greek theatre – an education for all

"I am fascinated by classical Greek theatre. Unfortunately there is very little of it in London," says Sir Stuart. The company modernises the plays and performs them at schools where young students get to discover their typically twisted plots. "Art is right on the margins," says Sir Stuart, who is also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a member of the Dickens Society. "But these performances at schools bring along to it an educational appeal for the young people."

Such activities are key to his vision of active citizenship as vital to the future of building democracy. "Mature stable democracies remain stable and mature by listening to what people are saying. Young people now form a social engagement which empowers them in and outside work," he explains.

Speaking to young people

At the University of Greenwich he runs a social inclusion programme to help students from minorities find their way along a path that is too often littered with unjust obstacles. He spends a lot of his time there speaking to young people, especially those who can no longer afford to attend university.

"To keep Europe alive we need to see a link between active citizenship and political engagement."



For him, the demonstrations by students throughout the country against planned spending cuts for higher education and an increase in tuition fees is testimony of the human will to face down challenges and hope for a better future. "To keep Europe alive we need to see a link between active citizenship and political engagement," says Sir Stuart. At the university, "there is a strong ethos in engaging students to be active in volunteering", he notes, adding that such activities are often where they learn civic engagement. "It is where they become more active citizens."

As Chief Executive of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), Sir Stuart has an inside expertise on active citizenship. The NCVO is the largest umbrella body for the voluntary community sector in England. Their vision is to empower people to make positive differences in their communities in the areas of well-being, social cohesion, climate change and financial security. They represent 8 400 voluntary organisations and provide them with a diverse range of services from funding to volunteer management.

They also publish an annual almanac that draws together trends, facts, and statistics relating to the voluntary sector. The *Civil Society Almanac* aims to help inform and shape contemporary public policy on civil society. In the latest issue, Sir Stuart makes a strong reference to active citizenship, which he describes as a "foundation of participation" and thus an ongoing priority for NCVO's public policy work.

An impact on society

Benedicte Federspiel



"I normally work long hours, and at weekends as well, but it's my choice!" Benedicte Federspiel is a lawyer with the Danish Consumer Council in Copenhagen. Combining a busy, full-time job with her duties in the EESC leaves her little time when she's not being active – and that she spends with family. It's a way of life.

Denmark's Consumer Council, set up in 1947, is the oldest in Europe. After 40 years in the post – 20 of them as director – she knows the organisation inside out. "Younger staff come to me to ask for information and advice," she notes.

As an independent body with a staff of around 100, plus 83 000 individuals and more than 25 organisations in membership, the Council has a powerful voice in a small country like Denmark.

"We are heard on everything of relevance to citizens and consumers. We cover all the topics: food, medicines, financial services, chemicals, telecoms, energy, data protection ... The consumer sector touches almost all aspects of life." Members range from green campaigners to educational organisations to elderly people. "Through all our activities we are reaching out to ordinary citizens and helping them to help themselves."

Taking things further

The Council has some 400 voluntary 'market agents' who monitor product and service providers at local level. It also coordinates a survey panel, polling 3 000 people all over the country. It receives a huge volume of general queries and complaints, and works with the finance, real estate and travel industries on joint bodies that deal with individual grievances. "We can do something to take people's problems and complaints further, for example to parliament, the consumer ombudsman, or asking TV broadcasters to take them up," explains Ms Federspiel.

Much of her work relates to the EU, which regulates the single market. She is a past president of the European consumers' organisation, BEUC, and of ANEC, which defends consumer interests in standardisation setting. When it comes to implementing EU legislation, "We talk to politicians and lobby them to vote for what is good for consumers. We try to give the consumer opinion on everything that might end up as legislation in Brussels, and we say when draft Directives are not good enough or need to be revised. In Denmark, it is accepted that politicians should hear all points of view, be it from industry or consumers. That is part of a democracy," she argues.

"We can empower consumers to some extent, but we also have to protect them. We can't all be smart. How do people understand whether an ingredient is potentially dangerous?" Two magazines, on general consumer advice and on financial matters, publish tests on products and services. "We have to have experts to argue each case – you cannot just have nice well-meaning people. We have to base our arguments on evidence, and be professional."

"It's too weak to sit back and say 'Everything's going in the wrong direction.'"

The Council performs a vital function in Danish society, insists Ms Federspiel. "Our impact is huge." Staff answer hundreds of requests from ministries, or help MPs to draw up proposals, pointing out areas which will improve the lot of consumers. "I get quite exhausted thinking of all the things we are doing!" she smiles.

Don't just sit back

The Council also has a high media profile, regularly approached by journalists for its point of view. "We are a voice they need to hear. But a lot is about trust. If we were to lose trust, or publish something that is not thought through, we would disqualify ourselves.

"If you want to live in a society where you can say 'I have done my bit', it's important to be actively doing something. It's too weak to sit back and say 'Everything's going in the wrong direction'.

"I chose to go into consumer affairs because I thought it was so interesting, and I still do!" Topics are changing all the time, she explains, bringing in new challenges – such as nanotechnology, privacy, and the digital world. "There are no limits."

Midwife to the rebirth of active civil society

Mall Hellam



Mall Hellam (centre)

The Soviet occupation of Estonia after the Second World War came to an abrupt end on 20 August 1991. Having lived under repressive Soviet rule for 50 years, an anxious population awaited its liberation.

Estonia had already declared its independence from Russia and established its statehood once in 1918. But the country was forced back into the iron Soviet grip in 1940. Today, 20 August is recognised as Estonia's Re-Independence Day.

Soviet tanks

EESC member Mall Hellam, along with her compatriots from the Estonian Hungarian Society (Mall Hellam graduated from the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest), had gathered to celebrate Hungarian National Day over 20 years ago.

"There was a lot of tension in the air, the putsch in Moscow had begun and the tanks were moving towards Tallinn," reminisces Ms Hellam. "People had no idea of what was going to happen and many of us felt that the 'beacon light' we had seen emerging would disappear once again." A new future was about to unfold whereby civil society and active citizenship could once again flourish.

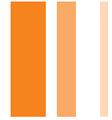
As the Soviet tanks slowly advanced on the city, Ms Hellam and her colleagues wrote a letter addressed to a number of foreign embassies. In it, they proclaimed that Estonia would never again succumb to totalitarian dictatorship. "We began our letter with the words of the famous Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi. The first line of his poem is Rise up, Magyar, the country calls!"

The events had a profound effect on her. Ten years later, she helped build a strategy for the nascent Estonian civil society.

Nascent civil society

In the beginning, there was only a handful of civic organisations. As the years went by, more and more emerged. Open Estonia Foundation, led by Ms Hellam since 1990, has done a great deal to achieve that. Together with her colleagues she helps build and shape civil society and to display joint solidarity with NGOs which continue to struggle elsewhere. By 2007, they had established the first joint manifesto of Estonian NGOs.

“Active citizens have the power to influence all the decisions that influence us.”



“Gathering together a few enthusiastic people and renovating a bus stop for people in the Northern Estonian fishing village of Käsmu is a small example of something what can be done for your community,” she says. In 2004, she went to Kiev to support her Ukrainian friends who had gathered at Majdan Square in the immediate aftermath of the presidential election. “My Ukrainian friends, standing up for democracy and values that characterise the open society, considered it very important that during the presidential elections their friends from Estonia showed their support,” Ms Hellam explains.

For the past 20 years, Ms Hellam has been running the Estonian-Hungarian society, which brings together people who have or once had relations with Hungary. “Those people have been and still are very much in love with that country and its people, culture and literature. Every year we celebrate Hungarian national holidays and try to give advice and information to those who want to know more about Hungary,” she says, adding that 20 August is also Saint Stephen’s Day in Hungary when the country was founded a millennium ago.

Ms Hellam’s personal commitment to a more just society is a reflection of the country’s troubled historic past. The freedom to engage and be active as a citizen is crucial at the level of policy-making. “Active citizens are able to hold government accountable and ensure they follow the rule of law,” she says.

In her office as executive director at the Open Estonia Foundation and one of the founders of the Estonian Network of Non-Profit Organisations in Tallinn, Ms Hellam continues to work for the development of an open and just society. The foundation of any democratic society relies on a vibrant active civil society and a citizenship that is engaged. “Active citizens have the power to influence all the decisions that influence us,” she concludes.

The personal and the public are the same

Evangelia Kekeleki



Evangelia Kekeleki (centre)

Defending the rights of Greek consumers is a full-time passion for Evangelia Kekeleki. She is the Secretary-General of the Greek Consumer Protection Centre (KEPKA), where her only reward is the satisfaction of seeing justice imposed on unscrupulous traders and business practices.

“People have a vague knowledge of their rights but don’t know how to enforce them,” she says. Ms Kekeleki recalls how one 75-year-old pensioner was unable to repay his credit-card debt. The bank took his entire pension and left him without any resources. “I called the bank manager and told him what he had done was against the law and to instead arrange to withdraw a small amount from the

pension but not the whole lot,” continues Ms Kekeleki. “The very next day the old man had his pension again,” she says, adding that the pensioner was overcome with tears of joy. “Of course, this success is based on the power of our organisation which, for the last 29 years, has become highly respected due to its credibility and independence.”

Exposing abuse has been an effective tactic, says Ms Kekeleki. It is a strategy she believes is the only really effective means of getting businesses to right their wrongs. Fortunately, most enterprises solve the problems without delay and conflict as soon as they realise that they have violated consumers’ rights.

Ancient Greek democracy revitalised

“Active citizenship is participation. If you are not active, you are not a citizen,” says Ms Kekeleki. Active citizenship, she explains, dates back to Athenian democracy where citizens had direct participation in society and governance. The word citizen incorporates the meaning of active. Those who

did not participate in society or attempt to influence the decisions taken on their behalf were looked down upon. Indeed, the Greek Constitution's last article states that the defence of democracy is in the hands of its people.

"If we participate in society then the public becomes ours. The personal and the public is the same and we need to view the public space like a house," she says.

A liberalising economy requires more consumer rights

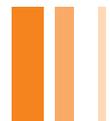
In today's Greece, making people more aware of their consumer rights is especially important. In some instances, companies which sell a defective product refuse to repair, replace, or refund it. "This practice changes completely when we step in," acknowledges Ms Kekeleki.

The liberalisation of the Greek economy means that the number of telecommunications providers has increased. As a result, consumers have more choices. "When the telecommunication sector was first liberalised we noticed that complaints tripled within a few months. We investigated and found out that the private new providers had entered the market but there was no regulation to protect consumers in this new era. So we pressed the national regulatory authority and we created an obligatory code of conduct. The complaints started decreasing soon after the code had been put in force."

KEPKA is a small organisation which depends largely on annual membership fees to survive. Yet last year they received over 13 000 consumer complaints. It is a tough charge to handle. "We accept complaints from any consumer. When we find a business that violates consumer rights and codes of conduct we pressure the government to create legislation, if it doesn't already exist, or to impose penalties to prevent the problem from occurring again."

Consumers need to know their rights in a constantly changing market. As a result, KEPKA holds seminars and information sessions at schools, from elementary to adult. The more people know, the better equipped they are to enforce their rights.

*"We need to view
the public space
like a house."*



"Consumers are always the weakest link in a transaction. Consumers need to be protected, trained and educated," says Ms Kekeleki. "My dream is that the motto of KEPKA will some day become a reality: I know my rights, I become conscious of my power as a consumer, I participate in a consumers' organisation, I am protected."

Just do it!

Waltraud Klasnic



“Deeds, not words” is the motto of Austrian EESC member Waltraud Klasnic. To her, that is what active citizenship means: “Don’t just talk about it, do it!”

A resident of Graz, for 10 years Ms Klasnic served as the elected governor (*Landeshauptmann*) of the Austrian federal state of Styria, followed by eight years as deputy leader. But retirement from politics in 2005 opened up a new horizon of social engagement.

“I have two main commitments,” she says. Her first task is as president of a national umbrella organisation of more than 250 hospice and palliative care services for terminally ill and dying patients and their families. The second equally challenging work is supporting the victims of child abuse.

A network of carers

The aim of the non-profit-making Hospice Austria (Dachverband Hospiz Österreich) is to improve the quality of life for terminally ill people and their families, and to raise awareness about incurable diseases, death and dying among the public, media and politicians. It also provides information and counselling on ‘living wills’, which are an expression of self-determination.

It organises a multi-professional Master’s programme in palliative care at university level in collaboration with the private Paracelsus Medical University and St Virgil in Salzburg. It also promotes dialogue between medical, nursing, counselling, psychosocial and other relevant professions. It develops quality standards for hospice and palliative care work across Austria, including for elderly people and terminally ill children. The national organisation supports 700 people working full-time across Austria’s nine federal states (*Länder*). And over the last decade it has recruited more than 3000 volunteers, who receive 70 hours training to enable them to go

into homes, hospitals and nursing homes, and provide palliative care and support. “Every year they are joined by hundreds more around the country,” says Ms Klasnic.

As head of the organisation, she is involved in liaising with the Austrian government, disseminating information, fundraising, and coordinating activities.

Redress for victims

Ms Klasnic also plays a pivotal role in the victim protection organisation Opferschutz Anhaltschaft. “As in other countries, there have been many victims of abuse in the Catholic church in Austria,” she explains. Even though 80% of child abuse takes place within the family, more than 1 000 victims have come forward in recent years to testify to mistreatment by priests and clerics, not just in the Catholic faith but all church organisations. In some cases, the offences date back as far as 50 or 60 years. “There must be others who don’t dare to reveal what they have suffered,” she adds.

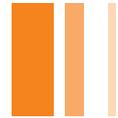
On the invitation of a Catholic cardinal, in April 2010 she stepped in and helped to set up an independent commission. Made up of lawyers, doctors and other professionals, it deals with claims for compensation and with psychological and practical support. “I am the bridge between the commission and the victims,” she explains.

City of human rights

Born during the Second World War, Ms Klasnic started work when she was 14 years old. “We had no money,” she recalls. After her marriage, she and her husband launched a transport business. Now she has three children and five grandchildren. Coming from Graz, which is known as Europe’s first ‘city of human rights’, she says it is natural for her to work through the EESC and its Communications Group to try to give greater prominence to the role of organised civil society in Europe. “Its role is not normally as visible as it should be,” she argues.

Ms Klasnic explains her commitment in simple terms. “Helping people helps me as well, it makes me happy,” she affirms. “I am healthy, and I am able to do it, and I would like to carry on for another 20 years, God willing! I have always been active: unless I’m doing something, I feel I don’t exist. It’s good to have that frame of mind.”

“Helping people helps me as well, it makes me happy.”



Europe needs militant citizens

With regard to “active citizenship”, I think firstly of all those people everywhere who have been treated unjustly, persecuted or even killed because they were involved in the trade union movement. It is essential for people to be able to unite, especially as workers, and to be heard.

Any form of organisation is without meaning if its sole concern is not human beings, citizens, people. The sole aim of the European Union itself is to “promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples”. Unfortunately, as “active” citizens, we regularly have to take to the streets in tens of thousands to remind and call on political decision makers to stop the speculators who are taking millions of people hostage.

To overcome injustice, exploitation, instability, poverty and destitution, a genuine social Europe must, at last, be created whose sole concern is its citizens. To this end, we must be more than “active citizens”: we must be “militant citizens”, fighting for a European Union of solidarity, peace and prosperity for all.

Georgios Dassis

President of the Employees Group of the EESC



In search of broader horizons

Juan Mendoza



“Social tourism is not just an economic activity; it is about improving the quality of life,” says Juan Mendoza. His passion for the practice has grown since his first job in the hotel trade. Now, as a full-time trade unionist he uses his knowledge to promote an alternative form of tourism that offers new opportunities, for example, to young and older people, disabled travellers and disadvantaged families.

He refers to an expanding public interest in social tourism, and a changing image. “It’s for people who want to take part in cultural activities, in learning, and in really getting to know other countries,” he explains.

Some 50% of European citizens have still never been outside their own countries, points out Mr Mendoza. “To make progress towards a united Europe and forging a European personality, everybody agrees that citizens must be the protagonists. We need to develop tourist activities that help them to understand other countries and cultures – to know the richness of Europe, the history, the architecture, the gastronomy! There is a very important potential!”

Respect for local populations

Social tourism also touches on issues like sustainable transport, cultural innovation, defending the natural environment, and the quality of life in cities, he says. And it should entail respect for local populations, fostering understanding of their languages, their history and their origins.

Mr Mendoza belongs to the Spanish trade union the UGT and lives in Seville, but works in Brussels where he has been an EESC member since 1998, and a special adviser to the European Trade Union Confederation. He became active in the union as a workers’ representative in the hotel business, and now pursues his interest in social tourism through the Committee, as well as in his own union and in international contexts.

Social tourism is beneficial to both local and national governments, and the EU, he explains. As well as widening travel opportunities to people who cannot take advantage of standard holiday facilities, it promotes regional development and employment in the tourist industry, by making use of capacity in off-peak periods. The European Commission has been promoting it since 2008, and in 2009 launched its Calypso programme, investing €1 million a year in spreading good practice and opening up low-price, low-season opportunities.

Education for life

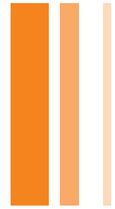
“Working in the tourist sector means that you have to be in contact with society,” adds Mr Mendoza. He is also involved in workers’ training, promoting lifelong learning, professional skills and adult education, which in turn can lead to more satisfying working lives.

He sees active citizenship as crucial to Europe’s future. “I think there is now an intellectual divergence between the economic powers and the social protagonists, in defining the future of the European model. They have two different ideas: economic and social,” he explains. “The economic view is that Europe must be one big market. But there is another idea, that Europe must be a political and social space, for people to share experiences, to work together, to show solidarity and to move forward in harmony. The EU needs to create a balance between economic and social policy.

“It’s important to get involved in society, to develop these ideas together and to empower citizens. The role of the trade unions is also very important, especially in the crisis. We have to find solutions to the problems it brings, and to propose alternatives.”

Working in tourism has confirmed Mr Mendoza’s ideas about the benefits of active participation in society. “When people arrive in a new country and they know something about the region, it helps them to enlarge their ideas, and gives them scope for communication and comprehension. And this also helps to promote peace.”

“It’s important to get involved in society, to develop these ideas together and to empower citizens.”



In the public interest

André Mordant



For André Mordant, the EESC's efforts to involve the wider public in its campaigns and activities are an outstanding example of active citizenship. The retired trade unionist, who was president of the Belgian FGTB before he joined the Committee in 2006, has been a strong supporter.

The first example he gives is the 'Save It!' campaign in 2009, which focused on energy conservation. Two young Austrian architects were behind the construction of the Pallet House, in a Brussels square. Using only old wooden pallets, the pair created two buildings, which because of their

energy and heat efficiency, could be particularly appropriate for use as schools or offices in hot countries. "It was a remarkable challenge," says Mr Mordant.

The Pallet House was designed to coincide with 'Global Overshoot Day' in September. That is the day of the year when the world's population has used up all the planet's available resources for the whole 12 months. "From that day onwards, we are consuming part of the future, because we have already exhausted our supplies for the year," explains Mr Mordant. "We held a number of meetings to explain the issues surrounding climate change, and many, many people came to see the Pallet House and to hear what we were saying."

Seeking alternatives

The second event, in 2010, was entitled 'Move It!' and focused on mobility. It featured a display of motorised bicycles, electric vehicles, and two-wheeled personal transporters (Segways). "We wanted to show that there are lots of ways of living differently. There was a fascinating exhibition about energy

economy and alternative means of transport."Visitors were invited to ride in 'tele-guided' driverless vehicles, and a motorised bike circuit illustrated how to get around easily in the city. "A lot of children came with their schools – it was very interesting," recalls Mr Mordant.

A third public activity, focusing on use of the internet and called 'Click It!', is taking place in Warsaw, Poland. "This way of approaching citizens is very effective," he concludes. "And because we have people who speak most EU languages, all members of the public can express themselves and be listened to."

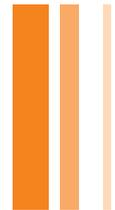
Founded on dialogue

André Mordant is also active in training activities, introducing the EESC to cross-sector audiences or groups of public service workers. "I explain the role of the Committee, its establishment more than 50 years ago, and the part it plays in social dialogue – which it also tries to promote on other continents, such as Latin America." Indeed, he believes strongly in dialogue, as a founding principle of the EU, and the essence of the EESC's *raison d'être*. But at present, he claims, Europe's social dialogue is under attack, with moves to bring bargaining between employers and unions down to workplace level, undermining solidarity between groups of workers. "The European trade union movement is in favour of an inter-professional system where the strongest support the weakest, so that everyone makes progress," he explains.

He gives the example of a recent seminar in Arlon, in the south of Belgium. "The participants had a very harsh view of Europe. Trade unionists used to be pro-EU, but now they question the way it is developing with regard to social rights, rights at work, and the freedom to negotiate. That makes them more and more sceptical, so debate is indispensable. It's important to get involved and open a dialogue with all the actors in society."

Mr Mordant has spent 45 years of his life promoting dialogue. "Today, I am still convinced that while Europe is not perfect, it is the only way to improve conditions for everyone. But Europe is losing the loyalty of its citizens, because it no longer assures equal opportunities for all, and that's very bad. Even if it's hard and we don't believe in it all the time, I am certain that we must continue to work actively within Europe."

"Today, I am still convinced that while Europe is not perfect, it is the only way to improve conditions for everyone."



Giving something back to your own community

Gintaras Morkis



The town of Plungė, 300 km from the Lithuanian capital Vilnius, has had a number of eminent citizens. But many have moved away in pursuit of their careers as politicians, business leaders, artists, musicians or doctors.

Gintaras Morkis is one of the founding members of the Plungiškių draugija, the Fellowship of Plungė citizens, which once a year brings together some of Plungė's best-known natives to undertake projects for the benefit of their home town. He is now on the Fellowship council, elected by fellow citizens.

"The organisation was set up in 1971, but at that time its activities were closely watched by Soviet officials," explains Mr Morkis, "so in 1975 it had to stop work." In 2003, after Lithuanian independence, it was revived and now has 130 active members. The Fellowship President, Dr Bronislovas Lubys, is a signatory of Lithuania's 1990 Independence Act, former Prime Minister and head of the Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists. He is the biggest donor to the town's activities, and also supports a kindergarten for disabled children. "Without his contribution it would be very difficult to expect any significant support," notes Mr Morkis.

Patron of young musicians

"This Fellowship does a lot for my home town and for its citizens." During the year, members organise events such as the Mykolas Oginskis classical music festival, or publish books about Plungė and its history and people. They encourage youngsters to get involved in exploring the town – offering prizes, including opportunities to travel within or outside Lithuania.

“The younger generation is being educated by example and shown how to keep in touch with their home town when they live somewhere else in the country, or abroad,” explains Mr Morkis.

“Some people have been away for many years, or they lived in exile in Siberia. Now they are back, and even if they live elsewhere, they are determined to serve their home town.” It is no coincidence that the Fellowship’s annual meeting marks the start of the Mykolas Oginskis festival in September. In the 19th century, Mykolas Oginskis was a patron of young musicians, and built a grand palace in Plungė. He also supported Lithuania’s greatest painter and composer, Mykolojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, who studied in the town. Nowadays, the Fellowship sponsors the music festival, and Vice-President Genovaitė Žiobakienė deals with organisational matters.

Plungė’s celebrated citizens include composers Juozas Domarkas and Stasys Domarkas, opera singer Giedrė Kaukaitė, jazz saxophonist Petras Vyšniauskas and cardiac surgeon Rimantas Benetis. Once a year, the Fellowship organises a special health day, with the backing of Prof. Juozas Pundzius, Director of Lithuania’s Kaunas clinics. “All the doctors work voluntarily to help the citizens of their home town to be healthier, to get high-quality advice and treatment if necessary,” says Mr Morkis.

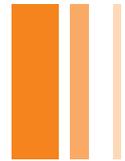
Participatory democracy

He himself helps the local business association to expand export opportunities by organising overseas missions and visits by foreign experts. In August this year, he was invited to talk to the annual meeting of the Fellowship about his activities within the EESC in Brussels.

As Deputy Director-General of the Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists, Mr Morkis is actively involved in defending the interests of large, medium-sized and small companies. “We take part in various structures, like the Tripartite Council of Lithuania, and we see this as a contribution to participatory democracy,” he explains.

On a more domestic level, he participates in the residents’ association of his apartment block. “Due to my exhaustive work for my organisation, and involvement in the work of the EESC, I don’t have much time for after-work activities,” admits Mr Morkis. But in the past he belonged to the local Rotary Club. “I was an active member of the group. It helped the community a lot.”

“The younger generation is being educated by example and shown how to keep in touch with their home town.”



A Spanish farmer in Brussels

Pedro Narro



The dry, open plains of Castilla-La Mancha in Spain are home to some of Europe's most cherished vineyards. Over half of Spain's wine comes from this region. It is farming country as well as the mythical setting of Miguel de Cervantes' celebrated *Don Quixote*.

It is also home to 33-year-old Pedro Narro and his family whose livelihoods have for generations largely depended on the industry. Both his brother and his father run the family vineyard. It was a path that Mr Narro could have followed, but he chose instead to represent the interests of these farmers, to engage them, and to help ensure a sustainable future for generations to come. That takes more than just professional commitment; it means spending time with people, discussing their concerns and listening.

"I, too, wanted to be an active farmer," he says. "But after about two or three years on the farm, I began to realise how important it is to be a part of an organisation at the local, national and EU level." Today, he is the manager of international affairs at ASAJA, the Spanish association for farmers. ASAJA is based in Brussels where Mr Narro now lives, although a large part of his time is spent in Spain. At least three times each month he goes to a different Spanish region and talks to farmers about the common agricultural policy (CAP) and the EESC's input.

"Farmers are far away from Brussels and think they are not affected by the decisions made here," explains Mr Narro, an EESC member who also authored the EESC own-initiative opinion 'The future of young farmers'. "I try to communicate with farmers about what is happening at the EU-level, how it affects them, but also about what the EU does in general." He's been doing it for the past 12 years.

Bridging distances

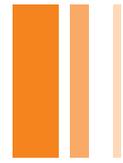
Reaching out to communicate and getting involved may be Mr Narro's duties at the ASAJA. But these tasks are also very much about active citizenship. He has seen and experienced life as a farmer in Castilla-La Mancha, Spain's third largest region. And although it lies in the country's heart, it remains one of its least populated. Perhaps therein expounds a sense of remoteness where life moves along with the seasons and the harvests.

"People live in rural areas. They are so distant and have a very local approach to dealing with issues. They are disconnected from Brussels," he says of the farmers in Castilla-La Mancha. To bridge the divide he also organises trips to Brussels. "The first time farmers come to Brussels they are completely lost. I understand their reactions, they are reluctant, are a bit afraid even," he adds. Eventually, they begin to see the concrete work being done in Brussels and the benefits. That includes discussing sustainability – a word that was only recently added to the Spanish dictionary, notes Mr Narro.

"Sustainability in farming is about passing new legislation on pesticides, about modernising water irrigation, better use of land, and improving the food chain." But it is also about getting young people to become farmers, he explains. Only 6% of all EU farmers are under 35. One in three is over 65 and nearly 5 million will retire in the next ten years.

"It is vital to become involved in society. It is vital to try to get young farmers involved in the organisation. We have created within our organisation tools just for young people. To get them involved as well and to ensure that Europe's agriculture has a sustainable future," he says. Being active is the foundation for his cause and, quite possibly, the future of European farming.

"It is vital to try to get young farmers involved in the organisation."



Make a wish come true

Michal Pintér



Michal Pintér and his children

Christmas is a magical time, and last year (2010), 270 children with impaired vision and from foster homes in Eastern Slovakia experienced that magic for themselves, thanks to the generosity of a local employer and volunteers.

Every December, the U.S. Steel company in Košice puts up a Christmas wishing tree, where disadvantaged children can leave a note to Santa Claus. But it is staff members who purchase and distribute the presents – anything from dolls to toy cars and building bricks.

“We do not push anybody to do it,” explains EESC member Michal Pintér, the firm’s Director of EU Affairs, who is personally involved in the scheme. “But since 2001, after U.S. Steel bought the local steel-making company, we have had a tradition of Christmas fund-raising during Advent.” Every year, many of the 13 000 workers donate money which is distributed among health centres, heart and cancer units, hospices, and other good causes. In 2010, 7 200 employees contributed. “Over the years we have donated thousands of euro,” he says.

The company also stages a Christmas concert for local children and disabled or disadvantaged people. “We have a huge Roma population in Košice,” explains Mr Pintér. Many of the beneficiaries – more than half – are Roma.

Part of the community

He is proud of his employer’s efforts. “We offer work to many local families and we want to be part of the community and to support them. This region is not very developed – there are lots of social problems and quite high unemployment. U.S. Steel is the biggest employer and probably the best example of corporate social responsibility in Eastern Slovakia. Some companies sell directly to the public, but we sell steel, so individuals are not our clients. We don’t gain anything except a good feeling.”

Every June, the firm organises a weekend entitled 'U.S. Steel Košice Volunteer Days', starting on the Friday, when staff donate blood. This is followed on Saturday by a charity collection of clothes and food for poorer families and homeless people, while hundreds of workers give up their time for projects ranging from building a playground for autistic children to cleaning out stables at the local zoo. "It's one of the biggest volunteering events in the region," notes Mr Pintér. "People enjoy it and they stay all day. The number of participants is going up." In 2011, it was organised in cooperation with the city authorities, and the local mayor and company director worked side by side.

With NGOs and clubs, the firm also supports sports activities as part of a 'play games, don't do drugs' campaign aimed at local teenagers. And for the Thanksgiving holiday, in November, U.S. Steel donates money to good causes through the American Chamber of Commerce in Slovakia.

"During the former regime we were not used to volunteering," admits Mr Pintér. "We were forced to do everything by the authorities." So the company has done a lot to raise local awareness of active citizenship. "Although we were not familiar with activities like this, we learned very quickly. It's not an obligation, but Slovakian people are very friendly and like to take part."

Environmental responsibility

Although a native of the Northern Slovakian city of Žilina, Michal Pintér is now based in the capital, Bratislava, where he is also a member of the National Union of Employers.

"I live in a small community," he says. "We organise special days when residents go out and clean up the environment." When he goes shopping with his four-year-old daughter Tamara, he explains to her why it is important to pick up litter. "We are the good people and we have to clean up the environment," he smiles. "If we don't, who else will? We cannot always rely on the government. I don't want to live in a landfill!"

"For me, recycling is a kind of active citizenship as well."



"In my neighbourhood, we have persuaded the council to give us bio-bags for organic waste, and to separate plastics and glass. For me, recycling is a kind of active citizenship as well."

Building alliances in pursuit of social justice

Oliver Röpke



Oliver Röpke (left)

“Our society, our democracy benefits from and depends on active citizenship. We need democratic institutions and we need elections, but to have a real democracy with the broadest participation of people, it’s necessary for people to engage, not only in unions but also in NGOs and political parties.”

Oliver Röpke, who runs the Brussels office of the Austrian trade union federation ÖGB, is a firm believer in channelling action through established structures. “I think it’s important to have a link between active citizenship and organisations like trade unions and parties,” he insists. So it is no surprise that his own contribution to active citizenship is made through his work.

“The most important activity at present, from my point of view, is our struggle for

the introduction of a Financial Transaction Tax (FTT). We have tried over the last two years to push this idea forward in the EU, and to involve many other stakeholders.” This led to the launch of campaigning and lobbying at both European and Member State level.

“We have been building alliances,” explains Mr Röpke. “We are trying to reach not only our members, but also parts of civil society who are not so close to the labour unions. We are in the Europeans for Financial Reform campaign, which involves unions, political parties and NGOs. It lobbies mainly for the FTT, but also for the effective regulation of financial markets.”

A three-stage campaign

In Austria, a major launch event was held two years ago in Vienna. “We invited both European and national stakeholders and politicians, and since then we

have taken part in a number of activities.” A three-stage political campaign focused first on the European Parliament, with a petition to members urging them to vote in favour of the tax. “Several hundred thousand e-mails have been sent to MEPs,” he reports. Further lobbying took place around the European Commission’s public consultation, and the third stage got under way before the European Council met in summer 2011, urging people to address their demands directly to their heads of state and government. Within the last year, the campaigners launched an internet platform where users from civil society can register their support for the FTT.

“From my point of view, it would be an important step forward,” argues Mr Röpke. “It would help to regulate financial markets, and to get more revenues for public spending, public services, social measures and the struggle against poverty.

Lessons from the crisis

“We have had a favourable response to the campaign,” he adds. “Most of the reactions have been quite positive, partly because of people’s experience of the financial situation. There’s a kind of consensus that the FTT would be an instrument for more social justice, but at the same time it would also represent a lesson we should learn from the crisis.

“I won’t say I am optimistic, but I welcome the fact that for the first time, it seems, the Commission and some Member States now advocate the introduction of an FTT. But we have to wait for concrete proposals. We should think already about the next steps, if the Commission’s proposal does not get a majority. One possibility would be for one group of countries to come together and introduce it, but we would prefer the whole EU, or at least the euro zone. That could be one solution.”

Mr Röpke, who worked for the Chamber of Labour in Vienna before joining the trade union movement, is a member of the Austrian Social Democratic Party and vice-chair of its Brussels section. “I am in favour of participative democracy,” he explains, “but often you find that young people want to engage but don’t want to join political parties. I think we should use these traditional institutions. They have a value and are really important for a democratic society.”

“I think it’s important to have a link between active citizenship and organisations like trade unions and parties.”



The European Citizens' Initiative – an opportunity to be seized

What is active citizenship and why is it important? These questions are at the centre of our concept of civic engagement and of participatory democracy, and in the EU, more than 100 million of our citizens are engaged in one aspect of active citizenship, namely: volunteering. This contributes to a more cohesive, productive and creative society which complements the state and the private sector.

In Europe, active citizenship has been reinforced by the Treaty of Lisbon which establishes structures for participation and dialogue between citizens, organised civil society, and the EU's Institutions. One key element of this dialogue is the European Citizens' Initiative. As the European Economic and Social Committee was created to be the formal platform for dialogue between European organised civil society, it is now up to it to seize this opportunity, to become a focal point for civil society in order to ensure that the European Citizens' Initiative does indeed contribute to a European citizenship and European identity!

Luca Jahier

President of the Various Interests Group of the EESC



Learning to move mountains

Madi Sharma



“It’s not the politicians who make a difference in the world, it is people at the grass roots who want to remedy an injustice or improve a situation. But many of them don’t know how to take the first step,” says Madi Sharma.

As a successful entrepreneur running a series of businesses in the UK and India, Ms Sharma is convinced that with self-belief and the right know-how, people themselves can actively improve their lives and their environment. “It’s what I call

valuing our human capital in society,” she explains. “If you can capture the human capital you can really move mountains.”

Ms Sharma’s contribution to strengthening active citizenship focuses first of all on teaching entrepreneurship in schools and communities in deprived areas and developing countries. “Many of these people are written off by society,” she says. “Through entrepreneurship we develop their skills and help them to contribute. Most importantly, we need our young people to be active citizens, because this is their world and they need to be involved in decision-making.”

A helping hand

She points to the “huge challenges” she has faced in her own life. As a single mother and victim of domestic violence, her first business venture was a failure. “But there has always been somebody to pick me up and help me to the next step. If I can do that for someone else, that’s my purpose.”

An EESC member since 2002, she has progressed from being an “unknown” in the British city of Nottingham – “an area of great opportunity but also of great deprivation” – to being part of the decision-making process in Europe. “If I can do it, so can others,” she declares. “To me, that’s what active

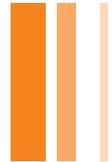
citizenship is. As Ghandi said, you must be the change you want to see. It's about giving people the tools to believe in themselves and make their voices heard."

The groups Ms Sharma works with include Tibetan refugees. "There are young students who have walked for thousands of miles in the snow, without shoes and with no food, leaving their parents behind. It's part of the fight against human rights abuses. Once they get here they can start telling about these abuses, but they cannot do it unless they believe they can make a difference. That's why I choose to work with those facing the greatest challenges, because the rewards are so enormous and can be clearly seen.

"I've received hundreds of e-mails saying thank you, but it's not about that. I am fortunate to be well connected and focused on action, and so together we can make things happen. But seeing the smile on someone's face is enough, and that can inspire somebody else. It's the knock-on effect of citizenship. It costs us nothing to share a contact, for example, but some of us are so protective of our networks, so suspicious..."

One of her businesses is engaged in education in entrepreneurship, but Ms Sharma also goes into schools as a volunteer, or works with women who have suffered domestic violence or rape. A group of those women launched their own campaign for changes in UK law to offer greater protection to their children.

"We need our young people to be active citizens, because this is their world and they need to be involved in decision-making."



Ripples in a pool

She specifically recalls teaching 65 orphans of the civil war in Burundi. "Those students all had a commitment to make change in their lives. They are my driving force to support Africa's development.

"It's like a pebble in a pool of water. If you do something, you will inspire others to act, but if you sit and do nothing, how can you expect anybody else to? We have one planet, and it's about working together."

Young people and women are not yet adequately involved in decision-making, at all levels, she warns. "That's a major mistake. We have millions of young unemployed people, but nobody is talking to them. Women and young people need to be out there leading. That's what will make the change."

A million voices

Anne-Marie Sigmund



The foundation of any democracy is its people. For Europe, the opportunity to have a direct impact on what happens in Brussels is now a reality. A million voices, a million signatures can compel the European Commission to take a hard look at issues raised by ordinary citizens throughout the EU. Introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, the European Citizens' Initiative is a tool Anne-Marie Sigmund describes with some pride. And no wonder – because she helped to shape it.

“The European Citizens' Initiative enshrines, for the first time in history, a direct cross-border, transnational democratic procedure,” says Ms Sigmund, who wrote the EESC opinion ‘The implementation of the Lisbon Treaty: participatory democracy and the Citizens' Initiative’. The initiative is a milestone for the EU and a tool that gives citizens of several countries a transnational right of participation.

Direct democracy was first introduced by the Greeks in 5th century BC Athens. But no nation or region has ever given people with different citizenships the right to petition for a common cause. “A society without active citizens does not exist,” says Ms Sigmund. Active citizenship in Europe is no longer confined to simple borders. The cross-border nature of the initiative, she hopes, will help foster a true European identity that to this day is proving elusive. She also hopes it will compel more people to take charge of their own destinies. “It is up to us to use the tool. We cannot just wait and be afraid. That would be the worst thing to do.”

Taking control

Europe is wrestling with major issues. In some Member States, young people are finding it difficult to get work. In all Member States, immigrants and marginalised people suffer discrimination. Apathy, lack of perspective, or unfair obstacles prevent some from participating in their communities. But a strong democracy has to be able to deal with a wide spectrum of issues, explains Ms Sigmund.

“There are some young people and even high-ranking officials who are disappointed with Europe,” she argues. “But the first deficit in Europe is not democratic, it is communication. Media focus too much on the negative.” For many, Brussels seems so far away, out of reach, and even out of touch. The decisions made in Brussels impact everyone, but not everyone is aware to what extent. People can make a positive contribution to what is happening in Europe explains Ms Sigmund. The danger, she says, is for people to do nothing. “It is clear that citizens cannot just follow someone, like in their sleep.”

Perhaps, the European Citizens’ Initiative could become a catalyst for a more engaged and more active Europe. For the moment, it is too early to tell. The measure has yet to be officially launched. But in the meantime, Ms Sigmund works tirelessly to help some of Europe’s most marginalised – the Roma.

Helping the marginalised

“I work a lot for the Roma. The Roma are de facto excluded and cannot participate in society. It is a vicious circle because they are not active citizens in everyday social life,” says Ms Sigmund. Combating social exclusion and getting the Roma to become active citizens begins with education. “Education must focus on early childhood,” she says, adding that some initiatives are producing concrete results. “In Sweden, Soraya Post, who is Sinti, runs an organisation that gives classes on lifelong learning.”

Indeed, the European Commission took up the EESC’s recommendation to mainstream Roma issues in all relevant European and national policies as the most promising way to achieve inclusion. And while official pronouncements on the Roma are welcomed, Ms Sigmund says getting involved at grass-roots level is the most effective means of getting results. “We must act and go local and get on to the ground.”

“The first deficit in Europe is not democratic, it is communication.”



A passion for progress

Cveto Stantič



The Slovenian town of Nova Gorica, Cveto Stantič's birthplace, is separated from its Italian neighbour Gorizia by nothing more than a border, established after the Second World War between Yugoslavia and Italy. Now, since Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, the twin towns form part of one single trans-border metropolitan area.

Seeing how EU membership helped create unity has had an important influence on Mr Stantič's view of active citizenship. "All my life, there was an artificial border splitting my town and preventing people from having a normal life," he explains. "I suffered because of it. Now it's completely different – the city is becoming one city again. But people tend to forget the benefits of the EU very fast. Today they move freely, they have the euro ... but they take it for granted – especially young people. That is why I put a lot of effort into talking to them."

The recent growth of Euro-scepticism has left many Slovenians feeling that, as citizens of a small country, they have little influence on EU decision-making. "That's not true," affirms Mr Stantič. "To build a European awareness you have to start in schools, with young people. You have to promote the European project at an early stage."

As part of the 'Your Europe, Your Say' initiative, which brings together students from all over Europe in Brussels, he visits Slovenian schools to present the values and benefits of the EU, the work of the EESC and the role of civil society. "Unfortunately, in Slovenia we don't have a long tradition of civil society organisations," he explains. "I'm trying to convince them that Europe is worth believing in, and I do that with a lot of passion."

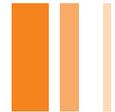
A life in business

Mr Stantič has been a businessman all his life, and now runs his own small firm selling hearing aids. He has also held senior management positions in larger Slovenian companies, and was Vice-President of the national Chamber of Commerce and Industry, taking part in Slovenia's EU accession negotiations. As a member of the core negotiation team, he was the only non-governmental official directly representing the interests of the business sector. "I was trying to convince companies that it was good for the Slovenian economy to join the EU," he notes. "I still believe in the European project, even though we are in difficult times."

Many Slovenians are unaware that 70% of legislation and policy shaping the business environment comes from Brussels, he says.

"I know the problems of both big and small enterprises, and part of my role is to try and help them, focusing especially on small entrepreneurs who have fewer resources." He uses every possible opportunity to communicate and collect feedback, including attending meetings of Slovenia's Economic and Social Council.

"I know the problems of both big and small enterprises."



Dialogue is the key

As the elected communication contact point for the Slovenian delegation on the Committee, he is responsible for liaising with institutions, civil society organisations and media at home. "It takes quite a lot of time," he admits. He is also President of the Western Balkans contact group, and travels frequently in neighbouring states, helping to develop their fledgling civil society structures. Enabling these countries to join the EU as soon as possible is key to stability in the region, he believes.

Dialogue is at the core of Mr Stantič's work. "Dialogue means not preaching at people, but listening as well, and I'm afraid we are not listening enough to each other," he argues. "In Slovenia, dialogue is much needed." Like elsewhere in Europe, his country is facing "a crisis of values". It has achieved major goals, but at the same time the privatisation process surrounding EU accession had some negative effects. "A lot of people tried to get rich overnight, and that left a bad feeling for everybody," he says.

"But there is an awareness now that civil society should be better organised and more active, and I am prepared to engage in that with all my knowledge, experience and time."

A woman's work

Dana Štechová



Active citizenship, especially for women, is very often also a question of time, says Dana Štechová. "If people are completely occupied with their daily problems and struggling to earn a decent salary, it is often more difficult for them to afford to take on extra activities, such as volunteering or helping others."

So encouraging people to be active is closely linked to trade union demands for better reconciliation of work and family life, and issues like working time. "If we want active citizens, they must have time and space," she insists.

Ms Štechová is head of the European and international relations department of ČMKOS, the Czech Republic's most important trade union confederation. "For me, active citizenship is a day-to-day commitment to being conscious of one's rights and responsibilities," she adds. "Citizenship should not be limited to casting a vote every four years – even

though that's important too, and these days more and more people prefer not to engage themselves further. But for me it's not adequate as it lets politicians believe they have a four-year mandate to do whatever they want."

Action in the general interest

Both her job and her convictions make her an active part of organised civil society, working to raise awareness among citizens generally and encourage them not just to be submissive or passive about what goes on around them, but to react positively in the general and collective interest. She tries to act as a link, channelling information between Brussels and the Czech population. "To activate, inform and raise awareness about European issues as well, that is the trade unions' *raison d'être*," argues Ms Štechová.

ČMKOS is continuously taking part in discussions on national reforms which she warns would mark a trend towards the erosion of social rights. “This trend is very dangerous, and it is also happening at EU level. In European governance, the social dimension is weak, whereas a strong social dimension is most important during a time of crisis – it should not be an excuse for doing less. It should not be those who didn’t cause the crisis who pay for it.”

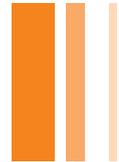
The support of public services

On a more personal level, she is involved in helping to coordinate and organise a network of women, through the trade union confederation. This showed her how shortage of time impacts on women’s active participation in society. The union has been campaigning and demonstrating for the EU Working Time Directive to be strengthened, in line with the demands of the European Parliament. But the debate is still going on, with no sign of agreement at EU level.

“My work with women is an important contribution to active citizenship,” emphasises Ms Štechová. “On the EESC I am often involved in debates on equal opportunities. Women, as well as men, who work in their free time for their children and their families, are also showing active citizenship. Some people say we should recognise this task in society. But this should also be done within a clear framework of public services and limits on working time, so that we have time for ourselves. High quality and proximity are the vital ingredients of well-functioning public services. These should be the elements which guarantee space for active citizenship.”

“In the Czech Republic, we have lived through significant democratic moments, but cultivating participative democracy is a task that is never finished – you have never won,” she warns. “It is important to stop those forces who would like to take over too much power, often also at the expense of the most vulnerable in society and in contradiction to European values. We sometimes forget to underline the fundamental principles of the EU: peace, solidarity, social justice and a decent life. They are big words, but I believe in them. It is important to remember these principles and be always vigilant in defending them.”

“For me, active citizenship is a day-to-day commitment to being conscious of one’s rights and responsibilities.”



Simply scouting

Pavel Trantina



Pavel Trantina (centre)

In the summer of 2011, nearly 40000 young people from around the world gathered in a field near a small village in southern Sweden. They had come to celebrate and participate in the World Scout Jamboree 2011. Over the course of two weeks, more than 20000 tents were pitched and a rich educational programme for young people aged 14 to 17 was delivered.

Among the scouts was Pavel Trantina, Vice-President of EESC Group III and former President of the Czech Council of Children and Youth. An EESC member since 2006, Mr Trantina specialises in youth issues that include education, employment and volunteering.

“World Scout Jamboree is a huge event for young people prepared and run by some 10000 volunteers which makes it the biggest activity within the framework of the European Year of Volunteering 2011,” says Mr Trantina who is also the chair of the EESC Coordination Group for the European Year of Volunteering 2011.

At only 36, Mr Trantina has himself spent the past 20 years as a volunteer in numerous activities and fields. He started as a youth leader and became the International Commissioner of Czech scouts where for almost ten years he developed international contacts and projects. He was also involved in the Czech national youth council, which he chaired for several years. Since 2010, he has been the coordinator of the volunteering working group of the European Scout Region. He describes scouting as a way of life that encourages active citizenship and provides young people with skills and life lessons to help overcome difficulties.

An antidote to indifference

“Active citizenship helps to counter indifference. It is about taking responsibility for oneself and for the life of the surrounding community,”

he says. It is also about opening up and engaging with people from different cultures. At the jamboree, young people from 150 different countries were given the opportunity to meet, to exchange experiences about their countries, and make friends.

“As one of these volunteers, I prepared and led 22 workshops for others on topics of recognition of skills acquired through scouting and on peaceful solutions of conflicts. And I am very happy that the topics and discussions were found very useful,” says Mr Trantina.

Religious freedom, immigrant life, and mutual respect were high on the workshop agenda. Other workshops simulated job interviews that help the young scouts experience and prepare for their first steps towards employment. “For the recognition workshop we prepared an English translation of a very handy French self-evaluation tool called *Valorise-toi!* It lists some 50 skills that a youth leader acquires through voluntary work.”

Recognising the skills

Teamwork, problem solving, multicultural awareness, empathy and a sense of initiative and responsibility are highly prized in the labour market, explains Mr Trantina. The recognition workshop at the jamboree made the young scouts more aware of such skills. It also showed them how to best communicate them to prospective employers.

“Volunteers are not usually aware of the competences they have acquired and, therefore, are not able to translate their skills into the language of employers. We need to develop the means to recognise the results of this non-formal education.” According to some statistics, nearly 94 million people, or 23% of Europeans aged 15 and older engage in some form of voluntary activity. While sports attract the most volunteers, many also help in the social and health sector.

Active citizenship comes naturally to Mr Trantina. At university, he participated in different self-governing bodies and student organisations. He was also on the academic senate at the university faculty. “This is also the reason why I started to work for President Václav Havel and stayed at Prague Castle for more than six years, sharing and supporting his view of society based on civic engagement.”

“Active citizenship helps to counter indifference. It is about taking responsibility for oneself and for the life of the surrounding community.”



Nothing about us without us

Yannis Vardakastanis



Yannis Vardakastanis is an active citizen campaigning to achieve greater progress in human rights, inclusion and non-discrimination for persons with disabilities in Greece, in Europe and in the world. He is an activist, and has been one since he was a student over 30 years ago. He is currently the president of both the Greek National Council for Persons with Disabilities and the European Disability Forum. He is also a leader in the International Disability Alliance.

Mr Vardakastanis is blind. Perhaps this was what motivated his life choices, shaped by active citizenship and the will to promote participation. Individual participation is needed at all levels, and his contribution is a prime example of how grass-roots activism can make a difference, bringing organisations that represent the needs and wishes of people with disabilities closer to key political figures and policy-makers at the local, national and international level.

Improving lives for people with disabilities

As a young man, he studied in the United States where he attended university before returning once again, in 1982, to his native Greece. He immediately became very active in the movement for the blind in Greece. From 1986 to 1992, he was the President of the Panhellenic Association of the Blind. In 1989, he joined forces with other colleagues with disabilities and founded the National Confederation of Disabled People of Greece. Four years later he became president of the confederation, a position he occupies to this day.

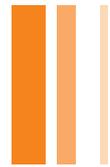
“Active citizenship is the nucleus of a pluralistic and democratic society,” he says, adding: “it should be recognised as a fundamental pillar of society.” He then cites an example. In 2007, the European Disability Forum decided to collect 1 million signatures to pressure the EU to introduce better rights for people with disabilities. According to the EU’s Lisbon Treaty, a citizen

may call on the European Commission to propose legislation if he or she collects at least 1 million signatures from a significant number of Member States. Mr Vardakastanis, as President of the European Disability Forum, together with his colleagues in the disability movement across the EU, got 1.4 million signatures. "We organised it, we delivered it, and we got the institution to move on it," he says.

Active citizenship must bring political commitments

Then in December 2010, the Greek confederation managed to gather together 5 000 people to protest in Athens' main Syntagma Square. They demanded more rights for people with disabilities. The demonstration was telling evidence of a struggle yet to be won. But progress is being made.

"Active citizenship should be recognised as a fundamental pillar of society."



Mr Vardakastanis was personally involved in the negotiations to make sure the EU signed up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It was the first time that the EU has joined an international Human Rights Convention. This accession happened at the end of 2010, making the protection of the human rights of people with disabilities part of EU law. Mr Vardakastanis wants to make sure Europe fulfils its obligations.

The economic crisis in the EU is having devastating effects on economic, political and social structures. One of the most important tasks for Mr Vardakastanis now is to ensure disabled people and their families do not pay for the worldwide downturn. He wants to protect their income, benefits and employment opportunities and prevent cuts by organisations that provide assistance.

"The EU crisis is more political and social than it is economic," adds Mr Vardakastanis. Counteracting the current problems takes positive and active social commitment. "Without active citizenship, a person cannot exercise his or her rights and therefore the basis of the conception that underpins the Union becomes compromised."

Giving people a voice

Kathleen Walker Shaw



Kathleen Walker Shaw (second from the left),
Maggie Hughes (second from the right)

As European officer of the British GMB trade union, Kathleen Walker Shaw works in Brussels on behalf of her 610 000 members, alerting EU decision-makers to their interests. "I try to make the link between people who are seeking justice at local level, and the people who should be listening to them," she says.

For example, since 1994 she has been active in the campaign to save the UK's Remploy factories, which

give work to thousands of disabled people. The GMB fought to change EU legislation to allow public authorities to award contracts to 'supported' businesses – now embodied in Article 19 of the Public Procurement Directive. "It took us 10 years to get it into the Directive, and another two years working at national level to make sure they got it right. It was a non-mandatory clause."

Nonetheless, 29 factories closed in 2008. Ms Walker Shaw believes disabled people should be able to choose supported employment if they wish. "These are rightfully proud workers with impressive skills," she points out. "We were amazed at the amount of community support they had. It was uplifting."

Something good out of something bad

More recently she has backed initiatives to assist crime victims outside their own country. Robbie Hughes was attacked while on holiday with friends in Crete, and left fighting for his life. His mother Maggie threw her heart and soul into a campaign to boost EU-wide resources, such as emergency services in embassies, victim helplines, financial and legal support, and greater awareness among travel companies. Ms Walker Shaw encouraged EU Commissioner Viviane Reding to take account of Maggie's practical

advice when presenting a package of EU measures to support victims, in May 2011, and she is guiding the EESC's opinion on it. With up to 75 million crime victims across the EU each year, Ms Walker Shaw says the toll is alarming. "People are travelling more, and we believe a lot needs to be done to protect and support them."

She points out that trade union members also belong to wider communities. "Supporting people doesn't end at the workplace doors, so we have a responsibility to assist people like Maggie. My job is to use the resources and knowledge and contacts I have to give her access to European politicians, and make sure they do not let her down. For her, the campaign has been a lifeline which helps her to deal with a tragic situation and it also helps the people around her. I have made new friends too – including Maggie and her daughter. It's a privilege to know them; their energy and integrity is inspiring."

"We need people who are models of active citizenship in order to have the kind of society we want to live in, and to encourage others."

A gesture of solidarity

Active citizenship is what makes society, says Ms Walker Shaw. "We need people who are models of active citizenship in order to have the kind of society we want to live in, and to encourage others. But people can be active citizens at different levels – they don't all have to lead campaigns. We should not have too rigid an idea of what active citizenship is. A smile can make a big difference to someone's day! However small the gesture, it is also positive for the person who makes it. Although dreadful things happen in the world, most people are good, and harnessing that goodness is going to become increasingly important.

"People say that society has changed, but I am not pessimistic," she insists. "If people are more disillusioned with politics and feel let down by institutions because of the crisis, it may encourage them to take a stand for what they want. We should not underestimate civil society's determination! Trade unions are a great source of active citizenship – for example, teaming up with community groups to fight cuts in local services. We have the ability to create a campaigning momentum and help people to shape their local community. It's our duty to help them get their voices heard."

A commitment to make life better

Hans-Joachim Wilms



"I am a political animal," says Hans-Joachim Wilms. Promoting active citizenship through his work as a trade unionist, and in his local community, is a natural reaction.

Mr Wilms, who likes to be known as Hajo to his friends and colleagues, has been an EESC member since 1994. Looking back on some of the most important opinions he has been responsible for during his time on the Committee, he highlights his personal investment in facilitating EU enlargement to the countries of Eastern and Central Europe.

"In Germany we have lots of experience of the breakdown of the German Democratic Republic, and all the trouble that it brought. I tried to apply that experience to the process of enlargement, together with colleagues from the newer Member States."

He argues that promoting European unity and solidarity is particularly relevant to German citizens. "Germany caused a lot of problems and suffering in the rest of Europe during World War II," he explains. "That is not forgotten. We still have an open commitment to fulfil."

The trauma of unemployment

Mr Wilms works as European Affairs Officer for the German trade union representing construction and agricultural workers (IG BAU), and is particularly committed to environmental protection. This is reflected in the

topics he chooses to give special priority to: sustainability, food scarcity and hunger, and climate change and reducing CO₂ emissions, as well as social security.

"I will never forget experiencing the loss of 150 000 agricultural workers' jobs in East Germany after reunification in the 1990s.

I was responsible for managing this difficult situation for the trade unions." This involved negotiating compensation, and looking for ways to create new jobs in rural areas, for example through small businesses and innovative enterprises, to help the newly unemployed people to maintain their skills and get back into work. "But the loss of employment leads to terrible distress," he recalls. "I was dealing face-to-face with 40-year-olds who had no future job prospects in the areas where they lived. It was very stressful."

Mr Wilms is based in Barmstedt and Berlin, but his work covers the whole of Germany, plus frequent visits to Brussels for EESC meetings. One of his most satisfying achievements was obtaining a better pension deal for agricultural workers. "I am very proud of having negotiated a 13th month," he admits. As a result, in addition to the basic rate of around €900, today some 60 000 workers receive an annual payment of nearly €1 000 from the supplementary pension scheme. Members' reactions have been "very, very positive".

A local debate

On a local level, Mr Wilms also plays an active role in civil life. "I live in a small town. Last Sunday, I took part in a bicycle rally organised by our sports savings club. The members visit a centre offering therapy for drug abusers. It's like a neighbourhood initiative in which we talk to people and share their problems, and try to support them."

In 2010, he represented the EESC at the UN climate change negotiations in Cancún in Mexico. "When I got home I invited people I knew to a local pub, to hear about what happened and give them a report-back. These are small things, but I like to organise such events," he concludes.

*"I live in a small town.
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Interviews

Andrzej Adamczyk, Group II Employees, Poland

Pedro Augusto Almeida Freire, Group I Employers, Portugal

Milena Angelova, Group I Employers, Bulgaria

Laure Batut, Group II Employees, France

Georgios Dassis, President, Group II Employees, Greece

Pietro Francesco De Lotto, Group I Employers, Italy

Sir Stuart Etherington, Group III Various Interests, UK

Benedicte Federspiel, Group III Various Interests, Denmark

Mall Hellam, Group III Various Interests, Estonia

Luca Jahier, President, Group III Various Interests, Italy

Evangelia Kekeleki, Group III Various Interests, Greece

Waltraud Klasnic, Group I Employers, Austria

Henry Malosse, President, Group I Employers, France

Juan Mendoza, Group II Employees, Spain

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Kathleen Walker Shaw, Group II Employees, UK

Hans-Joachim Wilms, Group II Employees, Germany

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