



European Economic and Social Committee
The President

Brussels, 22 January 2013, Hotel Plaza

**OPENING CONFERENCE OF THE EUROPEAN YEAR OF CITIZENS 2013:
“MAKING THE MOST OF THE EUROPEAN YEAR OF CITIZENS”**

Staffan Nilsson's keynote speech

Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
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Check Against Delivery

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

It is with great pleasure that I have accepted the invitation to speak at this conference.

It has never been so important as it is now to put citizens and European citizenship at the heart of the EU agenda. And indeed, as the title of this conference says, we must make the most of the European Year of Citizens.

Citizenship has been central to the development of the EU project; it is the very essence of our democracy; it is linked to the idea that the European Union works when we enjoy certain rights and when we accept certain obligations to one another and to future generations.



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Every citizen, in all the 27 Member States, enjoys a **set of civic rights under the EU treaties**. The right to move to, live in and work in another Member State and the other rights set out in the Treaty have greatly contributed to help create a sense of European identity, a feeling of belonging to a community wider than the national territory, where we share history, culture, peace and many values such as diversity and tolerance. The feeling of belonging to the European community has to evolve organically and this can happen by reinforcing EU citizenship rights and by becoming more knowledgeable about the other. Understanding and the willingness to understand are the basis of any kind of cooperation.

It is true that many obstacles still remain to the exercise of European citizenship rights and their removal must be one of main objectives of the year. Obstacles such as the one I learnt about recently - true stories such as European young citizens being prevented from enjoying their full mobility rights in another Member State - should be fully removed.

It is our belief that European citizenship can best be understood and exercised if it is linked to the economic, social and civic life of the European venture and the policies that underpin it. Economically and socially empowered citizens can participate more readily in the political life of the Union. Participation must be informed and inclusive and must take place in all areas of community life!

The EESC believes that there is much more to **European citizenship**, and that a political system such as the EU must cultivate and strengthen the **political, social and cultural dimensions of the Union**. If we want people to feel truly connected to Europe, we need to develop their ability to exercise political power (this word may seem too strong, but you see what I mean, "**power**" in the sense of **participation in governance**). We can develop that ability by providing knowledge about the political system and using mechanisms that allow for participation from the bottom up. To move forward, the EU needs clearer input and stronger support from its citizens. We can and we must mobilise people to see the need for the European dimension of their citizenship.

The **social dimension** is also very important: a community that has social discrepancies within it cannot create a collective problem-solving capacity for the Union, and cannot reinforce democracy. The social dimension of citizenship means, among other things, fighting social exclusion, investing in social cohesion and fostering respect for human rights.



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Social cohesion is a prerequisite for peace. While we share a common history and a common cultural heritage, for centuries that history was often marked by wars. The EU has contributed to 60 years of peace among nations.

And yet, peace seems to be taken for granted and nowadays the financial crisis has brought a different kind of economic and social challenge. Many European citizens face difficulties in their daily lives, for instance in finding a job. **The Year of Citizens comes at a crucial moment**, when we need **to build trust** (and fight mistrust), to empower people (and fight fear and despair), to make Europe "home" for all Europeans (and fight populist, anti-European movements), to restore people's confidence in the EU (and fight unemployment and poverty).

To deal with citizens' distance and alienation, the Lisbon Treaty created several tools for consultation and dialogue. Provisions on civil society dialogue are a way of ensuring that citizens' views and their deep knowledge will be made available to the EU institutions. This is in the interests of both citizens and the EU leadership, as it increases the legitimacy of decision-making. Our opinion on Article 11 of the Treaty concluded that **effective participatory democracy is needed to restore credibility to the EU**. Speaking on behalf of a part of civil society here, I would say that an ideal democratic civil society is one with citizens who are active, responsible, engaged members of groups and communities that, while they have different values and conflicting interests, are devoted to arbitrating those differences by exploring common ground and pursuing common relations.

The EESC represents groups of stakeholders such as employers, trade unions, farmers, consumers' associations and others from the Member States. We make policy recommendations to the EU institutions based on our grassroots expertise. We have also assumed the role of enabling civil society to connect and get together. We are creating ever more platforms, which allow us to listen to other, different civil society stakeholders and give them the space to speak up.

Together with the EESC Liaison Group with expert European civil society networks, we have been supporting the civil society Alliance for the European Year of Citizens 2013 (EYCA). This is a platform for dialogue and participation for good, concerted development of actions for the European Year of Citizens.



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Jean-Marc Roirant is here with us and will tell you much more about the Alliance.

During the Year, the EESC intends to work in partnership with organised civil society and with the EU institutions to encourage active and participatory citizenship and strengthen dialogue among citizens and between them and the EU institutions.

The Committee has also set up a coordination body composed of 12 of its members. Among our main initiatives is an open space event that will take place in the next two days and in which I hope many of you will participate. Let's explore future pathways of active European citizenship, let's map all our initiatives and find synergies between them.

EESC members will engage in a series of conferences, hearings and open space events, in Brussels and in Member States, to tell Europeans throughout the EU about the rights and opportunities that come with being an EU citizen and to encourage them to participate in civic forums on EU policies and issues. Our members are also EU ambassadors in their own organisations, in their own communities.

I very much support the Commission's educational approach for this year's initiatives. Along these lines, we have been working on an exhibition entitled "Being a responsible EU citizen", which celebrates the European Year of Citizens and explores the meaning and implications of **citizenship**. Ten educational posters will illustrate the economic, social, political and cultural dimensions of **responsible and sustainable citizenship in the European Union**. They are part of our toolkit for the year. An educational poster on active and participatory citizenship, available in all EU languages, can be downloaded from our website and used in the Member States.

I would also like to announce that in March we will launch a guide, a book entitled "Civil society and democracy – The Citizens' shortcut to the EU" in order to help active citizens and their associations outside the Brussels sphere find their way more easily through the EU's decision-making and policy-making systems.



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Many more communication initiatives are in the pipeline, and all of us here can step up for stronger EU citizenship through our communication channels. Many citizens are now on social media and we also need to meet them there!

It is vital that progress made during the Year does not get lost when the year comes to an end. The lessons and benefits of each European Year must feed in to the future and be carried forward. At the same time, active citizenship and dialogue must be encouraged in the coming European Years.

I would like to conclude by quoting Václav Havel: "civil society is one of the ways in which our human nature can be exercised in its entirety". Civil society is in fact the domain of citizens!

May collective intelligence emerge at its best today at this event, and I look forward to seeing just as many of you here at the EESC tomorrow!



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