



European Economic and Social Committee

Debate **Participation**
Lisbon Treaty Social Inclusion
Civil Dialogue Involvement
Consultation Mobility **Active Citizenship**
Democracy **Engagement** EU Values

The EESC – The House of Civil Society

European Year of Citizens 2013

Follow us on www.eesc.europa.eu/citizens



#EYC2013



IT'S ABOUT EUROPE
IT'S ABOUT YOU

Join the debate



European Year of Citizens 2013
www.europa.eu/citizens-2013

European Year of Citizens 2013

Citizens are at the heart of Europe's future!

The European Year of Citizens in 2013 is an unparalleled opportunity for the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to underline the direct role of Europe's 500 million citizens in building unity and prosperity, fostering integration and nurturing social solidarity.

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

2013 is an opportunity to encourage a real sense of belonging to Europe and to close the gap between EU decision-makers and citizens, which has widened during the years of crisis.

"Active citizenship is the glue that keeps society together".

Staffan Nilsson, EESC President 2010-2013

The background

It is 20 years since the Maastricht Treaty (signed in 1992 and in force since 1993) first introduced the principle of European citizenship, as distinct from national citizenship.

The Lisbon Treaty strengthened the citizen's dimension of the EU, now embodied in Articles 10(3) and 11 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). As well as promoting dialogue between organisations, it pledges that:

- Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.
- The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.
- The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent.

As the intermediary between civil society and the EU institutions, the EESC plays a key role in fostering dialogue among civil society organisations on the ground, transmitting citizens' views to EU decision-makers, and making the Union more transparent and democratic.



What is “European” citizenship?

Every citizen, in all the 27 Member States, enjoys the same set of civic rights under the EU treaties, including the right to move to, live and work in another member country, the right to vote and stand as a candidate in European and local elections, the right to petition the European Parliament, and the right to assistance from any EU embassy. But people are often unaware of these rights.

In addition, all EU citizens are guaranteed the same basic human rights under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. For the first time in the EU’s history, a whole range of civil, political, economic and social rights of European citizens and people resident in the EU has been established.

The European Commission has highlighted citizens’ mobility and legal rights as core aspects of the Year, with the removal of remaining obstacles as one of the key objectives. However, the EESC believes there is much more to European citizenship – encompassing political, civic, economic, social and cultural dimensions.

Moving towards a European identity

Although freedom of movement is not the only, or even the most important aspect of European citizenship, it is nonetheless crucial to creating a sense of European identity – especially among the young people who represent Europe’s future. The EU’s Erasmus is the most successful student exchange programme in the world. Over the last 25 years, it has enabled some 3 million students as well as 300 000 higher education teachers to experience life in another EU country. Each year, over 230 000 students study abroad thanks to Erasmus, and in 2007 it was extended to cover work experience, university staff training, and cooperation between higher education institutions.

Erasmus has helped to make mobility an essential part of many young people’s university experience, opening their minds and boosting their understanding of how people live in neighbouring EU countries.



All EU Member States share certain values: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. Europeans also share a common history and cultural heritage. While for centuries that history was not always tranquil, the EU has contributed to 60 years of peace among nations.

The cultural riches of the EU's 27 Member States are an inexhaustible source of beauty, wisdom and learning. But European society is also in constant evolution, and must be able to embrace and learn from immigrant cultures. The EESC works actively to combat social exclusion and to help incomers integrate and participate fully in their communities. The Year should be an opportunity to step up the fight against inequality and discrimination of all sorts, and heighten people's sense of being part of Europe.

A better place for citizens

Over the decades, the Union has brought numerous benefits, such as access to Europe's single market, guaranteeing free movement of goods and services, coupled with protection for cross border consumers.

Citizens elect their own representatives to legislate on their behalf in the European Parliament. But participatory democracy goes beyond exercising a vote. It requires active citizenship — getting involved in improving society and people's lives — whether through political activity, engaging in local communities, volunteering or organising in the workplace.

To be able to participate fully, people need to be better informed about how the political system works at all levels of decision-making. To this end, the EESC is in favour of giving education for citizenship a stronger role in Member States' educational systems, and teaching of democratic attitudes and participatory skills across the curriculum.

European Citizens' Initiative

One way of taking action is through the new European Citizens' Initiative, introduced by the Lisbon Treaty and in force since April 2012. It means that for the first time in the EU's history, citizens themselves can influence European policy in a direct way. If at least 1 million individuals demand action in an area where the EU has the power to make laws, they can call on the Commission to introduce a legislative proposal. The signatories must be of voting age, and represent at least seven of the 27 Member States. The EESC is informing citizens who want to use the ECI, for example by organising numerous conferences across Europe. The Committee aims to be a platform for dialogue and networking for ongoing ECIs, and will also evaluate how the initiative is working and propose improvements if necessary.

“The ECI is the first transnational tool of participatory democracy. It can be a great tool for creating real dialogue between citizens”.

Anne-Marie Sigmund, EESC President 2004-2008

Confronting the obstacles

Unfortunately, citizens' attitudes to the EU have grown increasingly unenthusiastic in recent years. In a spring 2012 Eurobarometer survey, only 31% of respondents viewed it positively, while negative perceptions have increased steadily since 2009.

In 2012, Europeans who felt attached to the Union were in the minority (46%) – a fall of seven percentage points compared with 2010 – whereas a small majority of 52% felt no attachment to it. People complain that the EU is not serious about dialogue and does not listen. European policy makers are not sufficiently in tune with people's lives: their values, interests and needs.

This is not surprising at a time when economic crisis has created real hardship for many people. While some blame the EU for being distant and undemocratic, others have picked on immigrant communities, raising the threat of extremism and xenophobia.

The Year of Citizens comes at a pivotal moment. It is crucial for all civil society organisations to unite against the sense of powerlessness, mistrust and Euroscepticism, and to increase people's confidence through active, informed and inclusive participation in all areas of communal life.

"Civil society is one of the ways in which our human nature can be exercised in its entirety".

Václav Havel

Staying practical

Throughout the Year, the EESC is working closely with the European Year of Citizens Alliance (EYCA), an alliance of civil society organisations and networks, to launch practical and concrete actions.

In January, an "open space" event is designed to collect ideas and encourage people to take ownership of the Year. As far as possible, activities will be organised at the grass-roots level – from the "bottom-up" – by citizens and civil society organisations themselves, rather than being planned and imposed by distant policy-makers. The EESC has a long-standing tradition of "going local" and is well placed to work with people across Europe to make the Year a success. Committee members will be active in their own countries, organising or taking part in events.

The EESC is also publishing a book to help citizens to understand the EU institutions, to take on a more active role, to lobby for a cause or to put forward a proposal, for example through the ECI.

And in 2014...?

Progress should not end when the Year does. The Committee will continue its task of encouraging active citizenship and dialogue. The lessons and benefits of each European Year; whether combating poverty and social exclusion in 2010, volunteering in 2011, or active ageing and solidarity between generations in 2012, must feed into The Year of Citizens and carry forward into 2014 and beyond.

Further information:

EESC:

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.citizens-2013>

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.soc-opinions.19907>

European Commission:

http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/european-year-of-citizens-2013/index_en.htm

European Parliament:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/content/20120903IPR50346/html/European-Year-of-Citizens-raising-awareness-of-EU-citizens%27-rights>

EYCA – European Year of Citizens Alliance:

<http://ey2013-alliance.eu/>



European Economic and Social Committee

Rue Belliard/Belliardstraat 99

1040 Bruxelles/Brussel

BELGIQUE/BELGIË

www.eesc.europa.eu

Published by: "Visits and Publications" Unit

EESC-2013-14-EN

EN



QE-32-13-042-EN-C
ISBN 978-92-830-2041-7



doi:10.2864/33394

© European Union, 2013

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.