



**European Economic and Social Committee**

*JOINT CONFERENCE OF THE  
EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE  
HUNGARIAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL*

**Improving national ownership of the Lisbon Strategy:  
Is organised civil society sufficiently involved?**

*Budapest, 9 and 10 March 2006*

**Opening speech**

by

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*President  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee*

*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*  
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*Check Against Delivery*

Mr President,  
Minister,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be able to join you in opening this important joint conference of the Hungarian Economic and Social Council and the European Economic and Social Committee. First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude on behalf of the Committee for your kind and generous invitation to Budapest and for the opportunity to be able to hold this event in the Hungarian Parliament's beautiful and historically significant building. We greatly appreciate this.

I would very much like to take this opportunity to recall an event of great importance for European identity: the Budapest uprising exactly 50 years ago. In 1956, the Hungarians took to the barricades with determination and admirable courage to battle oppression and fight for freedom and justice. Although the Hungarians did not win the day, in the long run this uprising heightened European awareness of the values that underpinned it and sent out signals for the future. This acted as a strong catalyst for European integration. The wish that we all share is, without question, that the spirit of Budapest will provide a source of inspiration for our gathering today and once again provide an impetus for the future.

This conference is a very special event for organised civil society in the European Union, as embodied by the European Economic and Social Committee and its European and national partners. This is because over the next two days in Budapest we will openly discuss one of the Union's most important projects for the modernisation of society – the "Lisbon Strategy".

In our view, this strategy is much more than an economic reform programme designed to make Europe the most competitive, knowledge-based economy in the world within a decade, which unfortunately is how it is always summed up. We believe that the general thrust of the decisions taken at the Council of Lisbon in 2000 has produced a thoroughly ambitious plan for the future of the whole of society in Europe, which, if implemented properly, will have our full support.

In a project such as this, which will undoubtedly have an impact on all people in Europe and will also determine how future generations live, it goes without saying that organised civil society must be involved at every stage. So together we have decided that the question of whether organised civil society is really sufficiently involved in the realisation and implementation of the Lisbon Strategy should take centre stage at this conference and that we should take a clear stance on the matter vis-à-vis the institutions of the Union and its Member States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In its conclusions, the European Council of March 2005 asked the European Economic and Social Committee, together with the national economic and social councils of the EU Member States and other partner organisations, to set up an interactive network for civil society initiatives aimed at supporting the implementation of the "Lisbon Strategy", with a view to assessing how the Strategy

had been implemented hitherto and proposing ways in which this could be improved. Furthermore, the Council asked for the results of this cooperation at various levels of organised civil society to be presented in a report for the forthcoming European Spring Council in 2006.

Together with our partners, the national economic and social councils, we have responded to this request with enthusiasm and great commitment. In particular, our national partner organisations have carried out critical assessments of the national reform plans which have since been produced, and have considered what kind of role organised civil society is to be assigned nationally when the necessary policies for the Strategy's implementation are drawn up – and in particular what form this role will actually take and where the problems lie. The conclusions can be found in 27 national reports.

Implementation of the Lisbon Strategy from a European perspective has also been the subject of in-depth discussions in the Liaison Group brings together the European Economic and Social Committee and European organisations and civil society networks not directly represented in the Committee and which has now been in existence for 18 months. The Liaison Group set out its position in great detail in its opinion on *The future of the Lisbon Strategy*. What is interesting here is that this document is a summary of opinions which has been carefully coordinated by members of the Liaison Group and which brings together the views, convictions and demands of a very large number of national members of European civil society networks from various sectors.

We have summarised this very substantial body of work in a synthesis report for the 2006 Spring meeting of the European Council. In the introductory chapter, we set out the conclusions of this joint work and indicate the demands which we in civil society think should be made on policy. We also emphasise that the interactive network developed by the European Economic and Social Committee with its partners could play a role in supporting the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy. At the same time we emphasise that the Committee and both its national and European partners are not only willing but also very keen to continue to engage in close and trusted cooperation in this area with the bodies of the Union and also with Member States.

At today's conference, this synthesis report will be made available to a wider audience for the first time. As another important element of the work carried out by the European Economic and Social Committee, you have been given a copy of an opinion requested by the Austrian Presidency of the EU on *The road to the European knowledge-based society – the contribution of organised civil society to the Lisbon Strategy*. You also have the declaration of the Presidents and Secretaries-General of the EU's national economic and social committees and of the EESC issued on 25 November 2005, entitled *"Restoring confidence in the European project by establishing a genuine dialogue with civil society"*. These documents will be presented to you in detail during the conference and will provide the basis for our further discussions.

We hope that our discussion will produce yet more interesting ideas which President Demján and myself, as the co-chairs of this conference, will be able to incorporate into our joint statement for the EU Spring summit. On the basis of our discussions, I will then try to formulate a number of what I

believe to be extremely important recommendations for the institutions of the European Union, which I will present to you at the final meeting.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for your attention and hope that all of us will be able to engage in interesting and constructive discussions on how we in organised civil society can effectively help to implement the strategy to successfully shape Europe's future in a better way and in a way that that involves the people of Europe and even fills them with enthusiasm.

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