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Organised civil society in the candidate countries and the future of Europe

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Round table 3

Participatory democracy and the role of the EESC

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"Estonia on the road to accession: challenges and opportunities for civil society"

The accession process: what is its significance for Estonia and for the "third sector" in particular?

In general, the fact that a country does or does not become a member of the European Union depends primarily on the public's confidence in its leaders, as it is they who lead the country towards membership or non-membership of the European Union. Therefore the notion of **confidence** is crucial: confidence not only determines whether we join the European Union but also whether we remain in it. Confidence and maintaining confidence also depend to a very large extent on regular information on the advantages and disadvantages of the process as a whole, as well as the prospects for the future, the publication of all relevant information, critical analysis and active debate in society.

The collective pool of knowledge available in society guides our efforts to participate in a common process, to take appropriate decisions and to move forward at an even pace. Other key notions for us besides **'knowledge available within the third sector'** and **'knowledge available within civil society'** are the ability of our **institutions** to act effectively, the administrative capacity of the state, and the willingness and opportunities to contribute to and be involved in the European integration and related development and in the information

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process. In addition, the following factors play an important role in the qualitative development of civil society: culture, customs, a readiness for lifelong learning and an active approach to life, all areas where Estonia has sufficient potential for development.

Certainly, civil society organisations are worried about their capacity to act effectively: we can acquire information, receive it and process it, and we have the skills and competence to participate in projects of different kinds. We can safely say that, to date, the potential that exists in Estonian civil society as a whole has not been exploited in so far as concerns a relatively important part of the country's development. However, some progress has been made.

It is no secret that Estonia's accession process has, up till now, largely been the preserve of negotiators and high-level officials. For example, the chapter dealing with employment and social affairs was handled so discretely that the social partners knew nothing about it. However, it is clear to most of us in Estonia today that it is not only assiduous government representatives who are moving towards accession but society as a whole.

There can be no doubt that the "third sector" has benefited greatly from the accession process: in particular, it has given the sector **strength and the conviction that it is essential to unite and develop civil society so that a European nation can become established and take root**. The accession process and European customs have made us eager to raise our profile and take part in national debates. Without the accession process we would undoubtedly have less confidence in ourselves and our objectives would be less ambitious. We would be less concerned about seeing our efforts lead to concrete results and having our points of view taken into account – about stamping our mark on a common future. And, of course, we would not have the opportunities available to us that we do today.

In short, **the EU represents for us both an objective and an opportunity for us**. This is so despite the fact that the increasingly rapid pace at which the process is advancing is forcing us to swallow some bitter pills and that not all that accession brings with it necessarily seems reasonable to us or suited to Estonian circumstances.

The EU-Estonia Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) was established in April 2002 to assist the Association Council established in accordance with the Europe Agreement. The aim was to promote dialogue and cooperation between Estonian and EU economic and social interest groups. One of the aims of the dialogue is to enable Estonian social interest groups to become acquainted with the consultation process which takes place between EU's civil society organisations within the European Economic and Social Committee and to make these organisations aware of the scope and scale of the reforms in progress in Estonia. The cooperation is also designed to strengthen the preparations of civil society organisations for

accession to the European Union. The dialogue and cooperation encompass all economic and social aspects related to the implementation of the European Agreement. The JCC gives its views in those areas where problems exist.

The following bodies are represented on the Estonian delegation to the JCC: the Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Network of Estonian Non-profit Organisations, the Estonian Confederation of Employers (ETTK), the Estonian Farmers Federation, the Estonian Employees' Unions' Association (TALO) and the Confederation of Estonian Trade Unions (EAKL). The JCC has two co-presidents: the president of EAKL, **Ms Kadi Pärnits**, and **Mr Filip Hamro-Drotz**, member of the EESC and senior advisor with the Finnish Federation of Industry and Employers (TT).

The JCC has encouraged all civil society organisations in Estonia to take an active part in the dissemination of reliable information on the consequences of joining the EU and to stimulate debate in Estonia. Although the civil society organisations represented on the JCC focus mainly on communication with their members and providing them with information, cooperation within the JCC has improved the effectiveness of contacts between civil society organisations and brought their day-to-day activities closer to each other. Cooperation has also widened the range of subjects that they deal with. By examining different subjects together (with Estonian colleagues and their counterparts in the European Economic and Social Committee), civil society organisations and public authorities have learned a lot, and this has broadened the perspectives of both Estonian and European civil society organisations and boosted the level and scope of their activities.

I believe the novel feature of Estonian development, the search for solutions which are a symbiosis of the old and new, will also help what is referred to as "old Europe" fulfil its potential and introduce a new facet into joint development efforts.

Thanks to cooperation between institutions within the JCC, Estonian organisations have also benefited from the crucial role played by the media in disseminating information and encouraging debate on EU-related issues. Thanks also to cooperation with government representatives and Estonian representatives of the Convention on the future of Europe, the JCC has enriched the content of the debate within civil society organisations on the EU and topics relating to its future.

To date, the EU-Estonia JCC has met twice. At its first meeting, in July 2002, the JCC discussed the EU Structural Funds and the involvement of civil society in the EU enlargement process.

At its second meeting, held in Brussels in November 2002, the JCC took a more in-depth look at the involvement of civil society organisations in the enlargement process. JCC members felt that civil society organisations should be more closely involved in the accession process, given their key role in implementing the *acquis communautaire*. They also thought that there was a need for the Estonian government to foster the development of dialogue with the social partners and civil society. The JCC presented the following recommendations as a basis for discussion:

- Elected politicians should increase the frequency with which their committees seek written submissions and then hold hearings to allow those making submissions of real substance and interest to present their views directly. Consultation processes with civil society organisations should be improved;
- Civil society organisations should be given sufficient resources for them to provide training for their staff and their representatives in research and communication techniques so as to equip them with the requisite skills to put across their views on subjects of interest to their sector. Civil society organisations should understand that they will be judged on the value of the contribution they make to the governance of Estonia;
- Training is needed for both civil servants and civil society organisations. Knowledge and expertise make for improved cooperation between civil society and the state.

The JCC considered it was essential in the run-up to accession that citizens have a very clear awareness of issues related to membership and the ultimate consequences of enlargement.

The JCC felt that accession would affect the entire Estonian population and that therefore civil society organisations had an important role to play in the public debate on it. Civil society organisations must be able to understand the facts and the issues involved; they must see to it that the public authorities are aware of the effects of membership in areas where the organisations have shortcomings and, most importantly, ensure that their members are kept fully informed and involved not only in spreading this information but in the dialogue as a whole.

The JCC also discussed issues related to the Structural Funds on the basis of a report prepared by two of its members, **Mr Peter Boldt** and **Ms Eve Päärendson**. Following the discussion, the following conclusions were drawn:

- The Estonian government was urged to draw up a plan to ensure that the social partners and other civil society organisations are informed about issues related to the pre-accession

funds and the Structural Funds and make it possible for the "third sector" to have access to Structural Funds aid;

- National co-financing is necessary to ensure that the "third sector" can make use of the Structural Funds;
- The social partners and civil society organisations must be involved at all levels in finding solutions to problems related to the Structural Funds;
- The government should arrange training on the Structural Funds (especially the European Social Fund) not only for civil servants but for civil society organisations as well;
- The European Commission should help not only civil servants in the applicant countries but also civil society organisations to acquire knowledge of the Structural Funds;
- Civil society organisations should, for their part, make use of Structural Funds resources in the future and carry out effective preparatory work so as to be ready for the co-financing and management of the projects concerned;

The JCC will discuss vocational training and lifelong learning at its next meeting in the spring.

It goes without saying that the cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee has led to greater consideration of various issues related to the European Union and civil society. That makes it all the more regrettable that this form of cooperation will come to an end with the signing of the accession treaty. If cooperation continues within the EESC, it is bound to be less specific and is less likely to be guided by the desire to assist a particular country. In view of the great speed with which we are moving towards accession, however, there is certainly a need for some form of JCC over a longer period of time.

With integration in Europe, civil society organisations will strengthen and cooperation in all its forms will become closer, leading to true European integration – in ways that will be more advantageous to citizens than in the absence of civil society organisations.
