



UNITEE

European-Turkish Business Confederation
Business Beyond Borders

The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Active Citizenship among New Europeans

UNITEE Offices, 20th March 2014



UNITEE (the European-Turkish Business Confederation) represents, at the European level, entrepreneurs and business professionals with a migrant background, New Europeans as we call them. In that respect, one of UNITEE's main goals is to bring the central asset its members possess to light. These are namely a dual linguistic and cultural background, a key asset in internationalisation of businesses, thus, the facilitation of economic growth, and a more participatory and integrated society.

In view of the upcoming 2014 EU elections, UNITEE has organised a roundtable discussion on the 20th of March, to address the present democratic deficit and explore the ways in which NGO's can foster a more representative Europe, gathering policy makers, high-level experts and representatives of civil society.

Participants:

Mr **KUMCU**, President of UNITEE

Mr **PRIVOT**, Director of European Network Against Racism (ENAR)

Mr **FRANDESCU**, Policy Director of VoteWatch

Mr **SOYDEMIR**, New European entrepreneur

Mr **NIESSEN**, Director of Migration Policy Group (MPG)

Ms **KING**, Member of European Economic and Social Committee

Roundtable Report

Mr Adem Kumcu, President of UNITEE, opened the two-hour roundtable organised at UNITEE's offices, with presenting UNITEE and its position and posed some questions to the guests. Active citizenship is crucial for Europe, especially at this point in time, when the European elections are right around the corner. On this matter, UNITEE pursues two main objectives; in the short run the goal is to increase New Europeans' commitment facing the European elections and, in the long term, to have more representative and inclusive democracies in Europe.

When working to achieve these goals, two challenges have first to be tackled. Whilst entrepreneurship has become difficult to accomplish and unemployment remains high, entrepreneurship seems to be the best way for social mobility. However, although motivation is present, structural barriers against New Europeans makes it more complicated. An urgent mentality change towards a greater cultural understanding is needed. It is a change that has to happen amongst everyone; within society itself but also amongst policy makers.

Thus, focusing on Europe's perspective and values, communication is essential to achieve these objectives. UNITEE uses its communication channels, like our [blog](#), to inform our members about Europe and the importance of the European elections, Mr Kumcu added: "If you want your voice to be heard you have to be active".

Amid other questions, the speakers explored the extend at which civil societies and NGO's can help increase active citizenship among New Europeans and in what ways they could help to address the current demographic deficit that is present within the union.

Answering to Mr Kumcu's question "*As a rapporteur of the opinion on Migrant entrepreneurs, what do you think about the voter turnout amongst the New European community?*" Ms **KING**, Member of European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), shared her view on the matter, asserting that the lack of representation of people, especially with migrant backgrounds, is notable and thus, this translates into barriers concerning voting. Under her opinion, full cultural understanding is a must, "we have to educate people to change too, not just ourselves". Similarly, in many countries, such as

the UK, voting systems themselves are some of the obstacles citizens encounter, having to go through many procedures and requirements.

Furthermore, Ms **KING** considers that people may not be as economically active as they should, and therefore the voter turnout is not as high as it should be. The EESC, serving as a bridge between the European institutions and organised civil societies, also insists that economic inclusion is essential and thus, so is the creation of businesses and SMEs to revitalise towns and cities, and, in this respect, foster active citizenship. To encourage participation of New Europeans, they believe we should have New European representatives, showing the diversity in our society.

Expanding on this idea, **Mr PRIVOT, Director of ENAR**, in answering the question *“To what extent can civil societies and NGOs increase active citizenship especially among New Europeans?”*, declared that the joint work of NGOs and civil societies make a difference. Throughout think tanks activities, advocating and lobbying they are able to address and engage politicians more directly. Indeed, votes translate in strength of political parties, however a mentality change within the parties to represent better the interest of New Europeans is needed. This is a long term process we still have a long way to go. In addition, the lack of New Europeans within parties comes as another obstacle. ENAR fights this through different methods; they champion New European politicians and contribute to the fight against the far right.

On this basis, ENAR, in its fight to achieve full equality, solidarity and well-being for all, have several projects going on. Its team is thoroughly working on researches in different countries in order to achieve a well-informed society, since, as Mr **PRIVOT** asserts “people are not informed enough of the whole picture”. Moreover, they are showing concrete examples of success of European entrepreneurs and with their campaign *“I vote for diversity”* they are trying to encourage New Europeans by going on the streets in order to inform them and see if they are ready to mobilise. Nevertheless, Mr **PRIVOT** reiterates that this is a long term process for which we need to dedicate time and effort.

In the same way, Mr **NIESSEN**, Director of Migration Policy Group (MPG) highlighted the advantages of different organisations – such as think tanks and advocacy organisations-fighting for the same objectives. Just in the roundtable, participants had common values and hence common goals. To the question: *“Which forms of active citizenship would you*

implement in order to contribute to the well-being of a diverse society?" he pointed out that there are two major set of barriers: the existing legislation, that may obstruct electoral participation of non-nationals, and the low participation rates of people with migrant backgrounds in elections. Thus, being the MPG a non-profit think tank is continuously pointing out possible improvements of the current system that would allow better access to power in terms of civil and political participation. Furthermore, they put their efforts in helping New Europeans to become a national or to make it possible for non-nationals to vote in the elections. "The existing legislation may obstruct electoral participation of non-nationals. We want to change this"

Likewise, the MPG is conducting a research in seven countries to see to what extend they can assist New Europeans and whether they would be able to set up a campaign to increase participation and awareness towards the upcoming elections. This research is available for everyone on their website.

When looking at low participation rates, the reasons for it are discrimination and a higher share non representative politicians (over 50, white males), since the migrant community is often younger, more colourful and at least 50% female.

In response to *"How do you, as New European businessman, perceive Europe and European elections?"* Mr **SOYDEMIR**, New European entrepreneur, President of the board of directors of FEDACTIO and Member of UNITEE's Board of Directors, claims that the lack of participation also comes from the absence of attractiveness of politics and of the lack of media coverage concerning the elections, which would make information more accessible. He denounces that, for example, the Belgian society, in general terms, is not concerned with European elections and does not get involved, and therefore, the European Parliament should try to maximise their campaign's impact to attract more attention to the EP elections, "States should make voting obligatory to increase turnout; the youth can research everything on their phones today." Mr **SOYDEMIR** gave the example of the Netherlands where you can vote in the metro and bus, it being easier and more appealing.

Last but not least, Mr **FRANDESCU**, Policy Director of VoteWatch addressed the question *"We are aware that there are still obstacles to a more participatory European citizenship, how could NGOs help the EU in addressing its democratic deficit?"* asserting that

integration deserves greater attention and insists on the importance of assuring an informed society. For instance, based on opinion polls from all EU countries, the far right is experiencing a considerable rise which directly raises barriers to migration and integration.

VoteWatch, as an organisation which promotes greater transparency in the EU decision making, contributes to this cause by providing easy access and analysis of votes. In addition, it monitors the works in the European Parliament and Council, as well as, it presents the individual activities of each MEP and the positioning of each European Political group on their proposals.

Overall, it is clear that all the participants share the same objectives and agree on the means and ways to achieve them; greater cooperation between civil societies and NGOs, focused on solutions and change, is vital to our society. Freedom of choice is fundamental, yet other problems are still present when people build barriers themselves, refusing to take part in achieving a higher degree of integration for all. As the far right and the euro scepticism is growing, there is a greater need of integration and active participation of the New European community.



The UNITEE Team wish to thank all the participants for their valuable contribution to this event!

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