

May 2014: European citizenship under the spotlight

European Parliament, Strasbourg, 15th of April 2014



UNITEE is an organisation which represents more than 15 000 entrepreneurs and business professionals with a migrant background, 7 national federations and 81 associations across 23 European countries. For several years, UNITEE has supported the idea of a European project and highlighted the diversity of Europe by promoting the integration of "New Europeans".

The growing lack of interest in European citizenship is worrying, that is why UNITEE organized this conference to promote the value of the European elections in May 2014. Indeed, the role of citizens "New Europeans" is crucial for the democratic legitimacy and the construction of Europe.

On Tuesday 15th of April 2014, UNITEE organised a conference entitled « *May 2014: European citizenship under the spotlight* » in the European Parliament in Strasbourg. The Vice-President of the European Parliament M. Miguel Angel Martinez Martinez; the Director of the Directorate B of the European Ombudsman, M. Gerhard Grill; the Director of the Information Office of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, M. Luis Martinez Guillen; and the President of UNITEE, M. Adem Kumcu, were invited to this event to discuss about European citizenship, a decisive topic in the context of approaching European elections.



SPEAKERS

Moderator: **Mr Abdurahman ATLI**, Head of UNITEE's Strasbourg Office

Mr Miguel Angel MARTINEZ MARTINEZ, Vice-President of the European Parliament

Mr Gerhard GRILL, Director of the Directorate B of the European Ombudsman

Mr Luis MARTINEZ GUILLEN, Director of the Information Office of the European Parliament in Strasbourg

Mr Adem KUMCU, President of UNITEE

Mr Abdurahman Atli, Head of UNITEE's Strasbourg Office, opened the conference with a welcome speech in which he quoted the historian and former Polish MEP Bronislaw Geremek « after creating Europe, we need to create now the Europeans ». Mr Atli specified what was the role of UNITEE in promoting the European project and in its function of uniting European citizens, whatever their origins are, in one single rich and proud Europe.

It is with great pleasure that Mr Atli introduced the speakers of the conference, all of them being representatives of the institutional organs that work at the closest with citizens in Europe, such as the European Parliament, the European Ombudsman or associations from civil society. He added how necessary it was to place the European citizens at the heart of the European project in order to reach a more democratic and more united Europe.

Introduction Europe, a political miracle

Mr Martinez Martinez, Vice-President of the European Parliament and MEP since 1999, started his presentation by defining what the European Union is. For him, the EU is before all the message of a triumphing Europe. Indeed, the EU is the story of an unprecedented success of a continent that was during centuries victim of intolerance, authoritarianism, mutual hatred and violence. Today, Europe has become a universal paradigm of peace, tolerance and dialogue for the resolution of conflicts. Mr Martinez Martinez noticed that we could speak of a real miracle. A political miracle that comes from politicians, and from the work of men and women, all of them vowed to politics, who decided to serve their community and defend a series of fundamental values based on dialogue. However, the Vice-President indicated that this miracle was far from being definitive, and that it was a constant need to work to protect and maintain it. Indeed, Europe's political success was built with the help of numerous conquests and efforts, and because this success is not eternal, it needs to be protected.

The citizens' paradox

The European elections are extremely important in the opinion of Mr Martinez Martinez. However, they are based on a paradox. On one hand, European voters are more and more informed and mature. On the other hand, a considerable part of them will not go voting on the 25th of May. They are aware of their European citizenship, they enjoy the right to vote and they have the opportunity to express their freedom, but some of them have decided to not vote. Why ?

European citizens' paradox is worrying. In Mr Martinez Martinez opinion, this paradox can be explained by the lack of solidarity in today's European project. He regretted the fact that the EU, essentially based on solidarity, had given up upon it.

In fact, European citizens do not recognize themselves anymore in a project that has become « ununited » and they have grown away from it. Worse, European citizens are convinced that the elected political forces of May will not be given any real powers to put in place what they wish to. After all, political power has been usurped by the world of finance and non-united proposals are now dominating the European political scene.

This is why it is crucial to make citizens more aware of the issues at stake for the upcoming election. This is the challenge for all MEPs and stakeholders of European politics.

Finally, Mr Martinez Martinez ended his speech by showing his enthusiasm of speaking in front of such a big crowd. He observed with a great amount of pleasure the mobilisation of the public and emphasized that the « New Europeans » did represent an added value to European integration.

The mechanisms of control of the European institutions

It is then Mr Grill, Director of the Directorate B at the European Ombudsman, who intervened to describe to the assistance the activities and the importance of the European Ombudsman. Indeed, one of the greatest rights of European citizens is the one to complain of the European institutions and administration to an authority. The distrust of the citizens is legitimate and they need a mechanism of control. This authority is the European Ombudsman, whose role is to examine the European institutions in order to check that their administrative practices are good and shaped to certain values.

Mr Grill then explained that the citizens were often little aware of their rights in the matter and badly informed, which explains why the European Ombudsman rejects more than 70% of the demands that are dressed to him/her. On the other hand, in cases of rejection, the European Ombudsman can, for example, lead citizens towards a national Ombudsman (when adapted to the situation).

In average the Ombudsman handles 500 cases/inquiries every year. Any citizen of a Member State of the European Union can complain to the Ombudsman wherever he lives: for instance, a French living in Japan has theoretically the right to refer a complaint to the Ombudsman. Also, all citizens living in a country member of the European Union, whatever their nationalities have the right to refer a complaint: a Japanese living in Sweden has therefore the right to complain of the European institutions. The European Ombudsman can also from its own initiative decide to open an inquiry if he feels it is necessary.

Finally, Mr Grill described three cases of intervention of the Ombudsman: the ones concerning fast requests; the transparency of the administration (the right to access to documents for example) and the protection of fundamental rights. Mr Grill concluded his speech by reminding that the right to complain of European authorities is a fundamental right constitutive of European citizenship, and that therefore the entire procedure is free of charge.

Assessing five years of the European Parliament's legislature

Mr Martinez Guillen, head of the Information Office of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, then assessed five years of European legislature, underlining its historical impact, before declining a certain amount of perspectives and solutions to make European citizens feel more concerned by the elections of May.

Between 2009 and 2014, the European Parliament adopted more than 970 legislative acts, 45 000 amendments in 24 languages for 28 nationalities. The amount of work accomplished in the « semicircle » is huge and must continue to be so. Indeed, the European Parliament is the only European institution directly elected by its citizens, and if it wishes to continue acting for a more open, more social and more united Europe, it has to be elected by an overwhelming majority of citizens. It is the only way that European citizens can act and decide on their common destiny.

For the first time since the Lisbon Treaty, the votes of European citizens will matter in the choice of the President of the European Commission. Therefore, the stakes are high and numerous for this election: the choice of a European model and of the head of the European « executive » are between the hands of hundreds of millions of voters.

However, Mr Martinez Guillen regretted that a distance had established between European citizens and their representatives. This distance can be explained by the fact that for a majority of citizens, Europe is today taken for granted, and that it is therefore imperative to move to maintain it. The opening of boundaries is hard-proof that peace is established between Member States. The work of the Information office of the Parliament is to explain that peace is not a present fallen from the skies but the result of a construction and of a continuous dialogue between citizens and their representatives.

Mr Martinez Guillen concluded by pointing out that the strategy of communication of the European Parliament had to be re-thought in a model of « marketing campaign » adapted for a chosen public: unemployed, students, disabled people, etc... those for who Europe is a real priority.

Conclusion: Europe, a paradigm of peace and prosperity

Mr Kumcu closed the conference by explaining the importance of the date chosen for this conference: the last plenary session of the European Parliament before the European election of May 2014. He also warned European representatives to not

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forget their mission to be constantly along the side and listening carefully to European citizens' claims. Mr Kumcu explained how essential it was to continue believing in Europe and to make of cultural diversity an asset for European citizenship. Indeed, racism is for Europe tomorrow's greatest danger.

Confronting the existence of several Europe, it is the duty of European citizens to protect democracy by exercising their greatest right, European citizenship. Mr Kumcu last remarks were to assess that Europe had become a paradigm of peace and prosperity.



*UNITEE Strasbourg wants to thank all participants
for their valuable contribution to this event !*

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