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EUROPEAN CIVIC FORUM

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« Civil society and the democratic process »

Synthesis

On the occasion of the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union, the European Civic Forum (FCE) organized, in partnership with DECO, a public meeting in Lisbon, in the Representation of the European Commission, to discuss different subjects of European actuality like the European democratic process.

This meeting entitled " Civil society and the democratic process " gathered more than 80 representatives of civil society organisations, representatives of the European economic and social Committee (EESC) as well as representatives of the Portuguese Presidency of the EU and the European institutions.

During the opening session, Mr Jorge Lacão, Secretary of State of the Presidency of the Council of ministers and Mrs Margarida Marques, Director of the Representation of the European Commission in Portugal, underlined the importance for the European construction to have a strong and structured organized civil society that could nourish by its reflections the European public space, that is still to create. Both of them presented the different actions implemented by their structures to make out of the Portuguese Presidency a moment of European citizenship with a strong involvement of the citizens and the associations and NGOs.

This day of exchange was structured in three strong times of debate : " Civil dialogue in Europe, state of the art and perspectives ", "Civil dialogue in the member states " and "The associative voice in the institutionalisation of the civil dialogue in Europe ".

Mr Jean - Claude Boual, representative of the European Liaison Committee on Services of General Interest and member of the European Civic Forum, presented civil society's dynamic since the beginning of the European construction until our days by paying a particular attention to the role played by associations and NGOs in this process. He also put in evidence the will of European organized civil society to better structure itself in order to set up a long lasting, sector-based and transversal, civil dialogue with the European institutions.

The first round table, " Civil dialogue in the member states ", was animated by Jan Robert Suesser, representing the French League of Human rights, member of the FCE. Through four concrete examples, this round table shown the variety of the existing situations on the relations between the national authorities and the associations. The participants debated also on the social and civic utility of associations and on the possible "added value" of their participation in civil dialogue.

Jan Machacek, representative of ANO pro Evropu, one of the biggest civic NGO in Czech Republic and member of the FCE, evoked the situation of countries recently freed from the communism, in which civil society still looks for its place. Helena Roseta, from the City council of Lisbon, spoke about the relation between politics and civic movements and shared with us its own experience as an elected representative within one of these citizens' movements. Ben Kernighan, representative of the National council for voluntary

associations, presented the COMPACT. A contractual relation existing between the English government and the associative sector that details the rights and the responsibilities of the government towards civil society organizations. The COMPACT is, in fact, the symbol of the official recognition of the major role that associations and NGOs have to play as intermediate and additional bodies of public authorities. Finally, Emmanuel Lemoine, representative of Animafac, member of the FCE, discussed with the participants about the role of youth associations in a democratic construction. He also presented the commitment of his association in the Conférence Permanente des Coordinations Associatives which is an associative platform created in France in order to encourage a long lasting and a strong dialogue between the French civil society and the government.

The second round table, "The associative voice in the institutionalisation of the civil dialogue in Europe", animated by Jean - Marc Roirant, representing Civisme et démocratie - CIDEM, member of the FCE, treated the question of the involvement of the European associative networks and civil society organizations in the construction of a democracy considered, more and more, as a " participatory democracy ".

Jan Olsson, rapporteur of the EESC opinion "The representativeness of European civil society organisations in civil dialogue" presented the criteria of representativeness established by EESC members. Conny Reuter, representing SOLIDAR, a European platform, Anna Gabriel, representing AEGEE-Europe, a European platform of students and member of the FCE, and Miklos BARABAS, representing the EESC, showed through their various speeches that the associative political word is being outlined at the European level by the intervention of sector-based or non-specialized platforms that are more and more visible and audible. They also asserted the necessity of institutionalizing civil dialogue, following the example of social dialogue, that is registered in the treaties.

Finally, all the exchanges with the floor revealed the importance that have for the participants the creation of a statute of a European association, that could find some ideas on the reflections already done by the EESC. This statutes is one answer allowing to legitimize the associative actors that wish to participate in the consultations and the partnerships introduced by the European institutions towards civil society organisations.

The meeting ended with the speech of Mr Guillaume Klossa, Adviser to the French Secretary of State in charge of European affairs, that encouraged the present associations to continue their daily commitment in informing and raising awareness in order to build a more civic and closer to citizens Europe. After that, he present the priorities of the French Presidency of the European Union as well as the various actions which will be implemented to encourage a citizens presidency.