Civil society and democracy
The citizens’ shortcut to the EU
Emily von Sydow

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Her bibliography includes:
När Luther kom till Bryssel, Arena, 1999
Från ordförandeskap till utanförskap, SNS, 2004
Den svenska modellen, Ekerlids, 2009

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Dear reader,

On Civil Society Day (8 May) 2012, the EESC organised a conference in Brussels on the theme of civil society’s perspectives on democracy in Europe. The rich and lively debates emphasised the importance that civil society organisations themselves attach to their role in underpinning the democratic life of the Union. The conference was certainly not a rounding up of “the usual suspects” so, being particularly struck by the contribution made by the “outsiders” among the conference participants, we decided to follow up on the debate by inviting a journalist, Emily von Sydow, to continue the discussion on how civil society organisations feel they can contribute to and strengthen the democratic life of the European Union. Emily von Sydow was expressly invited to avoid an institutional approach. Thus, the views herein are those of the writer and, as such, provide an outsider’s perspective on one of the Union’s fundamental debates.

The author concludes that civil society has an important role to play in constructing a democratic European Union: a healthy civil society can build a bridge between the grass roots to what is frequently seen as distant and faceless leadership at whatever level of governance. The author further concludes that a healthy and active civil society is not only a necessary complement to political representation at the regional, national and European level, but also that common actions within civil society can provide an opportunity for the creation of a common European identity among citizens from all Member States.

This book is neither the first nor last word on the role of organised civil society in democratic life in the European Union. However, it does present a number of fascinating illustrations about the way civil society organisations provide avenues of expression for the European citizen.

Above all, though, this has not been written for the seasoned insider who already knows his or her way around “Brussels” and the EU institutions. It is written precisely by and for those who do not spend most of their time in “Brussels”. As such, it offers a glimpse through the other end of the telescope.

Staffan Nilsson, President of the European Economic and Social Committee
I. Your voice in Europe
This book argues that civil society, by which we mean associations, interest groups and the employers’ and union organisations, is an essential pillar of democracy. During meetings with representatives of organised civil society, the writer has gathered a series of examples of how they have made their voices heard in the EU.

Based on these examples and other interviews, this book provides concrete tips on how European leadership and civil society can fully benefit from one another, creating a stronger sense of European identity for citizens and giving the institutions greater legitimacy, as their decision-making becomes more rooted in citizens’ real daily concerns.

Civil society fights in many arenas. Next to the traditional organised civil society, constituted for example by the employers and the union organisations, others are being formed. The young anti-doping ambassadors are active in European sport, working hard to make it free from illegal substances by strengthening the self-confidence of other young athletes. But they have run out of funding, just like the guide dog federation, which is struggling to meet the demands for a unified high standard of guide dogs for Europe’s visually impaired. Europe’s union for public workers is worried about the tendency to privatise all public services and has started a European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) called Water is a Human Right, demanding that the EU institutions reverse this trend.

Civil society’s role in shaping Europe received greater recognition through the Lisbon Treaty of the European Union. The Treaty was inspired by a deeply felt need for a stronger voice and influence for citizens.

Europe and its institutions were widely regarded as out of touch, detached from the men and women it represented, in spite of taking more and more decisions which will influence Europeans’ daily lives. To go forward, the EU needed clearer input and stronger support from its citizens.

The Treaty therefore introduced several tools for consultation and dialogue with Europeans to remedy this distance and alienation.

The role of the consultative body, the European Economic and Social Committee, which represents organised civil society, as a bridge, or even a bridge builder, between citizens, their organisations and interest groups and the EU institutions, is therefore enhanced. The expertise of associations and economic actors can be taken into account, and hence strengthen democracy in the European Union. But not only that: civil society has a role to foster a sense of community, which may be the way to create the elusive European identity, via a collective cause.

It is a base from which active citizens can be heard, and their competence and expertise respected, regardless of whether it concerns young IT entrepreneurs, farmers, organisers of music festivals or schoolteachers.

Some members of organised civil society, for practical and economic reasons, have joined forces by having a representative in Brussels. That is the case for the EPLO, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office, which represents over 30 member organisations. They think additional members would add to their legitimacy. But it seems some organisations, which have united on very wide issues like youth, age or disability, have to make compromises that sometimes obscure what the organisations really stand for.

The Treaty’s provisions on civil society dialogue are a way of ensuring that citizens’ views and their profound knowledge will be made available to the EU institutions. This is in the interest of both the citizens and EU leadership, as it deepens the legitimacy of its decision-making.
What is the EU? A brief introduction to the institutions

The European Union is a voluntary cooperation between European countries, which have decided to give up some of their sovereignty to common decision-making. The aim is to make Europe a better place to live in for its 500 million citizens, by strengthening the economy within the single market, enhancing human rights, protecting the rule of law, stabilising the countries bordering the EU, and giving Europe a clear and coherent voice in the world.

The Member States must adhere to the so-called Copenhagen criteria of democracy, rule of law, market economy and human rights. They must also follow commonly agreed rules, which are constantly reviewed and renewed.

The laws and decision-making architecture are described in the Treaties, the judicial foundation of the EU, the first being the Treaty of Rome which was signed in 1957 by the original six Member States: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. This Treaty states that the aim is an “ever closer union” between the people of Europe.

In 2012, after several enlargements, including the big one in 2004 when the Eastern and Central European countries, plus Malta and Cyprus, became members – and three years later Bulgaria and Romania – the number of members reached 27. Croatia is due to become the 28th EU Member State. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Montenegro and Turkey are also negotiating membership of the EU.

The promise of membership has been a powerful lever through which the EU has exercised “soft power” on the candidate countries, forcing them to adapt to the basic principles of the Union, as mentioned before – democracy, the rule of law, market economy and human rights.

Peace project

The politicians were initially looking for economic solutions as a means to maintain peace: by pooling control over coal and steel, these strategic resources would no longer be used for national military industries, but rather for rebuilding the civilian economies. The European Union is a peace project, and serves as an example of how a continent can achieve reconciliation, after centuries of bloodshed, making war between Member States materially impossible and basically unthinkable.

The goal already set out in the Treaty of Rome was to create a single market, including the four economic freedoms: free movement of goods, capital, services and people. Already in 1970, the idea of a single European currency to complete the single market was drafted.

Today’s European citizens take peace, democracy and free movement for granted. To the outside world, however, the EU remains a model for cooperation: the politicians of the African Union and Mercosur in South America, for example, look to the EU for inspiration.

The big ideas are easily overshadowed by relatively smaller disagreements. The initial pride of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 was quickly buried in bickering over who should attend the ceremony. In the end, the three Presidents of the Council, the Commission and the Parliament, Herman Van Rompuy, José Manuel Barroso and Martin Schulz attended the prize-giving ceremony in Oslo in December.
They also made it clear that long discussions and tough negotiations are what the EU is all about: trying to find a compromise between diverging positions. If we criticise that, it is important to remember what the alternatives might be. It is better to fight at the table than on the battlefield.

Another of the basic notions of the founding of European cooperation was that hunger is the enemy of peace. Therefore, to help refill European larders, the farmers received ample funds. The so-called common agricultural policy, CAP, would ensure that wartime food scarcity and rationing would no longer blight Europe’s populations and the farmers would receive support to deliver on this promise.

**Top-down construction**

European cooperation is often criticised for being a top-down construction. This was definitely true at the beginning. The initial plan – to create unity among war-weary countries and former enemies – was not really the result of a popular movement. None of the political leaders asked the citizens whether they were ready for this leap of faith.

The architecture of Europe was designed to protect the balance of power between large and small countries, especially to guard the independence of smaller Member States, and to ensure that the commonly agreed rules were being respected. The institutions were set up specifically with this in mind. As the powers of the European Community grew, so did the demands for political representation and democratic control.

Several perspectives converge in EU decisions: those of Europe as a whole, the Member States and the citizens.

The European Commission is the institution that proposes the legal rules, known as Directives and Regulations, which need to be transposed into national law. It also checks that the rules are applied. Member States, in the Council of Ministers, and the directly elected members of the European Parliament vote on them. In any disputes concerning these rules, it is the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg that decides.

The laws proposed by the European Commission are negotiated by the Members of the European Parliament with governments’ representatives in the Council of Ministers, on all matters subject to majority voting, i.e. everything except foreign and security policy and taxation.

Today, the European Parliament is directly elected, but it started as a consultative body. The first meeting of Members, who were appointed by the national parliaments, took place in Strasbourg in 1958. In 1979, the first direct elections of MEPs were held. Since then, the Parliament’s say in European matters has grown steadily.

The European Economic and Social Committee, hereafter referred to by its acronym, EESC, was part of the European construction from the outset. It represents the fourth perspective – that of organised civil society. The role of the EESC was, and still is, to give voice to employers and trade unions as well as various economic, social, environmental and civic interest groups. The 344 members are appointed by the Council of Ministers on a five-year mandate as representatives of different strands of civil society. The Committee’s opinions are civil society’s messages to EU lawmakers.
Influencing citizens’ daily lives

With the introduction of the four freedoms of the internal market, the new European Union laws entered the daily lives of European citizens, enforcing rules on food and drinks labelling as well as demanding safety standards for cars, for example.

In the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, another way of hearing citizens’ voices was added to the European Union. It was the Committee of the Regions, referred to as the CoR, which started in 1994 at the same time as the Structural Funds were introduced. The aim was to create a level playing field between the poorer and richer regions in the EU.

The opinions of the two consultative bodies, the EESC and the CoR, ensure that the different aspects of European life are considered when laws are drawn up. The CoR takes a regional and geographical view and gives voice to the local and regional authorities.

When I refer to civil society in this book, I mean organised civil society, which is represented in the EESC’s three groups: the employers and employees within their respective organisations; and the other groups, such as non-governmental organisations and bodies representing consumers, farmers, disabled people, environmentalists, etc.

The biggest challenge currently facing the EU and its Member States is linked to the economy. Many would agree that this challenge is best met by greater cooperation. However, this remedy does not necessarily echo the voices of citizens who are sceptical of the growing distance between themselves and decision-making in Brussels. Civil society and its coordinator on a European level, the EESC, have a fundamental role to play in bridging this gap.

Pillar of democracy

A strong civil society is one of the pillars of the house of democracy. We are reminded of that not only by examples from history, but also from today.

The American historian, Anne Applebaum, highlights this in her recent book *The Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe*. She shows how the civil movement, organising spontaneously and courageously to rebuild Berlin after the war, was crushed because it was a threat to Soviet power.

Today, civil society continues to challenge the leadership in Russia and elsewhere as one of the most efficient channels for voicing citizens’ concerns and raising the hackles of the political leaders. Human rights organisations are deeply concerned about the Russian president Vladimir Putin’s strict new laws limiting rights to public assembly and internet content. Members of associations in other neighbouring countries, and further away, often turn to the EU for support, as it is widely recognised as a guardian of basic democratic rights.

For example, Ukrainian journalists, faced with increasing censorship and limitations on freedom of expression in their country, sent an SOS to EU institutions and European civil society for more consistent support.
Further south of the EU, it was civil society’s demand for change that ignited the Arab Spring, and social media have proved a very powerful tool for connecting like-minded citizens within civil society. The Serbian civil society group, Otpor, meaning “Resistance”, which provoked the overthrow of the Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic, has developed a strategy, on how non-violent resistance can lead to the fall of a regime. Endorsing civil society remains one of the key instruments the Union has to support the transition towards a more democratic and stable neighbourhood in the Mediterranean countries.

**Relations with third countries**

When the EU deals with third countries, dialogues with organised civil society are vital for a successful relationship with that country. Civil society is not only the partner that implements different programmes on the ground, but is also an efficient actor and mediator.

The conclusion reached at a recent seminar on the EU as a peacebuilder was that the top-down way of dealing with a crisis in a third country – flying in a high-level outsider – should be abandoned for a bottom-up approach. It is more efficient to deal with people with profound knowledge of the region’s culture, such as local representatives of civil society. This approach makes it more likely that the use of funding will be successful and reforms rooted among citizens, rather than imposed as an elite project.

Civil society traditions differ across the Member States. In some of the new members, building civil society is more of a struggle. In northern Europe, associations and organisations appear to exercise a bigger pull than political parties.

But as the French senator, Chantal Jouanno, who participated in a recent EESC conference on how to get Europe out of the crisis, said: “While the politicians thrive on conflict […], civil society has an interest in building consensus and has a vision beyond the next election.”

However, building a lasting relationship between civil society organisations and governments and EU institutions requires a robust culture of dialogue and a strong desire from all sides to cooperate.

**How to use the Lisbon Treaty**

As stated earlier, the Lisbon Treaty created several tools for consultation and dialogue. The general principle is stated in Article 10.3 of the Treaty, which says that every citizen has a right to participate in the democratic life of Europe. This requires a new level of openness and transparency, which is the very basis of citizens’ trust in the European Union. The Treaty says:

1. The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action.
2. The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.
3. The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union’s actions are coherent and transparent.
The Treaty also requires that the institutions create the possibilities for civil society to participate in the political debate.

The third paragraph has been put into practice and the Commission now reports four times a year on the advice it receives from the EESC. The real door-opener for civil society, as described in the Lisbon Treaty, is the first paragraph which offers *citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views.*

**EESC as a bridge builder**

The role of the EESC as a bridge builder between citizens, their organised civil society and the EU institutions is carved in stone. Now it is for the Committee to follow up on this challenge and ensure that the expertise of associations and economic actors can be taken into account and listened to by European Union decision-makers.

It is a base from which active citizens can be heard, and their knowledge respected, regardless of whether it concerns union members, refugee associations or consumer networks.

This point was also stressed in the 2010 study *Political Trends 2011-2012* by the Brussels-based think-tank the European Policy Centre.

The EPC summarised the role of the Committee in six points:

1. To raise problems, which arise on the national agenda, where the effective solution is European.
2. To keep up the heat on issues that risk falling off the EU agenda.
3. To involve citizens in the big EU policy debates.
4. To look ahead, identify problems and bring them on to the EU agenda.
5. To criticise and suggest improvements to EU decision-making.
6. To provide analytical depth to the EU debate.

The Lisbon Treaty has strengthened the role of the EESC, but there is no reason to relax the efforts to build bridges between citizens and the European institutions. It seems crucial that the Committee remains “a stone in the shoe” of EU decision-makers, by constantly reminding the institutions of what needs to be done and which issues should not be forgotten.

The EESC’s opinions and conferences are proof that the Committee will not let go of this role. We have seen conferences that have raised issues like social exclusion, climate change, European competitiveness, and democracy. The Committee’s opinion by Luca Jahier, president of the EESC various interests group, also underlined the need for Article 11 of the Treaty to be fully implemented. The opinion concludes that *“Effective participatory democracy is needed to restore credibility to the EU.”*
Testing the powers

The new powers remain to be tested by organised civil society, not only in Brussels but also, and maybe more so, in the Member States. The anti-austerity demonstrations are one way of venting citizens’ anger, but the freedom to demonstrate is not a new tool.

The Treaty also describes other ways of reinforcing democracy. The European Parliament and the national assemblies and regional chambers have received bold new muscles in the Treaty, strengthening European representative democracy.

Participatory democracy is the other instrument. The Committee has urged the Commission to set up structures for the dialogues to take place. This means giving citizens a say in an institutionalised way.

The strength of the measures in the Lisbon Treaty is probably underrated and certainly under-communicated. Organised civil society and the EESC are in a position to test and try the limits of the Treaty’s democracy provisions. Who will be the first to use the Treaty and complain all the way to the European Court of Justice that their voices have not been heard, and that decisions have not respected the expertise on the ground? Will it be the environmental NGOs? The anti-poverty platform? Or maybe the organised youth platform? The employers or the unions?

Getting you on-board: participating in society

We no longer talk about our new societies as melting pots, but why not stress the meeting spots? The most obvious are in the workplace, school or university, but also in associations, societies and unions. Organised civil society may be your way to reach out, to participate, to root yourself in your community.

Without your participation, society may lose out on your expertise, your experience and your specific qualities. The opportunities for you to contribute are there, even on a European level. Getting “Brussels” to listen works both ways. It requires your participation.

The classic form of representative democracy, i.e. voting in elections for your party or politician, is still the basic form of democracy. But it is not enough today, because it does not bridge the void between citizens and decision-makers, especially in a context as large as the EU, where distances are big. And what is more, it does not bring your experience into decision-making; it merely records your ballot.

Citizens have also shown, during the latest European Parliament elections, that they are not fully satisfied with the right to vote. As the European Parliament’s powers have been extended, turnout in the elections has consistently declined. In the last elections in 2009, only 43% of the electorate participated.

Crisis of legitimacy

In spite of the European Parliament’s strengthened influence, and the more active involvement of national parliaments in scrutinising future EU laws, the European Union still faces a crisis of legitimacy. In view of this, civil society’s more organised participation in European matters seems to be the most efficient way to let the broader spectrum of citizens’ voices and characteristics be heard. Professor Stijn Smismans of Cardiff University developed this idea on 8 May 2012 at the EESC conference on democracy in Europe:
“Parliamentary representation provides a rough representation of the citizen. The citizen is ... detached from their personal characteristics and aspects of belonging other than being part of the territory of the polity. A territorially elected parliament cannot represent the whole of its electorate’s personalities and interests. Therefore participatory mechanisms can provide a complement to the traditional parliamentary representation. This is particularly suitable in Europe where representation through parliament faces substantial problems in terms of identifying with a single European demos, and given the particular possibilities to create more direct citizen participation due to levels of scale.”

In less academic language: the European Parliament covers only the very basic political wishes of EU citizens. It needs to be supplemented and reinforced by participatory democracy. European identity remains to be fully developed, but it can be created through civil society. In other words, football referees in Estonia and Portugal may have more in common than liberals or socialists from the respective countries.

Organised civil society is in a particularly good position to act as a bridge builder. On the European scale, the EESC has a natural role to fill as the institutional platform representing civil society.

**Dialogue**

Different forms of dialogue between citizens and the European institutions are one type of participation. However, they have yet to be fully organised and set up in a structured way by the European Commission.

E-democracy is already up and running in certain legislative processes, making it possible for citizens to engage in different proposals and put forward their points of view by responding to online questions. It works like an open online hearing.

The e-democracy method was widely used in the preparation of the Convention on the Future of Europe. The Convention’s work resulted in the Constitutional Treaty, which was rejected by the French and the Dutch in referenda and later substituted by the Lisbon Treaty. This method could certainly be developed further.

E-democracy provides an opportunity to reach out, but in an impersonal way. As Alessandra Mirabile, who has launched a European Citizens’ Initiative, says: “Nothing beats face-to-face meetings.”

Participatory democracy in different formats is being tried around the EU. The Comité des sages (wise people) in the French city of Besançon is made up of a group of elderly citizens who are consulted when decisions on transport, for example, are taken in the commune. There is also a corresponding committee for the young. In the UK city of Liverpool, citizens have been consulted on budget matters for a couple of years. Local residents have been invited to vote for funding of project ideas that were submitted by local and community groups.

Although these examples may work on a local level, they are, of course, difficult to translate into Europe-wide action. This requires a more organised form of dialogue and consultation.

An agora for civil society could also provide input to the Commission’s agenda. This idea was presented in the EESC manifesto to the European Parliament of 2009, called *Manifesto for a Genuine European Civil Dialogue.*
ECI: ensure success – avoid disappointment

The most prominent example of the Treaty’s new vision of democracy is the European Citizens’ Initiative, which is also described in the Treaty, Article 11:

4. Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties.

The procedures and conditions required for such a citizens’ initiative should be determined in accordance with the first paragraph of Article 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

The ECI is the first cross-frontier democratic tool of its kind. Similar initiatives have been tested, (in the UK there is one, for example) but never on this scale.

The ECI is not yet widely known outside EU quarters, but this ought to change once the first initiative is taken on and successfully translated into a proposal by the Commission.

Bold move

It is a bold move towards breaking up the European Commission’s monopoly on proposing laws. In short, the ECI means that a number of citizens (1 million signatories) from a number of Member States could unite around a subject and ask the Commission to propose a law in the area.

If this sounds easy – it is not. There are mathematical restrictions and quotas for what should constitute the correct quorum; and there are restrictions as to the subjects that can be addressed. There is also another constraint, namely money: according to some estimates, it costs about 1 million euros to get an ECI up and running with a dedicated server. Even if you collect the correct number of signatures, and fulfil all the other criteria, it is still up to the Commission to decide whether the initiative will be the basis for a new proposal for European law.

All these restrictions, along with the time and labour that running an ECI entail, can be quite dissuasive. But do not let this discourage you from starting an initiative. Bureaucratic complications may stand in the way, but this tool is too important to leave untested. To save time and energy, make sure from the start that your area of concern has a European dimension and that there is a basis for an EU law.

In November 2012, the European Citizen Action Service, ECAS, a Brussels-based NGO, organised a conference with the EESC on the theme Building the EU citizen pillar. The event attracted a full auditorium and lively discussions, as is often the case in Brussels, when a subject is ripe for debate.

Spokespersons for different ECIIs talked about their struggle and were quite critical about the organisational and legal skills required, on top of the economic sacrifice. Some asked politicians to take greater responsibility in the ECI process. However, it seems that this would risk the initiative being taken over by the political machinery, when in fact it was supposed to offer an alternative to this.
European identity

Alessandra Mirabile, a 26-year-old Italian stagiaire at the European Commission, started an initiative together with friends in her free time. Her ECI, called Fraternité2020, aims at enhancing the Union’s exchange programmes as a way of reinforcing European identity.

As a dedicated young European, she felt that she wanted to boost the opportunities she herself had profited from, namely studying and working in different EU countries. If exchange programmes were treated meanly in the budget, it would be to the detriment of the European construction, according to Ms Mirabile. Fraternité2020 has designed items which are sold on the website to help cover some of the costs.

The gathering of signatures for the ECI would be virtually impossible without computerised petitions, but Ms Mirabile is sceptical about the idea of letting social media run the show. She thinks there is a risk that social media oversimplify democracy – she even calls it a “banalisation of democracy”.

The initiative has to have European added value and, of course, the European Commission has to have the legal right to propose a law in the area. In EU language this is called a legal basis. When it comes to the internal market, the European Commission is very generous in its definition of legal basis. Let us hope that the same broad-mindedness characterises the Commission’s definition of ECIs.

Bruno Kaufmann, director for the Initiative and Referendum Institute, a think-tank specialising in direct democracy issues, has written a thorough guide to the ECI, and he categorises initiatives in the following way, according to the target:

An ECI aims to:

1. Get the EU to do something new.
2. Stop the EU from doing something.
3. Ameliorate EU law.
4. Use the ECI as a lever and influence EU policy-making.
5. Build alliances via the ECI.
6. Make your cause better known.

As an example of the first category of ECIs, Mr Kaufmann cites petitiongay.com. The petitioner cites exploiting the current debates and campaigns for gay marriage that are on the agenda in many EU countries. The petitioners want to extend the right to same-sex marriage across the Union.
Massive civic action

The first group of initiatives represents a somewhat eclectic expression of what political change Europe’s citizens are wishing for. It may be, however, that the ECI is just the start of a massive civic action.

If the British launch of a citizens’ initiative is anything to go by, there is a flood of proposals waiting to be presented at the EU level. The UK’s e-petition threshold of 100,000 signatures is likely to be raised considerably due to the number of proposals pouring in, creating a huge backlog of issues to deal with. This is not a complication, but rather proof of the fact that this form of democratic expression is filling an important need. There is no reason why the ECI should not be the start of the same activity.

The initiative is there for you to take, but to make sure that yours will not stumble at any of the preliminary legal obstacles, you can contact the EU office in your home country, or better still, the people who are already running an initiative, and ask them for tips, based on their experiences.

Alessandra Mirabile is something of a pioneer. She insists that being among the first to launch an ECI has been very challenging. She advises petitioners or organisations wanting to launch an initiative to check with those who have gone slightly further in order to avoid basic mistakes.
Interview with Staffan Nilsson, President of the European Economic and Social Committee

How can the EESC strengthen its role to promote democracy in the EU?

We need to continue to act on our role in a meaningful and efficient way, and deliver high-quality opinions and recommendations to our policy- and decision-makers. This is what we are here for: to ensure a functioning EU participatory democratic system. We also do much more than opinions, which remain, however, the basis of our work as specified in the EU Treaty. We need to be present in, and connected to, the Member States, in conferences and consultation processes at national level, and also be present in society.

Any good examples of this you would like to mention?

At an EESC conference in Stockholm on the European 2020 strategy, a woman who represented the homeless turned the tables on our discussion by reminding us, together with a representative of the tenants’ association, that free movement of workers within the internal market also requires actions for housing. That’s the kind of presence I’m talking about.

The value added of the EESC stands in our members’ roots in the national networks and organisations, which in turn are connected to their local member organisations. We’re not elected politicians, but we are elected by the members of our organisations. A democratic system such as the EU has to integrate the demands raised by various organised interests. The channels used by organised civil society, alongside the elected leaders, allow citizens to express their views on important policies, which affect their lives.

How do you retain your attachment to citizens, the people you represent? Isn’t there a risk that the structures and the institution itself stand in the way of clearly seeing your mission?

There is a risk, and the key here is the work of our members in their organisations and with those they represent. I’ve been a member of the EESC since 1995, representing the Federation of Swedish Farmers LRF, and I’ve been the president of the EESC since October 2010. I remain conscious of the link I have to those I represented first, and now, as president, to civil society at large.

We always have to remind ourselves that we are not here for our own sake. We have a mission. Our organisations can help make the content of EU policy decisions more transparent and more accessible to their members. A good understanding of policy matters enables an effective participation and meaningful contribution to the work of our opinions.
How does this openness manifest itself?

Our Committee is open and tries to host as many meetings as our premises and resources allow in Brussels, whenever civil society organisations request this from us. We also offer support for interpretation at these events and various meetings so that civil society organisations from different parts of Europe can have a dialogue irrespective of language barriers.

We have also assumed the role of enabling civil society to connect and get together. Thus we are closer to the real-world civil society conversations, and I believe this also reinforces our work and role. We keep the doors open to individuals and groups who represent a different view. Our conferences, hearings, stakeholders’ forums and all the civil society gatherings we help to launch are always free of charge, and open to everybody; this is one way of counteracting the risk of isolation and limiting ourselves to the so-called Brussels bubble.

Describe how you see the Committee’s role

The EESC wants to be a European front runner in many respects and in several policy areas, mainly because we take the pulse of economic and social problems at grass-roots level, through our members, before these problems come to the surface. On a general note, we have always demanded more Europe, I would dare say more and earlier than any other institution or body. Even though we try to find a compromise between the interests of widely separate groups in society, like employers, unions,
farmers, consumers and other associations of various interests, the EESC sometimes manages to go so much further than other, more homogeneous, groups. An illustration of this, for example, is our opinion on eurobonds, which surprisingly united employers, unions and NGOs in one stark plea for the mutualisation of public debt in the EU.

The European ideals are very strong here in the EESC. We still play the European anthem, *Ode to Joy*, for example, during solemn occasions. We see a strong Europe as a uniquely good thing for Europeans.

**How is it possible to strengthen the different branches of civil society and the EU?**

We need to remain humble and at the same time to strengthen our role as the bridge between civil society and the EU institutions, and as an enabler of a participatory governance in the EU. In fact, it is the work and passion of individuals in organised civil society that is the basis for our action. They can then unite in different platforms and put up a stronger argument for the environment, for solidarity across borders, for farmers, etc.

*In my contact with some of these platform groups, I get the feeling that they create a bureaucracy that is as bad as, and sometimes even worse than, the institutions themselves. Do the platforms really have to mirror the EU institutions to be effective?*

It’s true that the organisations and even we, as a consultative body, risk becoming self-centred. At the same time, how can civil society act effectively without getting itself more organised, and more professional? A balance should be struck here and maintained.

One key is to face criticism with a constructive perspective. Take the example of the study made by the European Policy Centre in 2010. I think their input was very important. It gave us a chance to look at ourselves in the mirror, test ourselves, but it did create some feelings of discomfort within the EESC.

**How can the EESC make better use of the expertise of civil society?**

We can invite experts who are not members of the Committee to provide input into our work. And we make the utmost of our own expertise. Openness is also incredibly important. This is why we increasingly create more platforms, which allow us to listen to other, different civil society stakeholders and lend them the space to speak up. Take, for example, the civil society European Year of Citizens 2013 Alliance (EYCA). Together with the EESC’s Liaison Group with expert European networks we have helped create this platform for dialogue and participation for a good and concerted development of actions for the European Year of Citizens. There is also the internet, which we try to use as an intelligent means of collecting expertise from a broader civil society spectrum. For instance, we used our online platform and forum to complement our hearings and to gather input for our contribution into the Rio+20 process and agreement.

**Is it accurate to describe the Committee as a true representative of European civil society?**

We represent groups of stakeholders such as employers, trade unions, farmers, consumers’ associations, etc. from the Member States. The EU Member States nominate and send people from their most representative civil society bodies to the EESC. Therefore, we are representative because we are based in organised civil society structures in the Member States, in the real world. We know whom
we represent, their needs, their interests and in the EESC we try to integrate these interests and needs into the EU agenda. So you have in the EESC the social partners AND a mirror of civil society diversity across Europe. In general, I would say that membership-based organisations better represent civil society and their input is meaningful in terms of feeding back and forth into the policy-making process. This is what I call effective participatory democratic governance. And I hope we keep contributing to this.

*Actually, the Committee is full of contradictions?*

What really distinguishes us and where we add value (compared with any other individual interest/lobby group) is the fact that the EESC gathers “under one roof” opposing interests and with every policy recommendation we make, we try to strike a compromise between opposite views. This is where our democratic credentials lie and this is what we bring to the EU’s supranational democratic governance.
II. Examples of voices heard from four corners of the EU
Be it the guide dog federation, the young anti-doping ambassadors or the company campaigning for unconventional recruitment, they all play their part in pushing for change in their country and are using the EU to amplify their message and maybe reach 500 million citizens.

These stories represent a tiny sample of European civil society. There are tens of thousands of other stories to be told, about the dedicated and enthusiastic people who are united in their wish to contribute to a better community and, thereby, to a better European Union.

Some dare to go against the broad consensus of their country, like the Non-Smoking Generation of Sweden foundation which was virtually the only group welcoming the Commission’s proposal for a new tough tobacco law aimed at limiting tobacco use among young people. The industry and all political parties were critical of the proposal, supporting the Swedish tobacco industry’s lobbying to expand the market for snus, or smokeless tobacco, which was limited by the proposal.

Civil society represents the all-important fibre of democratic fabric, through which citizens can express their dreams and ideas in a different way than through their elected representatives.

The following examples have been chosen partly by chance, but mostly because their ideas are fired by strong individual and collective conviction among their members. These examples truly represent an added value when they are magnified on a European scale. A couple are present in Brussels and have been selected because of the clarity of their message, or the efficiency of their work. The trade union EPSU is driving a Citizens’ Initiative on the issue of water as a human right. The European Peacebuilding Liaison Office is using serious reports and concrete suggestions as a way of getting EU officials to listen and strengthen civilian and peace-building efforts in the Union’s external affairs.
Pablo Sánchez does not mince his words. The press officer of the Federation of European Public Service Unions, EPSU, is furious with what he sees as the current EU policy of turning everything into saleable goods, including water and sanitation services.

EPSU is the largest federation within the European Trade Union Confederation with 8 million public service workers from 275 trade unions in Europe. Mr Sánchez and his union do not see their action as purely an act of protecting their members’ jobs. They rally around the issue of water as a human right, as does the UN resolution from 2010.

EPSU claims that liberalisation has proved a disappointment wherever it has been tested. "Those who have tried privatisation are going back to municipalising the water, like Paris did recently," Mr Sánchez says.

The reason is that private companies invest too little and charge too much for water, according to research commissioned by EPSU from the UK’s University of Greenwich.

**Duopoly**

The fact that privatised water services are expensive may be because they are dominated by a de facto duopoly, says EPSU. There is very little competition in Europe between the giants of the water services market, which is basically ruled by the French multinationals Veolia and Suez.

Nevertheless, the pressure for privatisation is strong. It is one of the conditions that the troika of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund is putting on further funding for debt-ridden countries. The troika demands that the water services in Athens and Thessaloniki be fully privatised and the same remedy is expected for countries waiting to join the EU. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, EBRD, also promotes privatisation of water services.

The EPSU has therefore organised a European Citizens’ Initiative with the aim of stopping this wave of privatisation and reclaiming water as a common good, out of the reach of single market regulation or competition rules.
The latest upset was a proposal from Olli Rehn, the EU Commissioner responsible for the euro portfolio and the rescue programmes. He reaffirmed the Commission’s ambition that the countries supervised by the troika have to sell their water services.

**Legal basis**

The Commission would check that the “privatisation process guarantees full access to water for all citizens”, but this claim did little to reassure the sceptics. The EPSU and other activists wonder what the legal basis is for this forced privatisation.

The real inspiration for EPSU’s fight against water privatisation is the Italian Water Movement. This started as a campaign against the proposal for water liberalisation in 2008, which was introduced by Italy’s former prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi.

In spite of the resounding “no” in the referendum against water liberalisation, the government went ahead with the proposed law. The Italian Constitutional court overturned the decision, which means that the people’s decision stands.

The Italian Water Movement was a real grass-roots movement, having started its operations from a squat in Rome, with no public money.

**Fighting spirit**

The EPSU is not working from a squat, but rather from a spacious floor in a modern office building, a couple of blocks from the Commission’s headquarters in the Brussels EU-area. The fighting spirit is still there, though, and Mr Sánchez wants to retain the sense of grass-roots momentum. Citizens have very strong feelings about their water and he is sure that if put to a vote, a large majority of Europeans would support keeping water services public, like the Italians did.

“Water is a natural monopoly. You cannot do without it. There is no alternative to water. The poorest citizens will suffer most from privatisation of water,” says Mr Sánchez.

Households represent a mere 9% of water consumption. The rest is used by industry and agriculture. The more you consume the better value you get. Therefore, traditional pricing is no incentive to be economical with water.

The EPSU is using the ECI as a political tool to save water from becoming a commodity. The campaign is gaining momentum. Recently, the ECI was joined by a group of like-minded mayors from cities across Europe. The EPSU is trying to widen its support base as much as possible, but Mr Sánchez remains sceptical as to the possibility of getting the Water ECI all the way to a Commission proposal.
“I call the ECI a petition to the king because the Commission can still reject the initiative. We must see the ECI more as an agenda-setting tool,” he says.

**Surrealist**

Mr Sánchez describes the problems of setting up the ECI in truly surrealist terms. The Commission’s software system could not accept the different formats of ID numbers. (Eighteen countries require ID numbers to validate petition signatures. Nine countries do not, which simplifies the process in one way, but also opens the list to all sorts of Mickey Mice and James Bonds.)

Nevertheless, the EU Commissioner responsible for the ECI, Maroš Šefčovič, congratulated the EPSU for being the first ECI organiser to start collecting online signatures. Due to the initial software troubles at the Commission, the early-bird ECI organisers have been given an extended deadline of another six months, until November 2013, to gather their 1 million signatures.

**Comment from Leila Kurki, EESC member, Group II, Finland**

The EESC strongly supports all means to encourage and facilitate the active participation of citizens in political and public life. The European Citizens’ Initiative is a good tool, but its importance must also be recognised by decision-makers.

It has been stated many times that the EU’s ambition is to develop into a competitive, knowledge-based economy with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. These are not merely nice words. The Lisbon Treaty explicitly states that the EU wants to achieve this by, inter alia, combating social exclusion, promoting economic and social progress for its citizens and guaranteeing social rights.

The lack of decisiveness in this area has led to a grave problem of EU legitimacy. EU institutions should maintain fundamental social rights and standards with more conviction. EPSU’s initiative for the right to pure water should be taken as a serious human rights concern for citizens.
Guide dogs for Europe

“Our goal is for all visually impaired people in Europe, who are suitable and willing, to have a guide dog. We are looking for a uniformly high level of standards for dogs,” says Peter Farnworth, who has served as president of the European Guide Dog Federation.

These European ambitions are put into practice locally, in many guide dog centres in Europe. We visited one in the Belgian town of Tongeren, midway between Maastricht, Liège and Leuven. This is the Belgian guide dog centre, with its secretariat, and it also serves as a “boarding school” for young dogs, as they prepare to join their visually impaired clients.

Thanks to their trustworthy furry friend, disabled people will gain independence, mobility and often, as a result of this, greater self-confidence.

To Peter Farnworth, a robust and trustworthy guide dog is an essential tool for the visually impaired to exercise their human rights. However, the chance of getting a guide dog varies significantly across the EU.

In the UK, 5,000 guide dogs are currently working and the British association receives ample funds. In France, the situation is slightly different: the number of French guide dogs is circa 1,500 and a visually impaired person has to sign up to a waiting list of up to one year to get a dog. In Belgium, the estimated need is for 600-700 guide dogs, but there is a lack of both dogs and trainers.

**European standard**

The European Guide Dog Federation has received a three-year grant of €300,000 from the EU’s Leonardo education programme, which has now run out. The plan was to help to finance guide-dog centres in different parts of Europe, and to establish some sort of European standard for both dogs and trainers.

The price of a fully trained dog, including administrative costs and money for trainers, is €30,000 to €40,000. Funding varies from country to country. In the Netherlands, for example, guide dogs are covered by health insurance.

Good, obedient guide dogs are a prerequisite for the all-important right to access, which is something the federation is working on. Being allowed to bring the dog into a store, post office, airport, or on public transport is vital for the visually impaired. A universally acknowledged right to access is something the
federation is pushing very hard all over Europe. This would guarantee basic free movement for guide
dogs and their owners. Some countries are more developed, often thanks to the dedicated work of a
person or group of individuals or a local patron. Croatia – soon to be an EU member – is one example.

“There is a centre in Croatia, which has so far trained 112 guide dogs, 69 of which are now active,”
says Mira Katalenić, president of the Croatian association and a board member of the European
Federation. “We estimate a cost of €15 000 for a fully trained dog, but for the client it’s free.”

The principal of Belgium’s boarding school in Tongeren is Ellis van den Berg, who is also a professional
dog trainer. Her trainee guide dogs – six at present – are Labradors or golden retrievers or a mix of
poodle and retriever. They are selected from specific breeders, and the puppies chosen are tested at
five, six and seven weeks.

“We want to see how the puppy reacts to certain manipulations: we turn it over on its back, and a good
puppy should wriggle a little, then calm down, then wriggle a little again,” explains Jules O’Dwyer, an
Irish professional dog trainer who is working at the centre.

The selected puppies are then given basic education for ten months in a foster family, and if they show
the right attitude and are in good health, they are selected for training at the guide-dog centre.

Lack of guide dogs

The veterinarian, Bob Roesmans, who serves the centre on a voluntary basis, is also a board member of the European Guide
Dog Federation.

He says there are no clear statistics, but there is clearly a lack
of guide dogs and trainers all over Europe, except in the UK.
The Belgian government is asking for more dogs, but it takes time
to train new trainers and breed good dogs – time and money,
of course.

The dog trainers at the centre have to be as good and attentive
with people as they are dog-whisperers. Ms Driesmans is a trained
social worker as well as a dog teacher. She must understand the
disability of the new owner and be able to communicate her
experience of dogs to the visually impaired.

When Baily comes home from her walk she is still in her harness
and stays amazingly calm. The instant she is out of her harness,
she becomes a “normal” dog, sniffing around, sticking her head into a big shopping bag, and impatiently
waiting to join friends at the kennel. “The harness is the signal. While she wears it, she is on duty, but when
she is out of it she becomes another kind of dog, a pet. That’s how it should be,” says Ms Driesmans.
Comment from Yannis Vardakastanis, EESC member, Group III, Greece

Freedom of movement is a fundamental freedom that all EU citizens should enjoy. The European Guide Dog Federation is an example of how representatives of people with disabilities advocate for personal mobility, for accessibility and high-quality standards across the EU. As part of the disability movement and together with the European Disability Forum, the EGDF fights for people with disabilities to be involved in all decision-making processes that concern them, and for equal opportunities to become a reality for all in the EU.
Innovation Express – boosting young Finnish entrepreneurs

When the network of young Finnish entrepreneurs arrived in Brussels on 12 November 2012, they were armed with a manifesto that they handed over to the European Commission at the Helsinki Representation office.

Innovation Express is a tour organised by LaureaES, an NGO promoting student entrepreneurship. In cooperation with several universities in southern Finland, which co-funded the trip, the visitors were all students and entrepreneurs.

Brussels was the first stop on their European tour. Strasbourg, Nice and Barcelona were the next cities on the route; the group was travelling by train, with an InterRail Pass. The students had the right to eight days of train travel on the continent plus accommodation, but they had to pay for their flights to and from Helsinki. In Nice, they would visit the university of Sophia-Antipolis, known as a successful incubator for hi-tech start-ups. Barcelona was chosen for its strong tradition of innovation.

Struggling with red tape is one of the issues that put entrepreneurs off. Innovation Express has a recipe for creating a more fertile ground for Europe’s young entrepreneurs: the main ingredient is uniform rules for setting up a business in any EU country, and getting rid of the bureaucracy. The idea is that “politics supports entrepreneurship rather than regulates behaviour”.

Allowing failures

It is also important to be allowed to fail. Behind many big successes are a couple of failed attempts at creating a business. The manifesto therefore asked for a change in attitude among Europe’s leaders, so that failing entrepreneurs would not lose their credibility. “Both failures and successes (ought to be) celebrated as important parts of learning and moving forward.”

Entrepreneurial spirit needs to be encouraged from early on. If Europe is to breed many more entrepreneurs, countries will have to start at school. In the manifesto, Innovation Express suggests that “entrepreneurial thinking [should be] taught from the very first years of school”.

WHO
Network of young Finnish students and entrepreneurs

PROBLEM
Lack of start-up spirit in Europe

EU SOLUTION
Uniform rules for setting up businesses in Europe, including entrepreneurship in EU Comenius school programmes

Civil society and democracy – The citizens’ shortcut to the EU
This struck a strong note with Simone Baldassarri of the Commission’s DG Enterprise. He was invited to meet the students at the Helsinki Representation office in Brussels to receive the manifesto. He explained that the Commission was conscious of this “entrepreneurial gap” which had to be overcome.

“Education can foster the spirit of creating a business, but it can also kill the same spirit,” he said, adding that entrepreneurship is more than starting a business – it is also a key competence. The majority of the students who were taught entrepreneurship and business during their studies found a job afterwards. The students who did not study business had greater difficulty.

Creative spirits

Finland scores top results in international assessments of education systems. Mr Baldassarri reminded the students of this, and said that many other countries with more conservative schools are not as likely to promote entrepreneurs with creative spirits.

One of the participants on the trip, Matti Lamminsalo, is CEO of the IT company he created a couple of years ago, which sells apps featuring nightlife hot spots, so far only in Helsinki. The popularity of the app during last summer has emboldened Mr Lamminsalo to think that the sky is the geographical limit. He is hoping to create a partnership with established listings publications in big European cities, and to link the app to social media. The idea would be to find out where your Facebook friends are, and then go there.

The 24-year-old now has two business partners and six employees and is convinced that his company can grow like wildfire.

“It started because I thought that there should be a way of finding out what’s going on in town via your smart phone. With this app, you can find out where the nearest karaoke bar is or the next poker tournament, for example. It can also be linked to renting a flat. You may want to know what the nightlife is like in the area. Bars and clubs pay a monthly fee of €100 to appear on our app, and that’s very cheap advertising.”

With infectious enthusiasm, Mr Lamminsalo says that young entrepreneurs need to get university credits for their work, as he has done with the studies he has undertaken for his company.

“The school curriculum should also include entrepreneurship. It creates a way of thinking,” says Mr Lamminsalo. “I may finish my studies next spring, thanks to this system of using my company as an example for my practice. Otherwise, I would have taken ten years to finish, because my first priority is still my company.”
Comment from Ján Oravec, EESC member, Group I, Slovakia

I was excited to hear about an interesting initiative by young Finnish entrepreneurs: their European tour with their manifesto on how to promote entrepreneurship. The EU Barometer on entrepreneurship back in 2010 demonstrated that nowadays many more Chinese (more than 70% of the population) than Europeans (just about 50%) prefer a status of being self-employed to being an employee. There is no future for Europe without entrepreneurs. Therefore, we all need to wake up now! Young Finnish entrepreneurs came up with very well defined priorities: teaching entrepreneurship starting from nursery schools; improving the business environment by getting rid of red tape; encouraging risk-taking, and accepting failure as a necessary part of striving for success. These are also my long-term priorities when representing Slovak entrepreneurs vis-à-vis politicians and policy-makers both at national and EU levels. I am looking forward to pushing for these priorities together with a new generation of young entrepreneurs!
Europe’s young anti-doping ambassadors

The fight against doping may be an uphill battle. It should not be reserved for the small elite of global top performers, because the problem is also very relevant at the junior level and among amateurs in health clubs. The best way to reach out to these groups is through intelligent peer pressure.

This was the starting point of the project by the German Youth Sports Federation, Deutsche Sports Jugend (DSJ), where Rebekka Kemmler-Mueller is responsible for the project which aims to establish a network of European anti-doping youth ambassadors.

“The message from the big sports organisations is scaring people from listening, because of the authoritarian and prohibitionist tone of voice. We are convinced that a more efficient way of spreading the anti-doping message is to strengthen young athletes’ self-confidence,” explains Rebekka Kemmler-Mueller.

Anti-doping mentality

The European Commission accepted the pilot project, which ran from 1 December 2010 until 31 March 2012, as part of the Preparatory Action in Sports 2010-2012. The main goal was to establish an anti-doping mentality. The EU Commissioner responsible for sports, Androulla Vassiliou, took a personal interest in the scheme.

The anti-doping ambassadors project, started by DSJ, was geared specifically towards young athletes. It involved educating young athletes in workshops where they were taught the basics on the effects of doping, doping controls, prohibited substances, psychology, and communication skills. They were then sent back home to spread the word to other young athletes, who would act as multipliers of the message.

The problem is huge. According to a German study, between one-quarter and a half of all athletes use doping substances. Marijuana is the most common among young athletes.

“For the project to continue, the EU demanded measurable success, which was almost impossible to provide evidence for, at least in numbers, but we are convinced that our way of spreading the anti-doping message is the most efficient,” says Ms Kemmler-Mueller.

The DSJ now finds itself with a number of highly motivated anti-doping ambassadors who lack the financing to go out and do their job of inspiring young athletes and sports amateurs to adhere to the goal: namely, a “European-wide anti-doping mentality in the youth sector”, as it is formulated in the European Commission programme.
Rugby and bobsleigh

I talked to two of these ambassadors, who met during the training programme and have remained in contact since: 24-year-old rugby player Nils Avanturier from France and Danej Navrboc, the 21-year-old member of the Slovenian national bobsleigh team and a trained kindergarten teacher.

According to Mr Avanturier, the four-day training in June 2011, organised with project funding from the European Commission, was excellent. He and Mr Navrboc especially remember the testimonies of three athletes from the former DDR, one of whom was Andreas Krieger, a former champion shot-putter, born as Heidi. The athlete was unknowingly heavily doped with steroids by her trainer and later underwent sex reassignment surgery. Today, he suffers chronic pain and devotes his life to campaigning against doping.

"The training was based on intercultural understanding – doping is viewed differently in different countries. Another theme was sports psychology and how to strengthen self-esteem among the athletes. We also used role-play, which was very good."

The participants became a team and used their new tools to spread the message of anti-doping to the athletes in their respective countries. In January 2012, they met again in Innsbruck in the margins of the Youth Winter Olympics.

"Everyone felt they had made progress in transmitting this message," says Nils Avanturier.

Danej Navrboc is on leave from his kindergarten job, as he is now training full time for the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014. On his return from a training session in Sochi, he told us that he was still optimistic. He finds it hard to believe that the anti-doping ambassadors’ efforts will go unnoticed and hopes that the European Commission will come up with some way to continue funding their campaign.

"Our team in Slovenia has probably reached 3 500 young athletes. It is so important to meet the juniors and amateurs of sports and communicate the anti-doping message to them. The big associations are mostly interested in the sporting elite, but the preventive effect is bigger if you reach younger sportsmen and women," he says.

Comment from Alfredo Correia, EESC member, Group II, Portugal

Sports contribute a lot to the physical and mental health of our citizens and also to the values of discipline and team spirit. They help furthering social integration. The EESC recognises the problem of doping in sports. We need an EU-level discussion between the Member States on how to fight against the social ill. It risks the health of sports amateurs while also perverting the true ideals of sports. This work by the anti-doping ambassadors expresses the opinion of the EESC very well.
They have been dismissed as “hamburger jobs”, which may be why the Swedish fast-food chain had trouble recruiting reliable people for its restaurants around Sweden.

The chain runs more than 90 restaurants in Sweden and Norway and has 3,500 employees. Since 2005, several hundred of these have been recruited from Samhall, the Swedish state-owned company tasked with providing meaningful training and jobs for people with different disabilities.

Centre of excellence

The company is expanding, maybe worldwide, building on its experience of unconventional hiring. It is calling on the European institutions to set up a European centre of excellence, using the experience of recruiting people who have been marginalised, and seeing their disabilities as a source of strength rather than a drawback.

"We never saw this as a PR stunt, to get favourable coverage, but it has turned out that way. We have never had to advertise, thanks to our recruitment policy. We don’t even write about this on our webpage. The key to success begins with the core values. We don’t think that being reimbursed for hiring people with disabilities is a primary factor. It may be an important incentive, but it is still second to attitude," says Pär Larshans, chief sustainability officer.

That is why the company calls on the European Social Fund (ESF) to adopt and act on its idea of a value-driven perspective on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the new programme period of 2014-2020.

“This starts with the attitude of the managers, who follow a training scheme. They have to confront their own prejudices. This will make them capable of handling employees with different needs,” Mr Larshans continues.

He joined the family-owned company 26 years ago. In 2002, Mr Larshans, as human resources manager, started to worry about the demographic situation. An ageing population would make it more and more difficult for the company to expand, simply because it would not find people to hire.
“The 18-year-old kids fresh out of school weren’t interested in joining a fast-food restaurant. If they did, they didn’t stay long. They wanted to become IT millionaires. Our personnel turnover was big and that wasn’t good for the restaurants.”

**Pioneer**

Mr Larshans realised he had to broaden the search for new personnel. He contacted Samhall, which operates on 250 sites around Sweden and has 20 000 employees. The pioneer was Lars Andersson who started working at the restaurant six years ago in his home town of Piteå, in northern Sweden.

Mr Andersson had worked at Samhall for three months when he was offered trial employment as a restaurant host. He suffers from attention deficit disorder and dyslexia. He had previously been unemployed for 12 years and had lost his confidence after uncountable failed job interviews with employers unable to see his special potential.

As a restaurant host, he has to make sure the customers are well received, are informed about the special deals and that the restaurant is clean and welcoming. This job suits his personable attitude very well. When he signed his first contract, he could not believe his luck. The feeling of being included, listened to, respected and good at his job was literally life changing.

“I bought a laptop with my first salary. It helped my dyslexia. Since then, I have married and my foster parents are very proud and happy. The difference is that the bosses see my possibilities and they are informed how to tackle my disabilities. I also had some education in psychology before I started, which is good when the customer gets upset about getting the wrong hamburger, for example. My employer has adapted to my physical need for regular hours. I work day shifts and every other weekend, although the restaurants are open until midnight,” says Mr Andersson. “It has given me self-confidence.”

Since he got the job, he has become quite used to giving speeches about his road to inclusion and what this has meant to him. “In the beginning, it was easy to say that my success was a lucky strike, that I wouldn’t be able to keep it up. Now that it’s been six years, they can’t say that any more.”

**Broaden recruitment**

Mr Larshans wants to broaden his recruitment to immigrants who have arrived in Sweden and are encountering the same difficulties in finding a job. He is convinced that there is a huge opportunity within this group of people and has started a programme called Manager 2018, which involves hiring restaurant hosts, with a view to training them to become managers within five years.

“We need this diversity. If these young employees perform well, we will offer them jobs as restaurant managers in their country of origin, having first trained in Sweden,” Mr Larshans concludes.
Comment from Marie Zvolská, EESC member, Group I, Czech Republic

The Swedish example shows how to use the European Social Fund, the key instrument for supporting the implementation of the European employment strategy.

Investment must be aimed at the development of human resources, improving skills and the reintegration into the labour market of workers who have been made redundant.

Nonetheless, priority should be given to the creation of quality jobs, sustainable growth and the incorporation into the labour market and into society of vulnerable social groups including young people, women, migrants, the long-term unemployed, people who are the furthest removed from the labour market, older people and people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities, in order to increase the EU’s competitiveness and achieve the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy.

According to the EESC opinion “The future of the European Social Fund after 2013” a number of improvements must be made to the implementation of procedures and the practical aspects of accessing ESF funding: considerably reducing bureaucracy, speeding up the payment system in order to minimise the financial burden for those implementing programmes, and simplifying the invoicing and account settlement procedures, through the use of lump sums, for example.
“The EU should play a key role in peacebuilding and conflict prevention, and that’s why we are here,” says Catherine Woollard, executive director of the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO).

The EPLO wants to strengthen the EU’s credentials as a peace project, within and outside Europe. “EPLO is an umbrella for 33 European member organisations,” she says, defending the role of platforms. “There are over 1,000 NGOs in Brussels, and the officials simply don’t have the time to meet them all. Certainly the European External Action Service, the EU foreign service is not staffed for that”.

“One voice

“From the NGOs’ point of view, it’s a practical and economical way of being represented in Brussels; instead of employing a person and renting office space, our members pay an annual fee of €1,000 to €10,000, depending on the size of the organisation.” Ms Woollard insists that the EPLO has a clear enough mandate from its members to speak with one voice in Brussels.

One voice

“Our mission is to strengthen the policies so that the EU becomes more active and effective in preventing violent conflicts and promoting peace. For this, one has to be in Brussels. If there is something I wish for, it is for even more members. The more expertise we bring into the organisation, the greater our legitimacy.”

The EPLO general assembly met in November 2012 and agreed on a three-year strategy. This serves as a reminder of what the members demand. It keeps the Brussels office with its staff of eight people on its toes to deliver, and to respond to questions from the members. It is a control system within, which Ms Woollard thinks works. “I see our role as part watchdog, part specialist bringing expertise on our subject,” she says.

Ms Woollard spends a lot of time meeting officials, attending and organising conferences when she is not writing reports. As we walk through the EU area, she extends greetings right and left, proof of a wide network of contacts. “There are enough lobbies representing the arms industry in Brussels,” she says. After one conference on the EU’s role as a peacemaker, organised by the European Policy Centre and the Finnish Peace Institute, there was a long line of people wanting to talk to her after she had raised a critical question about the role of the EEAS.
Peace prize

As a specialist in EU peacebuilding, Ms Woollard thinks the Nobel Peace Prize was deserved and “extremely important”. She interpreted the committee’s motivation as a good reminder of what the EU is all about. She hopes that the prize will enhance EU peacebuilding capacities, the way they have been successfully implemented within Europe. “It should also serve as a reminder to combat nationalism and extremism in EU Member States,” she continues.

Civil society means different things in different Member States. Among the new members, civil society was a strong force in the transition from the communist era, and it still plays an important role. In southern Europe, civil society is often based on either activist grass-roots movements, or it is highly elitist, think-tank-driven. That is also reflected in how officials meet with organisations like the EPLO. “Certain officials may have a sceptical view of civil society,” she says.

This prejudice should be countered by the highly professional reports that the EPLO produces – for example, an analysis of the EEAS which included 43 specific recommendations. “When we reviewed the situation a year later, we were pleased to see that a number of our recommendations had been adopted.” The quality of the analysis is what Ms Woollard comes back to all the time.

There is little room for compromise and bland messages. The EPLO operates with other platforms on a regular basis. It very rarely writes reports with other umbrella organisations with similar interests, because the necessary consensus between the authors means those reports lose their analytical edge.

Good analysis

“What makes politicians and officials listen is good quality analysis,” she concludes.

The EPLO was started in 2001, but Ms Woollard joined four years ago. In 2010, the office won a huge EU grant to become the organiser and facilitator of what is called the Civil Society Dialogues Network (CSDN).

“We have the responsibility to organise dialogues with EU policy-makers and civil society on peace and conflict issues. We have been asked to set up 40 dialogues between the institutions and civil society. In July, for example, we organised a dialogue in Brussels with representatives from Libyan civil society.”

Ms Woollard is worried about the proposed budget cuts for the EEAS, which would seriously damage the EU’s ability to act externally. “Already, this service is understaffed,” she claims. “Our success depends on how our analysis is received and there being someone qualified at the other end to listen.”

With reference to the independence of the organisation when it receives substantial funding from the EU institutions, she responds: “I would much rather not receive EU funds and rely solely on membership fees and other benefactors, like the Quaker organisation, and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Having said that, I don’t think our reports produced before and after we received funds from the EU are very different. Sometimes, we are criticised by our members for being too pro-European. But it is difficult to wield real influence on EU policy if you are a Eurosceptic NGO,” she acknowledges.
Learning from the examples

Naturally, the success stories for organised civil society on a European scale are based on dedicated people with a vision. The challenge for the EU is to have the sensitivity to build on these ambitions.

In the case of the guide dogs, it may help to be part of a bigger structure, like the Disability Forum, through which concerns can be voiced and amplified. However, at times it seems as if the platforms, or umbrellas, as they are sometimes called, may also be a hindrance because they are caught in a system that forces them to mirror the institutions. The veterinarian Bob Roesmans, on the board of the European Guide Dog Federation, claimed it was hard to understand the different layers of decision-making within the bigger structures, like the Disability Forum. They become bureaucratic, lead-footed, navel-gazing and dangerously apt at infighting.

If the umbrella becomes an umbrella of the umbrellas, it is very hard to see who is actually sheltering underneath. The platforms risk becoming a goal in themselves, perpetuating their own organisation, in danger of leaving the citizens, for whom they are working, behind.

However, Ms Woollard of the EPLO, points out the practicalities of being an umbrella. It creates access to EU officials and makes it economically feasible for local organisations to be represented in Brussels. In the EPLO’s case, the member organisations give clear a mandate to the Brussels office, which rules out the uncertainty of representing many members.

Also, in the case of civil society in third countries, policy advisers recommend using a collective grouping of associations. Dealing with a single interlocutor in a special field is more efficient than dealing with possibly competing smaller ones, according to a 2011 study from the European University Institute, by Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan.

Comment from Jane Morrice, EESC member, Group III, United Kingdom

I have had the opportunity to work with the EPLO on a number of occasions when drafting my opinions on EU peacebuilding strategies in Northern Ireland and beyond. It is a highly professional, well-respected organisation carrying out valuable work for its members. It is an organisation whose expertise is both reliable and influential because it comes directly from NGOs working at the coalface of peacebuilding and conflict prevention. It is that experience in the field combined with a knowledge and understanding of the corridors of EU power which gives the EPLO its cutting edge.
Cash point

Money is always an issue, as is the problem of credibility and independence.

If your work is financed by European Commission funds, the risk of echoing “his master’s voice” is obvious, as Pedro Sánchez of the EPSU union pointed out.

In a critical report by IPN, the free-trade think-tank, called “Friends of the EU”, the authors Caroline Boin and Andrea Marchesetti describe how ten big green NGOs, called the Green 10, present in Brussels, rely heavily on EU funding. Half of the budget of Friends of the Earth, for example, comes from EU coffers. The researchers question the independence of organisations which receive generous funding from the Union.

The legitimate control system surrounding the distribution of money makes funding very complicated. Therefore, it makes sense to fund projects for a longer term. In the case of the anti-doping ambassadors, the project ran for less than a year and is now left orphaned. For some, finding EU funding has become a profession in itself. This is not possible for smaller associations which must rely on the federations or platforms to access funds.

Certain associations and NGOs have, for example, decided against launching an ECI because it is too costly. Innovative ways of funding that do not necessarily involve EU budget lines seem to be in demand. President Nilsson’s idea of membership fees comes to mind, but also private donations and other campaigns. As an example, the Belgian guide dog association collects plastic bottle caps which are sold on to a polymer factory for recycling.

The Community Foundation for Ireland has set up a simple website for donations, where givers can fund causes they believe in while those in need can apply for funds. It sets a good example for civil society organisation in other countries as well. The Solstice Festival in Cork, which advertises itself as a “platform for emerging artists, experimentation and community”, has organised financing along the same lines with attractive formulas for sponsors, friends and patrons who receive VIP treatment in return for gifts.
III. Being an active citizen
Being an active citizen and taking an active interest in how your community is run may sound like a lot to ask when the clock governs your schedule, and you may even have difficulties meeting the basic demands of your busy life. Clearly, this challenge is even bigger if you are a newcomer, and you do not trust your language skills, or the social codes in your new environment.

Europeans are becoming more mobile, leaving their home country to settle in other EU Member States, while new citizens arrive in the Union bringing other traditions with them. This mobility, which is not only voluntary but often imposed by economic reality as people leave tight job markets to find employment elsewhere, is naturally part of creating a new sense of European identity. In an increasingly heterogeneous society, we sometimes struggle to find a common goal, a common sense of belonging.

**European identity**

Civil society can play an important role in forging this identity and what is sometimes referred to as part *ownership* in your community.

The economic downturn has hit Europe’s associations from two sides: their services are in greater demand than ever while, at the same time, Member States are cutting their funding. Simultaneously, the associations’ budgets, which admittedly have grown since the 1950s, are now being eroded: membership revenues have dropped, as has funding from private donors.

Nevertheless, civil society’s work in community outreach may help resolve the economic crisis, as Valérie Fourneyron, a member of the French government, explained in an interview in the daily *Le Monde*, on 25 October 2012: “In terms of employment, in projects and in new forms of solidarity... the associations remake living together. They respond to a crisis of values.”

Ms Fourneyron pointed out that participating in associations and community life can build an important bridge into society for young people who may have difficulties at school or in finding a job.

**Trust**

“The participation of the young in civil society has remained stable for 20 years. It seems they have more confidence in the institutions of associations than in the institutions of the Republic,” admitted the minister.

She touched on the subject of trust, which is at the heart of democracy. While citizens may lack trust in the institutions, they still have confidence in civil society.
Trust is missing in the newer Member States, as well, which is reported widely in the media and by social scientists. The financial crisis has not only put economic strain on citizens but has also created a sense of disillusion with the political system, including EU membership, which is the subject of academic research within the countries. This dissatisfaction with modern democracy has become exacerbated in the present economic climate. It expresses itself partly in the emergence of strong nationalist and extremist political anti-establishment movements.

Here again, civil society could provide the new link between institutions and citizens, reinforcing the bottom-up approach, as described in a report by Professor Attila Agh of the Corvinius University of Budapest, presented at the conference on *Democracy, Liberty and Freedom in Central and Eastern Europe* on 16 November 2012 in Budapest. It was organised by the progressive European think-tank FEPS and three Hungarian think-tanks. Professor Agh insisted that only a more just Europe would stem the lure of authoritarianism.

Times are also changing in terms of loyalties. We are unlikely to remain with the same employer for a lifetime. And, if it survives, the company is more likely to get new owners. We may have to change jobs and develop new skills, as the ones we have acquired are no longer in demand in a rapidly changing economy.

**Mobility as a goal**

The idea of a lifelong relationship and traditional family structures are equally challenged, partly because we live longer. The loyalty to our region, to our house, even to our furniture is put under strain as we move, get bored and simply want renewal in a fast-paced world. Following the view that economic growth is the only way forward, good citizens are also ardent consumers.

Our politicians encourage it and the goal of the internal market is also to stimulate growth and mobility. The success of the single market relies on our ability to uproot ourselves and move from unemployment to where the jobs are. This all adds up to a breakdown of, or freedom from – depending on how you see it – old structures. For some people, this may be experienced as a sense of loss and alienation, while for others it is perceived as a huge arena of new possibilities.

The Belgian philosopher at Oxford University, Philippe Van Parijs, calls for a new collective identity in Europe as a way of fighting the radical individualism that is encouraged by present economic ideas. He sees short-term thinking as a threat to our sense of community.

The individualist tendency is strengthened by our mobility. To rebuild a long-term collective identity, Mr Van Parijs calls for action both at the very local level, such as organising a street party, but also at the European level, which is where the EESC can play a role. Organised civil society has been given a new task to complement Europeans’ sense of collective identity.

The declining interest in formal politics may have slowed down, with relatively high turnouts in many recent elections. The presidential elections in the United States and France in 2012, for example, were widely reported on and turnout was high. The European elections still struggle to evoke the same enthusiasm.
Making waves

There is, however, a strong revival in civil society. The economic crisis has become a fertile soil for different kinds of protest movements and civil society has become a strong pillar of confidence, while trust in political leadership has waned. We may even be watching a new wave of civil society involvement, on a par with the green awakening.

The British NGO Food Cycle is a good example of how participation in civil society can create a bridge into the job market. Using surplus food and spare kitchen space, Food Cycle volunteers cook nutritious meals for people in need while at the same time creating a community hub.

The volunteers are trained and develop skills, and thus stand a better chance of entering the labour market. To date, Food Cycle is only active in community centres in the United Kingdom, but this sort of cross-over activity could certainly be transferred to other European countries. Maybe it could inspire Ms Fourneyron of the French government to push for similar actions in France.

In this way, civil society can play a role, not only in sending the necessary messages from citizens to the politicians, but also in creating new bonds, new loyalties and sense of participation in European society.

During the EESC conference in May 2012, one of the prevailing messages was the need to use organised civil society as building blocks for the common good. Civil society has become a necessary complement to the welfare society.
A Europe-wide civil society association is potentially a popular democracy movement involving 500 million people. Your power of persuasion is so much bigger if you connect across borders. Below you will find a non-exhaustive list of ten tips on how to break the ice, and make your association known in Brussels so that you can bring your message to decision-makers in the Union and link up with citizens in other EU countries who share your concerns.

Think of the Union as a machine, which runs on four different fuels: the first one is personal relations, which you will have to build. The second is basic distrust, which you will have to dispel with your strong arguments. It was this distrust that led to strict rules, for example protecting the small countries, from being trampled on by the bigger members. The third concerns external forces and threats, which are agenda-setters and to which the EU response can be the real solution to the problem. Take for example the outbreak of Avian influenza, which started in Asia in 2003 and then hit the EU. The lack of proper coordination of disease control within the single market was laid bare, and a couple of years later the EU had to set up a new agency called the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in Sweden. The fourth fuel is the political will for consensus, in spite of significant differences in position. The handling of the financial crisis could serve as one such example.

Decision-making in the EU system may seem byzantine and more difficult to predict than political results in your home country, partly because there are so many more players on the field. Decision-making is not linear, like Member State democracy. The national government’s proposal is likely to be enacted, because it will be voted on in a parliament, the majority of which often supports government. The Commission’s proposal has a more complicated path to take. It is not very likely to be voted on in the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers without being altered en route. This opens the EU policymaking to many voices, and maybe one of them is yours.

**Ten tips for EU success**

1. Do your **homework** and present your case correctly. If you are on a limited budget, then skip the fancy folders and stick to the basics. The important thing is to get the facts right. Your message should be clearly stated, preferably boiled down to one concrete phrase. This can be elaborated by bullet points, which are reader-friendly and look good. Your folder and/or webpage should be easy-to-read, clear and concise, with full contact details and information about who is supporting you, how you are financed and the basic history. This does a lot to dissipate basic distrust.

2. Never lose sight of the **European dimension** of your area. This is the fourth fuel at work. Try to formulate what could be the political will on an EU level, to reach your goal. Even if your fight is local from the start, the way to make decision-makers in Brussels listen is to prove that your idea can add value to Europe. A paper signed by groups from several member countries is infinitely stronger and sends a much more powerful message. In this context, it may be important to be inclusive. Do not forget the EEA countries like Norway and Iceland, which apply internal market rules although they are not EU members. Iceland is a candidate for EU membership and the European institutions are keen to link up with civil society in candidate countries. If, for example, you are promoting your yoga association, try to find out if there are similar associations in other regions of Europe, which are involved in the same line of work. A European dimension also means that while the fight may be local, the result is for the European good.
3. Find the **right channels**. This requires a more-than-basic knowledge of the decision-making process. Get a guide of EU decision-making from your local EU representation. You can also call the Europe Direct Call Centre on a free phone line 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 from anywhere in the EU. There are local Europe Direct offices scattered across the Union, not only in the capitals. Check out your local office on the Europe Direct website. For a call-back service, you can also text the message “call me” to +32 472 6 7 8 9 10 – an English-speaking operator will get back to you and transfer you to an operator speaking your preferred EU language.

4. Once you have your guide and basic information at hand, you may want to find out more from the European Parliament and European Commission, which both have local representative offices in the Member States. Maybe there is already a platform representing your issues. Another source of information is your country’s **Representation** office in the EU. An official or diplomat is employed to follow developments in, for example, the environment, social affairs, finance or employment. Brussels and the EU system are sometimes caricatured as the home of faceless bureaucrats, but it is actually a meeting place more than anything else. Find the right person to talk to in the corridors, and half your job will be done.

5. This demands a good **phonebook** and who’s who, like the EESC’s **Vademecum**, which can be ordered online. Rather than reading a 50 page document, it may be more efficient (and definitely more pleasant) to start with a cup of coffee with a knowledgeable person. Look for someone in a network or an association who is already well connected in Brussels. Apply your **networking skills**. Keep your phone and address book updated. The best way of gaining confidence is to get back to the person you met at the coffee break at the conference, and follow up on the discussion with a link to an article or something that will add an extra piece to the jigsaw of your particular problem. In-depth knowledge can be gained at **conferences**, not only from the speakers, but also from questions raised by other participants. Attending live events presents opportunities to meet other people. Get a copy of the attendance sheet which will give you a good idea of who else is interested in your subject. It may seem unfashionable, but the good old business card is still the best way to exchange contact details in Brussels.

6. Check out the **buzzwords**. You may question the EU’s insistence on using a language that soon becomes jargon, but there is no way round it. Certain expressions serve as an alarm clock and a signpost pointing to a directive or framework of rules which can be applied to your specific project.

7. Try to **position yourself** in the European arena, by establishing the different driving forces in your field. What are the outside threats, the third fuel, which could be used to your advantage? Who are your natural allies? Who are your opponents? What are their arguments? How are they best met? Remember the fuels, and use them to refine your arguments. Your message will also naturally reflect whether you represent many member organisations or only a narrow group of vested interests. The broader your backing, the broader your message. If your line of action is focused, your message should be more pointed.

8. **Timing** is all-important. You have to identify what stage the decision of interest has currently reached in the pipeline, and when it is possible to get someone to listen. Good timing requires two things: first, a political sensitivity as to when an issue is ripe for the European agenda. The only way to establish this is by following media reports and updates from your contacts. Secondly, timing involves a certain amount of luck as the agenda is often set by outside forces beyond your reach. If you are lucky, they will coincide with your proposal. Ideally, you should pre-empt them and organise your proposal accordingly, although that is very hard to achieve.
9. EU funds are desirable, but try to find other sources of finance. It enhances your credibility and may also give you the possibility of long-term planning. The Brussels-based European Citizens’ Action Service (ECAS) has published a useful guide to EU funding for civil society organisations. Although funding is not everything, where civil society is concerned, very little can go a very long way. However, the issue remains that EU funding can also create a question mark as to how independent your organisation is.

10. **Be yourself.** Do not try to imitate the institutions, although the buzzwords have to be taken into account. Being a representative for civil society is a strong point in itself, precisely because the arguments are not derived from the bureaucracy.

**The road to take**

European Union and associations can fully benefit from one another, creating a stronger sense of European identity for citizens and giving the institutions greater legitimacy as their decision-making is based on a more thorough understanding of citizens’ real-life concerns.

Civil society is a bridge towards participation and active citizenship. It could open the door for newcomers from other countries by giving them a part in what Mr Van Parijs calls the collective identity – one that transgresses national borders. It provides an opportunity to unite citizens around a common theme for the community, be it your city district, your region or Europe.

The idea of citizenship can be constituted around something more than going to vote as the ultimate democratic right, or duty, as it is in certain countries. Citizenship can also be widened to embrace something more, something within the collective of civil society.

The idea of Jean Monnet, one of Europe’s founding fathers – that “Everything starts with the people but ends up in institutions” – does not appeal to people today. Institutions are not the answer to the citizens’ ills, but intelligent listening by the institutions may well be.

Doing research for this book has made me realise how much dedication and fun there is in European civil society and how many extraordinary talents are at work here: the fundamental work of society and community building, liaising with people, gathering knowledge and expertise, as well as creating support systems where formal society does not do the job.

Such work does not necessarily manifest itself in the hard data of GDP per capita, but without it our Europe would be so much poorer, not only in economic terms, but also socially, politically and in ideas.

It is tempting to think of civil society in an internal market context, so that one local experiment or involvement can be exported fruitfully to other parts of Europe. Hopefully this book can serve as one of many instruments which can make this happen.
**Valuable investment**

When young musicians from all over Europe meet up for the Solstice Festival in the Irish city of Cork, it is thanks to the work of civil society. In other arenas it brings together athletes spreading their anti-doping message to young sportsmen and women and students. It provides guide dogs for visually impaired people and inspires businesses to recruit vulnerable people who have long been excluded from the jobs market.

When I tried to locate some of these players, I often found the little European Union symbol accompanied by a short thank-you note from the organisation to the EU, for making publication possible – and, I thought, that this was taxpayers’ money well spent.

However, there is a catch in financing civil society by the state or, at the European level, the institutions. It may not be totally innocent and, indeed, the suspicion remains that an organisation cannot remain independent and keep an open and critical mind towards the institution that feeds it.

This demands a great deal of transparency. By clearly stating who the sponsors are, the representative of organised civil society inspires confidence and understanding.

There is a risk that civil society organisations are mirroring the institutions and becoming big bureaucracies themselves. It may strengthen their voice in Brussels, but it also risks weaken the link to the members. The opinions have to be negotiated and compromises struck, so that the core message is sometimes ground down to something remote from the people concerned.

There is also a risk that the institutions may complicate the rules to the point of discouraging civil society from participating in EU policy-making. The development of the rules surrounding the ECI comes to mind. The European institutions must realise that civil society’s input in decision-making is not a privilege offered to the people, but rather the opposite. It provides a necessary link between Europeans and their leaders, a link which in the long run will render Europe more legitimate and understandable to its citizens.

The ambition is high – to make us democratic citizens. It is hard work, but it is necessary, especially in a society that is changing and where the sense of belonging, identification with our common good and the understanding of direction are sometimes lost, not least at the European level.

Let us make the most of 2013, as this year is dedicated to you and me. No, let us go further: let us make the European Year of Citizens 2013 permanent.

In an ideal world, of course, every year should be citizens’ year.
Further information

ECI Guide

A brief guide on how to create an ECI:

1. Form a citizens’ committee of seven members with one contact person plus a substitute. They should be EU citizens and eligible to vote in the European elections. (That also applies to all the valid signatories.)
2. Register the initiative with the European Commission.
3. Wait for the Commission’s red or green light, which takes two months.
4. If OK from the Commission, start collecting signatures. They should come from at least seven Member States. The threshold number is 750 times the number of seats in the European Parliament. Austria has 19 seats, which means a minimum of 11,450 signatures are required from that country.
5. Signatures have to be accompanied by an ID number in 18 Member States. The other nine do not require any verification (see ECI legal text for details).
6. Collection of signatures should be completed within a year from the date you get the OK from the Commission.
7. The list of at least 1 million signatures is handed to the Commission, which analyses the ECI and concludes within three months whether or not to go ahead.
8. Even if the ECI is correct and fulfils all the criteria, the Commission can still reject it.
9. Fraudulent signatures or financing (which has to be transparent) is liable to penalties.
10. The lists cannot be used for any other purpose and must be destroyed after the ECI is completed.