

**Democracy in Europe, where do we stand?
A civil society perspective**

Civil Society Day at the EESC

**Session on 'European democracy in the light of the current crisis: who sets the agenda,
how to reach legitimate decisions?'**

SPEECH

by

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi

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Ladies and gentlemen:

- It is with great pleasure that I am with you today at this Civil Society Day, to discuss a topic which is of key importance to the EU and to the EESC in particular;
 - I see that the title of my presentation is 'An EESC roadmap for participatory democracy', which relates to a document adopted by the Various Interests Group, in March of last year, following a seminar that we organised entitled 'What are the prospects for participatory democracy in Europe';
 - Since that date, many things have happened: at the level of the Various Interests Group, we had an event on the European Citizens Initiative in June 2011; we also organised local events in six EU Member States to mark the entry into force of the ECI (with three more events still to take place);
 - Moreover, we published the 'Compendium on Participatory Democracy', which brings together the numerous EESC Opinions on governance and participatory democracy (available on display);
 - At the level of the EESC, in March of this year a joint conference on the ECI was held with the Committee of the Regions, examining the opportunities and challenges of implementing the ECI;
 - Finally, I should add that I am currently rapporteur of an EESC own-initiative Opinion on the implementation of Article 11 points 1 & 2 of the Treaty of the European Union;
 - As you are aware, Article 11, together with Articles 10 and 12 are the formal expressions within the Treaty of both participatory and representative democracy;
 - So I hope that you will agree that the EESC is well placed and well versed in the subject, living up to its role as a bridge between the institutions and organised European civil society.
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- In the current climate of economic and political crisis in Europe, it is *imperative* that we find effective and reliable forms of dialogue for representative elected and civil actors;
 - As a result of the crisis, the European Union is in *dire need* of making itself more visible, tangible, relevant and accessible to the lives of its citizens;
 - We are in dire need of enhancing the sense of 'European identity' among our citizens through increased opportunities for participatory democracy and accountability at the European level;
 - For over the past two years, the harsh austerity programmes and the repeated recourse to intergovernmental negotiations (17 European Summits trying to 'resolve' the crisis), have resulted in a heightened sense of disavowal and disassociation of citizens vis-à-vis their local, national and European leaders;
 - Indeed, the EU Institutions, which were originally established to be the bastions of democracy, find themselves under attack by citizens in several European countries;
 - We must also remember that at the national level we have witnessed the collapse of thirteen European governments and the instauration of two technocratic ones;
 - The result has been the emergence of stereotyping and prejudices reminiscent of a Europe of many decades ago;

- Regrettably, we are living through a very radical and dangerous period of disenchantment and disavowal by European citizens, which is increasingly taking the form of extreme xenophobia, on occasion even politically orchestrated;
 - Within this context, it is crucial that we recognise and act upon the opportunities of the Lisbon Treaty's Articles 10, 11 and 12 to send a *political message of confidence* in active citizenship and representative democracy;
 - We should seize upon the opportunity to develop a European identity among citizens so that they recognise that investing in Europe is in their personal and national interest;
 - In a nutshell, we need 'more Europe', which means more trust between Member States, between Member States and Institutions, between citizens, governments and the EU, and between different national societies;
 - We need to create a perception of 'community of destiny' among all of the above, something which is currently seriously lacking, both between Member States and even within the governments of single Member States.
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- So how should we proceed?
 - I will not comment on the ECI, but will concentrate my remarks on paragraphs 1 & 2 of Article 11 of the TEU;
 - In my view the first step that needs to be done is to assess the existing structures of civil society consultation and cooperation, to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. This could take the form of an evaluation, to be carried out by the European Commission, in collaboration with the EESC;
 - But not only do we need to assess what exists, we also need to make it more visible and to communicate to stakeholders on what is already happening. For example, preparing detailed and accessible databases of all civil society consultations and structures of dialogue carried out by the EU's Institutions and bodies;
 - At the level of the EESC, we must capitalise on the recent renewed Protocol of Cooperation with the EC, which includes concrete provisions for a more proactive and ex ante contribution of the EESC in the work programme of the EC and by extension, to the implementation of Article 11;
 - Finally, I believe that we need to find the right format at an inter-institutional level, in order to bring together European civil society with policy makers to openly discuss the future of Europe, to examine our joint priorities and means for achieving them;
 - My proposal is for us to jointly invest in the 2013 European Year of Citizens: for the Etats généraux of parliaments to take place (national parliaments from our Member States together with the European Parliament), which would come up with 5 key recommendations for Europe;
 - In parallel, the European Economic and Social Committee could organise a similar event for civil society and working together we could forge the bridge between our citizens, the electorate and the elected.
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- Ladies and gentlemen, since 1957, when the European Economic and Social Committee was established, much progress on civil society dialogue and participatory democracy has been made;

- I firmly believe that the EESC has contributed to this progress and that it will continue to do so, as long as we can work together and to adapt to the changing environment and challenges;
- As was stated by Jean Monnet many years ago: *"Nothing can be done without citizens but nothing can last without institutions"*;
- Thank you for your attention.