

'European Year of Citizens 2013'

Pro Integratione Conference 2013

SPEECH

by

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of the

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Ladies and gentlemen:

- It is with great pleasure that I am with you today at this conference in Budapest and specifically speaking at this panel on the 'European Year of Citizens 2013';
- I would like to start by thanking Kinga Joo, who is an active member of the European Economic and Social Committee and who asked me to speak at this event, which I accepted with pleasure;
- For as we can see from the list of speakers on the programme, we are all in good company!
- I also understand that this panel has been co-organised with the European Movement Hungary;
- This is in fact the second time that the *Various Interests Group* of the European Economic and Social Committee, will cooperate with the European Movement in the last few months;
- Only in February, we co-organised a major conference with the European Movement Ireland in Dublin, so I am very pleased to be working with you again today and of course with the other organisers of this event.

- Now, I would like to begin my presentation by reminding us all of the shocking figures released by Eurostat, the EU's statistical service;
- According to these figures, currently only 33% of European citizens trust the EU and only 30% of Europeans have a positive image of the EU;
- These are the lowest levels of support by citizens of the European project in 25 years!
- We should also remember the recent findings of the Pew Research survey, according to which even in France, a country considered to be at the heart of European integration, some 77% of those surveyed believe that European economic integration has made things worse for France;
- Unfortunately, the ugly reality today is that we have unemployment for the under 25-year olds at 23,5% in the 27 EU Member States, rising to 59% for Greece and 55% for Spain;
- We have 26,521 million persons of working age unemployed throughout the EU;
- And we have 115 million people, or 23.4% of the European population at risk of poverty or social exclusion;
- So some would consider it to be the greatest irony that in 2013, this 'European Year of Citizens', 'Europe' is in reality seriously undermined by fear among its citizens, by political extremism, poverty, inequality, xenophobia, ignorance, mistrust, misinformation and prejudice;
- Indeed, the Europe that we have all worked towards over the last 60 years, a Europe of values, a social Europe, a Europe of diversity, of people and citizens, is deeply under threat;
- Unfortunately, we have returned to old national stereotypes, to deeply rooted national interests and even some would say to the inter-governmentalism of the Congress of Vienna of 1815.

- So what is the way forward?
- With the looming deadline of the elections to the European Parliament next May, how can we bring on board our citizens?
- How can we reinvigorate the *political legitimacy* and *democratic accountability* of the European Union?
- Ladies and gentlemen, although I recognise that Europe is currently facing many serious challenges, I do also believe that we have before us many *opportunities*;
- But the economic, social and political future of Europe must advance together;
- We cannot de-couple social policies from economic policies, we cannot de-couple political legitimacy from political accountability, in which citizens must feel represented and listened to;
- For this reason, I am very pleased that finally, European and national political leaders are waking up to the reality that we need a Social Pact for Europe, that we need a monetary union with a 'human face';
- There is now talk of "austerity being neither effective nor socially viable" of "austerity...having reached its limits";
- The European Economic and Social Committee has been actively involved in these discussions and only two days ago we adopted an Opinion entitled 'The Social Dimension of EMU', of which I was the rapporteur;
- In this Opinion, we called for a European Social Action Programme and Social Investment Pact, which would include the right of Europeans to a minimum guaranteed income;
- We called for the creation of a European Anti-Poverty Solidarity Fund and for increases to the European Social Fund;
- We argued in favour of the establishment of European Social Bonds and of a European Network for Unemployed Workers;
- But crucially, the argument is made that in order to bring citizens back to Europe and Europe to its citizens, then yes, the fiscal, banking and financial unions are necessary pillars of Economic and Monetary Union;
- Yes, individual countries do need to fight corruption and to carry out Structural reforms in order to make them more competitive;
- But these measures *must* be complemented by growth and equity promoting measures, by employment creation, inter-generational solidarity, poverty reduction, the protection of consumer rights, the sustainable and efficient use of resources, territorial and social cohesion;
- We must strengthen Europe by supporting the Single Market and the Europe 2020 Strategy;
- We must take concrete steps to re-industrialise Europe, provide liquidity to our SMEs, invest in Europe's competitiveness, in research and development and international trade;
- And the key actors in this process should be our SMEs, the social economy, the green economy, the liberal professions, etc;
- We must invest and not regress in qualitative education, lifelong learning, decent work and enhanced mobility for Europeans;
- And all of the above should be underpinned by *political legitimacy* and *democratic accountability*.

- Ladies and gentlemen, European citizens cannot take any more empty promises!
- For 'Europe' is not a 'project', it is a living reality, which impacts all of us in a myriad of ways;
- Now is the time for Europe to pool its efforts and invest in a social approach to the crisis and to EMU, in order to bring our citizens back on board and to stem this torrent of mistrust in Europe and national prejudices;
- But to do so, we need the power of imagination and the strength of determination!
- So let us begin to do this together, today!