

Introduction by **János TÓTH**, President of the EESC / TEN section

Distinguished panellists, dear fellow members, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon and welcome to all of you in the European Economic and Social Committee - also known as the EESC. As president of the section dealing with Transport, Energy and the Information Society, the TEN Section in our Committee, I am pleased to introduce this public debate on how to make the internet a safer place for everybody but, most importantly, for children and young people.

During the last 15-20 years we have seen rapid developments in electronic communications. In the TEN section we have consistently advocated that increased care should be taken about the protection of privacy, security and personal rights, notably for minors, on the various networks that constitute the backbone of the Information Society. We have issued **several opinions on this topic**, the most recent of which will be discussed today in more detail. After the adoption of this opinion in May 2008, we engaged in several follow-up activities and we received some very positive and interesting feedback from various stakeholders. I am delighted to see most of them present today and I would like to thank you for your trust and co-operation on this important matter and for organising today's event.

Our rapporteur, **Ms Sharma**, has also participated in relevant high-level events, such as the one held by the European Schoolnet last January and the Ministerial Conference organised by the Czech Presidency in Prague just a couple of weeks ago. Finally, let me point out that we have just launched an own initiative opinion on a very relevant and current topic, "the impact of social networking sites", which is now being drafted by another distinguished member of our section, **Mr Pegado Liz**.

Before passing the floor to Mr Dassis, who has kindly accepted our invitation to give today's opening address, please allow me to point out what I feel is the key message

from this opinion: It is the need for **international co-operation** and co-ordinated partnerships between various stakeholders to maximise the effect of any action taken for making the internet a safer place, for young people and children in particular. This event is being held in support of this objective, so I'm really pleased that most stakeholders ARE indeed represented in today's panels:

There is a **representative of the European Commission**, which has made the EU a forerunner in this field since the mid 90s, and a **representative from the Council of Europe**, which has actively brought together a large number of countries and actors also beyond the EU borders, for example in its quite recent Conventions on Cyber-crime and on Children's Protection against Sexual Exploitation.

There are also **my fellow distinguished members**, Ms Eulenburg and Ms Sharma, representing the organised civil society but, unfortunately, it was not possible for a **European Parliament** representative to be with us today, as their last session for this term is held these days in Strasbourg. Nevertheless, their strong interest and active commitment on this topic is unquestioned, as demonstrated for example in the report which was adopted last March and urges Member States to update legislation in this field. Given the opportunity, please let me remind you that in exactly a month's time the **European elections** will take place and we should all take this opportunity to make our voice heard *in* and *for* Europe!

The **Czech Presidency** has also confirmed the **Council's commitment** in fighting illegal content and conduct online in the Declaration adopted at the recent Ministerial Conference in Prague – and I guess Ms Sharma will later share with us some feedback from this high-profile conference.

In the next two panels, we have the privilege to welcome prominent **experts**, of different backgrounds and origins, representing the Information Technology industry, the internet providers and the financial institutions, as well as some top **specialists** from highly active NGOs in this field. Last, but certainly not least, we will have the

opportunity to listen to **young people** themselves, represented here by the laureates of the last Data Protection Day contest and we will also have the opportunity to watch their award winning video.

In short, in this public presentation we aim at taking advantage of our distinguished panellists' experience and knowledge! But we will **not** have achieved its objective without **YOUR active participation**. This afternoon, you will be called several times to express your concerns, ideas, suggestions or questions, so please take also advantage and make this debate a very productive one.

Dear panellists, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you again in the EESC and I sincerely hope that you will find this event valuable for yourselves and for the constituencies you represent. Thanking you for your attention, let me first remind our panellists that they have up to **10 minutes each** for their initial presentation and also that you are all kindly invited afterwards to a cocktail reception at the Atrium on the 6th floor. I now give the floor to **George Dassis**, the President of the Employees Group in our Committee.

Mr President, the floor is yours.