



European Economic and Social Committee

SEMINAR
on
***Organised civil society in the candidate countries
and the Future of Europe***

Brussels – 30 and 31 January 2003

Round Table 3

"Participatory democracy and the role of the EESC"

**Intervention of Mr Renaldas VAISBRODAS,
"EUR-OP-A" Programme Manager (Europe, organised participation, access),
Council of Lithuanian Youth Organisations**

First of all I would like to thank the organizers of this workshop for giving the future EU Member States a unique chance to share experience and discuss important issues. Besides, we appreciate the opportunity to speak out in our native language.

Today I would like to dwell on my approach to the democratic participation and discuss a number of prospects for the future of the European Economic and Social Committee. One more problem of great significance is the challenges resulting from the enlargement of the EU. To sum up my report I will raise a number of issues and resolve them as I find it correct.

Not only am I honoured to participate in this seminar but I am fully aware that the responsibility to express the interests of youth organizations rests on me. I represent the Council of Lithuanian Youth Organizations as a Manager of EUR-OP-A (Europe, Organized Participation and Access) project. Let me present in short the main objectives of this project which, I believe, can play a significant role in today's discussion. The EUR-OP-A project is based on the statement: *Let's create the Europe we want, the Europe we imagine*. In my country the word "Europe" has always been associated with welfare and security. Traditionally it was understood that we were Europeans but psychologically it was difficult for many people to really feel it as the approach to the concept of Europe differed greatly. Now that many people get to know Europe better and see the actual benefits of international co-operation they become increasingly aware of the multisided concept of Europe. The main goal of the Council of Lithuanian Youth Organizations' project is to give young people a chance to discuss European values, to discover them from both the outside and the inside, and

.../...

eventually to appropriate this concept of Europe and finally create what we call the "Lithuanian Europe".

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that youth organizations in Lithuania and in other countries were rather active in discussing youth related issues long before the decisions on enlargement were taken at the Copenhagen summit. Not only many followed the ongoing process but they also significantly contributed to the statement of young people's interests in Europe. This was done through many events initiated by youth organizations and related to the Convention on the Future of the European Union. The European Youth Convention should be mentioned as one of the events where young people had a possibility to express their views. We believe that such a process should be continued through, for example, a second European Youth Convention.

Democratic participation as young people see it can be stated as follows: *"Nothing done without us if it concerns us!"*. This means that we believe in a democratic society where non-governmental organizations can influence decision-makers; these organizations are supposed to supply the political system with the formulated interest of different target groups that enables the system to take political decisions meeting the requirements of these groups. Participation can also be described by the following: *"Show me and I will see", "Tell me and I will hear, "Involve me and I will understand"*. Indeed, we participate only by being actively involved into different processes. This is becoming a strict rule, an integral part of the democratic civil society. Lithuania's experience shows that the chosen way to formulate and implement the youth policy through co-management and co-decision proves to be worthwhile; so we believe that similar structures functioning not only as consulting boards but providing non-governmental organizations with the direct possibility to formulate and influence decisions should be encouraged on the national and especially on the European level.

European civil society faces many dilemmas resulting not only from the enlargement of the EU anticipated in the year 2004. It is the relation between democracy and efficiency that is becoming an important factor. Youth organizations clearly express their attitude towards institutions that in their opinion should be closer to the citizen. The relation between democracy and efficiency becomes a challenge to the European institutions and a puzzle for the Convention. Youth organizations often call on the institutions to give young people the possibility to participate in discussions, influence decision-making processes and be in the thick of things. This might be the way for the glass building of the Commission to become the home of transparent and open European institutions. We believe in that and wish it might be realized for everyone in Brussels and in our own countries. Yesterday it was mentioned by some speakers that the EU takes too long to make decisions. It is painful especially for young people because if the decisions are not taken today, tomorrow the same person might no

longer be young. I hope that while new countries join the EU train, we will manage to change the locomotive and increase the speed of the train.

It should be mentioned that the requirement to stimulate social cohesion processes stems from the accession of new countries. These processes would draw EU Member States closer to the standpoint of economic, social and cultural life. The European Union can be expected to be strong only through the knowledge of each other's culture and mutual understanding. Traditional values, cultural differences and social achievements are to be taken into account. This is the only way to build a Union where future generations will love to live.

I believe that the European Economic and Social Committee is the place where civil society is represented and may be that is why I completely agree with Mr. Landaburu who said that it must be ensured that the issues discussed in Brussels are not far from the reality which people at local level are facing. The European Economic and Social Committee is to become the knowledge centre where the European institutions can always find answers to civil society related issues. The knowledge centre does not focus only on the collection of information from the Member States and synthesis thereof; it is expected to be the place where each Member State's contribution is taken into account and is treated by the political system as a formulated interest to be considered. Moreover, politically the European Economic and Social Committee should find its place in the EU institutional map.

I believe there is still a place for perfection; there is also an obvious need for harmony; we are still heading for changes. Most probably the EU enlargement and the Convention will contribute to the renewal of the institutions in the sense of getting closer to citizens. I would like to finish on this high note and thank the European Economic and Social Committee for the possibility to share my views.
