

## EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP IS MORE THAN RIGHTS!

### Open letter to MEPs: Commission proposal to designate 2013 as “European Year of Citizens”

On 11 August 2011, the European Commission proposed to designate **2013 as the “European Year of Citizens”** to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the European Union Citizenship under the Maastricht Treaty in 1993.

European Civil society organisations and networks members of the EESC Liaison Group<sup>1</sup> welcome Commission’s proposal to put Union citizenship at the heart of the political agenda. For a long time, we have been advocating for **citizenship to become a transversal dimension of European policies** and a key priority in all areas of Union action. This proposal is an important step forward in the building of a citizen-friendly European Union that would no longer be reduced to merely economic preoccupations. Nevertheless, we are deeply concerned that, in the framework of the European Year of Citizens 2013, **the EU citizenship tends to be confined to an individual rights-based approach and does not tackle the Europeans’ sense of belonging to a common European Union.**

**Considering that the main objective of Commission's proposal to designate 2013 as the “European Year of Citizens” is to raise awareness on Union citizens' rights, with a view to facilitating the exercise of the right of free movement and residence, we call on MEPs:**

1. to **broaden the focus of the European Year 2013** and give European citizenship its full meaning and scope by taking into account the new prospects opened up by article 11 of the treaty on the European Union for citizens’ participation in the democratic life of the European Union, for the following reasons:
  - democratic citizenship does not confine to citizen’s legal status but includes all aspects of life in a democratic society relating to a vast range of topics such as education, sustainable development, non discrimination, participation in society of people with disabilities, gender equality and the equal representation of women and men in decision making etc;
  - democratic citizenship implies that citizens have a say in the EU policy-shaping and decision-making processes by electing their representatives to the European Parliament; With the prospect of the upcoming elections in 2014 and at a time when many citizens feel the European Union is remote from their concerns, the stakes could not be higher;
  - democratic citizenship also implies that European institutions enjoy public confidence and can secure active involvement of citizens and organised civil society players in the European processes; therefore, the adoption of an interinstitutional agreement and a structured framework for European civil dialogue<sup>2</sup> is needed to give practical substance to active and participatory citizenship alongside with the provisions of the Lisbon treaty.

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<sup>1</sup> The Liaison Group is a structure created by the European Economic and Social Committee in 2004 to provide a framework for political dialogue between the EESC and European civil society organisations and networks.

<sup>2</sup> For more information please see the [Manifesto for a genuine European civil dialogue](#) and the call for [A Structured framework for the European Civil Dialogue](#).

2. to ensure that the **preparation and implementation of the European Year 2013 is given appropriate financial means**, since the current budget proposal of one million euro would only allow for top-down communication measures and not for tangible actions and does not foresee co-financing for citizens' and civil society organisations' initiatives;
3. to call on the Commission to **closely involve civil society organisations in the preparation and the implementation of the 2013 European Year**, since they have a key role to play in carrying forward the European project so that it fully meets the expectations of its citizens.

What does European citizenship mean twenty years after its creation? Firstly, a legal status that guarantees the freedom of movement and some political rights deemed to contribute, along with the deepening of the single market, to creating a sense of belonging to a community of goods, services and people.

Europe is part of the daily life of its citizens, but the rights and benefits stemming from this "single market citizenship" are essentially linked to mobility; thus, they become effective only "abroad". What about those who do not travel, study or work abroad and for whom the European citizenship can then be only an abstract and meaningless concept?

We consider that the concept of **citizenship** encompasses a **two-way relationship between a community and its members**. The Lisbon treaty provides a broader framework for the development of European citizenship rooted in a "community of values", and reinforces its social and political dimension by giving to the Charter of Fundamental Rights the same legal value as the European Union treaties and by creating the conditions for citizens and civil society organisations to be fully involved in the European processes.

The European Year of Citizens 2013 should reflect this reality, and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights must be implanted effectively and proper control mechanisms put in place. Also, European citizenship should be founded on the principle of residence and **in the name of universality of rights all residents of the European Union should enjoy equality of treatment and the same right to participate in public life as EU citizens**.

It is therefore vital, during the European Year 2013, to support awareness-raising on fundamental rights in all their dimensions; this is a shared responsibility of civil society organisations.

Furthermore, **the European Year 2013 should also be seen as an opportunity to bridge the gap between the EU and its citizens**. "After having built Europe, we have to build Europeans!" used to say former MEP Bronislaw Geremek. The European political space exists, but we are still far of having a European public space and a truly European society. We are now facing an ever growing gap between the European Union and its citizens, as revealed by the turnout in the latest European elections and by surveys which repeatedly show citizens' lack of awareness of European citizenship and identity<sup>3</sup>.

The European institutions' difficulties to give a strong and coordinated political and institutional response to the current financial, economic and social crisis and the mounting predominance of the use of intergovernmental method in European processes can partly account for this civic disaffection towards the EU.

We strongly believe that a true **active and participatory citizenship** is an important condition to regenerate the European project. It is also by giving citizens and civil society organisations the means to participate in European public debates and voice their opinions, and for European institutions to provide feed-back on how their concerns have been heard and taken into account, that EU policies and actions will be endowed with stronger democratic legitimacy and, ultimately, will be better understood and accepted. A real participatory democracy involving an equal representation and participation of women and men in the making of the decisions affecting their lives is crucial for enhancing the legitimacy of the European project.

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<sup>3</sup> EU citizenship report 2010.

European civil society organisations and networks members of the EESC Liaison Group have created a civil society Alliance aiming at mobilising and coordinating civil society engagement in the activities which will be scheduled during the European Year of Citizens 2013, and at initiating a European-wide debate on issues relating to the exercise of European citizens rights and to citizens' participation in the democratic life of the EU. This alliance is open to all civil society organisations sharing the same vision and willingness to promote a collective engagement for a common project and the emergence of a European public space.



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