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.
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.