



**European Economic and Social Committee**  
**The President**

Brussels, 23 January 2013, the EESC

**"YOUREUROPE 2013"**  
**OPEN SPACE EVENT**

**Staffan Nilsson's opening speech**

Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
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Check Against Delivery

Welcome everyone! Some of you I addressed yesterday morning and I'm happy you have walked in our Committee, in YOUR Committee. This is our first in a series of initiatives related to the European Year of Citizens.

Every time we gather stakeholders in this space that we call atrium, we bear witness to one of the Committee's strengths: we re-affirm the promise of our openness; we re-affirm our role as an enabler of dialogue and participation. It has never been so important to act on these two practices as it is now, during this year and during economic and social turmoil; and it has never been so important to put citizens and European citizenship at the heart of the EU agenda as it is now!



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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 ("**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.

Today we walk the talk of our mission and bring meaning to it: we bridge the EU to civil society at large, we bridge the meaning of the EU to the reality of our times. Our commitment, engagement, volunteering, grassroots expertise are just some characteristics of our members' character and profile.

Such participatory event to which you will be contributing today and tomorrow build capacity for collective intelligence; for a culture of on-going, high-quality dialogue that examines the whole-system dynamics in and around our organisations.

When we worked on our opinion about the European Year of Citizens (otherwise, an idea nurtured long time here in the Committee), we appreciated the focus on the need for citizens to be more knowledgeable and make more use of their mobility rights within the EU. However we decided to aim even higher with this year: when citizens enjoy their economic and social rights, it is vital that they exercise their civic and political rights as well. Therefore we urged that **this year's activities encourage more participation of active citizens and civil society in the life of the European Union**.

To our normal awareness, a room filled with people is just a crowd. But arrange those people in the right way, with the right processes, and they can generate wisdom.



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There is a place for each citizen in a strong democratic civil society. When we bring together all those involved in a situation, organisation, or community for real dialogue we include all relevant perspectives.

Let's speak for all the citizens' interests and needs we can think of and we meet back home. Let's tap into the creativity of all of us, through real dialogue, using our co-intelligence to create European Year of Citizens that responds to all, to each one of us, each of our organisation, and to each and every citizen.

As president of the EESC and also as a member, I want to make a personal commitment as well to engage as many people around me in a debate on the Europe we want to live in. I will be back here this evening to listen to the evening news when you will be sharing some of the wisdom collected during your conversations today.

Václav Havel once said: "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 hear your ideas, see the seeds of your initiatives, feel the synergies in the room.

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