

# Civil Society for rEUnaissance

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Speaker

*Opening speech delivered at the EESC Civil Society for rEUnaissance event [Check against delivery]*

Good morning everyone,

Thank you all for being here today.

This is an important day. We are gathered here a little over ninety days before the European elections to ask the question: are we brave enough to grasp the urgency of the moment?

Five years ago, President Jean-Claude Juncker, whom we shall have the honour to have with us today, said his was the last chance Commission. Five years later, I can assure you that every day I wake up with a knot in my throat reminding me that as we move closer to the European elections, these are the last chance elections.

Democracy is under attack everywhere. Euroscepticism, racism and a growing, devastating anti-semitism are flourishing and a cause of great concern. Our values are being questioned, the right to do good is not perceived by many people as the core of our political action.

Polls suggest a rise in **populist and nationalist voting patterns** and the populist voices being increasingly heard in many different countries seem to agree on one thing: they accuse the elite, be this their national government or the European Union, of "**not listening to the people**", issuing a vague and confused call for a need to "take back control".

As Francis Fukuyama has recently pointed out, the growing divisions and claims that are mounting all around the world are increasingly based on the demand for dignity or recognition, and accompanied by a powerful return of identity-based demands, which are intertwined with a widespread process of social narcissism based on a small world made up of many individual experiences in which the very concept of the common, collective good is lost.

Walls are being built against foreigners. There is a return to protectionism, isolationism and the search for an enemy. Solidarity is being rejected: troops are even being deployed on some of the European Union's external borders, and there is even separation... the dramatic case of Brexit.

We are living in a time of ever growing conflict between passion and reason. It seems that reason is now more derided than listened to.

The sleep of reason produces monsters: the great Spanish painter Francisco Goya immortalised this phrase in a famous picture. But the same painter also thought that the great wonders of human civilisation came only from a fruitful union between the logic of reason and the imagination of the passions. This combination is part of the bedrock of European history and civilisation and has always found in culture and values its foundation, origin and sustenance for its regeneration.

This is not a time for being resigned and depressed, and even less so for spreading fear, a pernicious envy or too many divisions in small countries.

On the contrary, it is a time for taking a gamble, for daring, for risking, for dreaming. And the time is now, not tomorrow. It is the time for responsibility, for coming together and for strong alliances between the most diverse forces.

It is time for a new emotional intelligence, for innovation and investment, a new pact between productive forces, between generations and between different areas.

Instead of the extremes, we must succeed in getting the "voices of the good" heard, as Italy's president Sergio Mattarella said in his new year's address. We must listen to the people whose hopes and opinions are being drowned out by the incessant violence of rallying cries.

Forces for good, to paraphrase the President of Italy. Today, following my speech, we shall hear so many "voices of the good", the voices of those who every day, in every part of Europe, roll their sleeves up to build a better Europe.

Today, I have invited here someone whom I believe to be one of the voices of the good, Greta Thunberg. I thank her for accepting the invitation. She has undertaken a long train journey to be here with us.

She is just 16 and in less than six months she has started, with tremendous courage and determination, a

climate movement that is collecting consensus across the planet.

More than three thousand scientists have given their backing to the strikes Greta Thunberg has started, and strikes for the climate are now being held every week in two hundred cities.

With the might of adolescence, she is telling us that the future is now and that we cannot sacrifice tomorrow to our inaction today.

Greta is right. It is the voice of our conscience, of our children. The best way of facing up to those who are now everywhere opposing the European project, without themselves offering tangible proposals, is to vigorously assert that Europe has a clear strategy for the decade to come.

It is called the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and is based on Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union, voted and agreed on by everyone. This is the matrix for the strategy. And if the Member States and European civil society fully embrace the strategy, it will enable us to embark upon a positive economic, social, environmental and institutional path towards renewal and the future.

The 2030 Agenda has become an imperative, a way of boosting and combining the efforts of entrepreneurs, workers and all of civil society. It could provide the social and economic contract for the 21st century, aimed at eradicating poverty, ensuring decent living and working conditions for all and reducing social inequalities, ensuring the sustainability of the planet and – above all – a new era of innovation and progress in every field for a Europe open to the world.

Our young people, Greta among them, are telling us in no uncertain terms that the winning recipe is to bring together sustainable development, young people and civic commitment.

It is a difficult task but we must have the responsibility to take it on, because the European Union continues to be the best gift that we can leave to our children, the best place in the world in which to live, to start a family, to do business, to be looked after, to be protected, and to live together in a rich diversity.

In this challenging time, I believe that the EESC and all of us representatives of civil society have a pivotal role to play. This institution was born sixty years ago from the spirit of our European democracies. It is an intermediary force that gives voice to the needs and aspirations of the myriad faces of this Europe that works – #Europeatwork – in our local and national environments.

It is a house of debate, consultation and compromise, civic passion and reason.

And we must make sure that the growing polarisation we are experiencing in our countries does not undermine this capacity for dialogue, compromise, of civic passion and reason.

To quote the Jewish, Romanian and US philosopher Elie Wiesel: "[W]e must see in every person a universe (...). Just as despair can come to one only from other human beings, hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings."

In order for hope not to remain just an empty expression, it must be turned into ACTION. This is why WE ARE here, today, as **"Civil Society for the rEUnaissance"**.

The Renaissance was a powerful and vast humanistic revolution that founded the modern transformation of Europe.

It gave citizens the cultural, technological and empowerment tools, the tools of civic involvement and a new form of governance so they could see themselves and act as protagonists of their lives.

The worst thing for us would be to remain silent.

A few years ago, Mario Draghi, the president of the European Central Bank, visiting the City of London in the midst of the financial crisis, said he would do anything it took to preserve Europe's economic security.

For the sake of our children, let us do the same.

#whateverittakes we will dare a sustainable Europe.

We promise today to stay engaged for a real #rEUnaissance.

And this time we ask that people vote for this # FutureofEurope

Thank you, everyone.