

THE ROLE OF NGOs IN PROMOTING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

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Dear guests,

It is a **pleasure** to welcome you at **UNITEE**, the European-Turkish Business Confederation, to our **expert roundtable discussion** on “The Role of **Civil Society** in Promoting **Active Citizenship** among **New Europeans**”.

This concept, “**New European**”, which was coined by the **European Commission** in a 2011 Eurobarometer survey, is **at the heart** of UNITEE’s **vision and mission**.

Who are the **New Europeans**? According to the Commission, New Europeans are **Europeans** with a **migrant background**, more precisely, “people who live in **Europe** but have **connections** with **more than just the country** where they live”.

Economic actors AND social & political actors?

In this definition, “**connections**” is a **key word**, because in today’s **globalized world**, having an **international awareness** and **understanding of other cultures** is of crucial importance.

In particular, **UNITEE's members**, New European **entrepreneurs** and **business professionals**, are a great asset for Europe in terms of **job creation, innovation, and internationalization of SMEs**.

And their **economic contribution** has grown over time, as they have become increasingly **well-educated** and are gradually moving from **ethnic businesses** to **more innovative sectors**.

However, can **the same** be said of their **political and social participation**? Has it **increased** overtime? And is their role as **economic actor** enough for them to **truly** feel part of their **new home societies**? In other words, is it enough to run a **successful business** to feel like a **genuine member** of a society?

The answer to **all these questions** is no. For two reasons. First, because a successful **integration** will only happen if New Europeans also take part in **the civic and political life** of their new country. Second, because **European democracies** will only work if they are **inclusive**.

Creating more space for New Europeans in the social and political life of European societies

And there is **more space** for them in the **social and political life** of **European societies**. But for New Europeans to **occupy it**, two **moves** are necessary:

- One is to be made from the “**Old Europeans**” to the “**New Europeans**”: the Old Europeans should **give more space** to New Europeans in **social and political spheres**.

And to do so, they first need to **stop** viewing them as **temporary citizens** and to stop **denying** that New Europeans are **part and parcel of their society**. But unfortunately, in the **public discourse**, and especially among **extreme right** partisans, New Europeans are still seen as “**foreigners**” and as “**passive citizens**”.

- The other move is to be made by the **New Europeans themselves**.

They should **involve** themselves more in their **new home societies**, by, for example, engaging in **volunteering activities** to improve the life of the society and not just of their **own community**.

To sum up, what is needed is a **double change of mentality**, a change of mentality among “**Old Europeans**” and a change of mentality among “**New Europeans**”. However, these **two moves** should be **facilitated**.

The Role of Civil Society Organizations such as UNITEE

And this is where **civil society organizations** and **actors** such as UNITEE or the ones represented today **play a role**.

Civil society organizations can help in fostering this **change of mentality**, both among **Old Europeans** and among **New Europeans**. But also among **policy-shapers** and **policymakers**. And this is what **UNITEE**, and its **member Federations and associations**, are doing.

First, by **advocating** for New Europeans to **local, national or European** stakeholders so that they **better acknowledge** the **added-value** and **contributions** of our members.

Second, by providing our members with a **wide range of services** to aid them in their economic but also **social and cultural development** and by **encouraging them** to play a **stronger role** in their country of residence and at the European level.

I will give you a **few examples** of our work and the work of our members.

[UNITEE BLOG](#)

Because we believe that a **genuine European citizen** must be constantly **updated and aware** of the decisions taken by its **representatives** at the EU level, UNITEE has launched a **blog** entirely dedicated to **European developments** and to the **upcoming elections**.

Our first **target** is, of course, our members, but we also target **New Europeans** in general. We want to encourage them to **learn more** and to **engage more** by showing them that **important decisions** are taken at the **EU level** and that these **politicians** are also their representatives.

We select **relevant information** and **hot topics**, and make them **easy** to read. We provide the **basics** and the **terminology**, as well as **current events** related to the elections. We conduct **interviews** with the Members of the European Parliament, so that our members learn more about their **opinions on key topics**.

MEETINGS WITH REPRESENTATIVES

Both UNITEE and its **federations** and **associations** organise **meetings** between **New European entrepreneurs** and **politicians**.

These **citizens' meetings** allow for a more **interactive dialogue** in a **bottom-up process**, in which the participating **entrepreneurs** send their **comments and suggestions** to a **higher-level**, while the participating **politician better understand** how it works **on the ground**.

These events contribute as well to **create mutual confidence between two worlds** that usually do not get the **opportunity** to meet.

- UNITEE organised for example a few **roundtables** with **one MEP** and **several entrepreneurs**.
- The same is organized by our **British Federation BIZNET**, what they call “**1 to 11**”, roundtables with one Parliamentarian and 11 entrepreneurs.
- Our **Dutch Federation HOGIAF** organizes each month a meeting between a **Parliamentarian** and **businessmen** in order to bring these.

CSR

UNITEE also promotes **Corporate Social Responsibility** among its members. The **message** that we give to them in this regard is **clear: entrepreneurship and innovation**

are not only about **generating economic value**. It is also about **anticipating and responding** to social problems.

Their **entrepreneurial mindset**, driven to a **great extent** by a desire to improve **their quality of life**, the different **perspectives** and fresh **ideas** they bring to Europe... all these **characteristics** put them in an **ideal position** to help Europe address these challenges. Our **German federation**, for example, organizes many events centered on **innovation** and **sustainable developments**.

Last but not least, **our members** are also involved in the **funding of schools**, such as **L'Ecole des Etoiles**, here in Brussels.

Why this roundtable?

So, why this roundtable? As you know, **obstacles** to a more participatory **European citizenship** remain. And, of course, UNITEE will **not be able** to address **these issues** alone.

Therefore, the **joint work** of all **relevant stakeholders** to promote **active citizenship** among **New Europeans** is crucial. And it is no **coincidence** that this **roundtable** takes place just a few weeks before the **upcoming EU elections**. The expected **rise of extreme right parties** should trigger a **stronger mobilisation** both among **New Europeans** and among us, gathered today around this table.

By bringing together **policy makers**, **high-level experts** and **representatives of civil society**, this roundtable wants to serve as a **call for action**. With a **short term objective**: engaging New Europeans more in the EU elections. And a **long term objective**: creating more representative and inclusive democracies in Europe.

The central questions that will have to be addressed are the following:

- To what extent can **civil societies and NGOs** increase **active citizenship** especially among **New Europeans**?
- How can NGOs help in the EU in addressing its **democratic deficit**?

- How can NGOs help to encourage a **fact based, non-populist** debate about European politics?

To answer these questions, we have today **distinguished speakers** and I would like to **thank you all very much** for accepting to participate in our roundtable.