

**Statement at the Meeting of the Church Council's Advisory Board
on European Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland
14 October 2013**

*The European Year of Citizens – a Critical Assessment and
Challenges for the Future from a Church and Education Perspective*

Introduction

Thank you very much for the invitation. It is an honour for me to be with you today and to discuss with you about the European Year of Citizens. My background is shaped by two perspectives: education and church.

I am an educator and work as a senior researcher at the Comenius-Institut, a Protestant Centre for Research and Development of Education in Germany. In a recent study I have investigated the place and concept of religion and education in the activities of the Council of Europe and the European Union (Schreiner 2012). On the basis of the findings of the study one can say that the European institutions are open for dialogue and exchange with churches and religious communities.

As part of my work I am involved with the Intereuropean Commission on Church and School ICCS, as member of the board and as president. ICCS brings together staff that is responsible for church and school issues in the different Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican churches in Europe. ICCS is a registered partner organization of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and a participating NGO at the Council of Europe.

As the moderator of the working group on education of the Church and Society Commission of CEC (CSC/CEC) where Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) and the European Year of Citizens are main issues to deal with.

One example is the publication "Education for Democratic Citizenship" (Schreiner 2013) a joint publication of ICCS, IV and CSC. The motive and purpose of this publication is to enable churches and their members to get access to the European discourse on citizens, citizenship and EDC. It is based on the premise that all can contribute to shaping society's and Europe's future, starting in the present.

My introduction has the following parts:

- A positive supportive perspective for EYC
- Interlude
- Some critical points
- Finally a critical constructive perspective

I. Positive supportive part concerning the European Year of Citizens;

It is the right initiative at the right time, a whole year is dedicated to citizens' rights; it can give impulses with sustainable effects; it can provide an active recognition of the crucial event to come the European elections in May 2014.

The official slogan is: **It's about Europe – it's about you. Join the Debate.**

The year marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the EU Citizenship under the Maastricht Treaty. It provides an opportunity for people throughout Europe to:

- learn about the rights and opportunities open to them through EU citizenship – particularly their right to live and work anywhere in the EU
- take part in debates about the obstacles to using these rights and generate specific proposals for addressing them, participate in civic fora on EU policies and issues
- prepare to vote in the 2014 European elections and engage in the EU's democratic life

So the Year can help to make citizenship a permanent and transversal dimension of European public policies decision-making, implementation and assessment. It can also help to promote the Europeans' sense of belonging to a common European future.

A first signpost set by the Year includes that:

- Citizenship is about making a difference.
- Citizenship is a sense of belonging
- Citizenship has three essential and complementary dimensions: A status, a feeling and a practice associated with democracy and human rights (Osler/Starkey, 2005: 9)

A positive result of the year is that dialogue happens on different levels. Last week 5000 young people from all of the 28 member states of the EU gathered in the European Parliament in Strasbourg for three days to discuss the future of Europe. Other events have taken place. One of the dialogue events with EU Commissioner Viviane Reding happened also in Helsinki with good effects as I have heard.

A second effect is that several initiatives of civil society have been created for raising awareness about active European Citizenship and about Education for Democratic Citizenship. I will introduce three examples:

❖ “European Year of Citizens 2013 Alliance”: ey2013-alliance.eu

This is an open network of European and national civil society organisations willing to promote active citizenship as a core element of the European democracy in the frame of the European Year of Citizens 2013.

The alliance has published a Manifesto as a key document (3 pages). The document includes:

Active European Citizenship is about pursuing European collective goals and values enshrined in the treaties.

It refers to Article 11 of the Treaty on the EU for citizens' participation in the democratic life of the EU.

It states:

Active citizenship means primarily active involvement of citizens as participation in the life of their communities, and thus in democracy, in terms of activity and decision-making.

Mentioned elements are: It is a lifetime process; it includes participation in elections, civil dialogue, participation on local governance and social citizenship.

The document demands:

In order for citizens to engage with policy development, effective mechanisms need to be put in place to provide diversified and objective information and education for citizens.

- ❖ **The Permanent Forum of European Civil Society** is another network of civil society and seems to be a bit more critical concerning EYC. It has published the Laeken declaration (June 2013) <http://en.forum-civil-society.org/> that should not be mixed up with the declaration of December 2001: on the future of the EU, European Council, committing the EU to greater democracy, transparency and efficiency, towards a constitution.

The text of June 2013 is composed of short statements on 12 key issues and a number of related questions. The main aim is to argue towards a renewed Union.

The document includes sections on: Education and Employment for young generations (2.) and on Democracy within the European Union (11.)

Two questions concerning education:

1. What role should Education have at a European level?
2. Should a European Education Policy and a specific European Education System be envisaged? *A somehow naïve question when you realize the existing situation (Europeanisation of Education, open method of coordination, rethinking education strategy etc.)*

On democracy the document includes a critical view:

The European decision-making process is showing its limits and its inefficiency in governing the economic, political, asocial and democratic crises the Union is currently facing.(...) Innovation in European democracy is paramount. Giving back power control (empowering) to citizens must be at the centre of the decision circuit within the Union.

- ❖ **Activities of the Conference of European Churches**

As I have already mentioned the CEC is active concerning EYC. Together with the catholic partner organization COMECE a dialogue seminar took place on 20 June this year with the European Commission on: EU citizenship – challenges and benefits; The debate was around human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity and a sense of belonging as key elements of European citizenship. Three key attributes were mentioned and

discussed that are related to the quality of European (and also national) citizenship: Belonging, being, and becoming.

In the debates at the seminar it became also clear that we need a shift of perspectives among Europeans: from “us first” to “we together”.

A second example is the publication “Education for Democratic Citizenship in the Context of Europe. Material and resources for Churches and Educators” (Schreiner 2013). This publication includes introductions to concepts of citizenship and education for democratic citizenship, it presents European as well as selected national initiatives and includes resources and references.

Interlude

After the first part I like to introduce now as an interlude some quotes from a crucial statement of the president of the EU Commission José Manuel Barroso. Once a year he delivers a speech about the “State of the Union”. This year it was held on 11th September 2013 to the European Parliament (see: Europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-684_en.htm for the whole text).

Barosso plead for a more complete political union and stated concerning citizens:

Citizens will not be convinced with rhetoric and promises only, but only with a concrete set of common achievements. We have to show the many areas where Europe has solved problems for citizens. Europe is not the cause of problems, Europe is part of the solution. (...)

In today's world, the EU level is indispensable to protect these values and standards and promote citizens' rights: from consumer protection to labour rights, from women's rights to respect for minorities, from environmental standards to data protection and privacy. (...)

Solidarity is a key element of what being part of Europe is all about, and something to take pride in.

Barroso also mentioned education as an integrative part of EU policy.

[EU must] invest more in innovation, in technology and the role of science.

That is why we use the EU budget to invest in skills, education and vocational training, dynamising and supporting talent. That is why we have pushed for Erasmus Plus.

II. A critical (negative) perspective

It is no surprise that the European Year of Citizens can be also seen from a more critical perspective. And it should be a task for the churches to become “critical friends” of the European institutions for the sake of European citizens. It means to contribute in a critical reflective way to the debate on Europe’s future. Concerning EYC the following critical points should be taken into account:

- there are no substantial effects of the Year
- the initiative does not trickle down to the local level
- the focus is on a marginal issue
- Europe is not very strong in the conscience of Citizens

- the Year is a fig-leaf action;
- it does not bridge the growing gap between the EU and its citizens.

A critical perspective can be underlined with the mentioned Laeken declaration. The document starts with the following view:

“Deep and simultaneous economic, political, social and democratic crises are lashing at the European Union made vulnerable by its incomplete construction and unable to meet the expectations of European citizens. They feel deprived of their right to participate in the decision-making process.”

Also the turnout in the last European elections and several surveys repeatedly show citizens’ lack of awareness of European citizenship and identity. The gap between what happened in the European institutions and what matters in the lifeworld of the people is big. Intermediators such as the churches are not successful enough to bridge the gap. A deficit of democracy exists in European institutions, why should we vote for the European Parliament? The EU is fighting against an endemic financial, economic and social crisis. Anti-Europe forces are gaining sympathy such as a new party in Germany called Alternative for Germany AfD. What to do? Bridging the gap between citizens and the European institutions should have a high priority. As the Laeken declaration states:

Innovation in European democracy is paramount. Giving power control (empowering) to citizens must be at the centre of the decision circuit with the Union.

III. Critical reflective perspective:

I see an urgent need to (re)discuss effects of Europeanisation and ways for religious communities and churches to play an active role in European affairs.

There is a need to enable Churches and their members to actively participate in processes of European integration.

Also an effective representation on the level of European institutions is needed and collaboration with other organizations of civil society.

As an example that comes from collaboration with different organisations in Brussels I will mention the planned *Guide to May 2014 European elections* that is in the making of CEC together with other organizations. The document deals with the following issues:

1. A strong Europe based on the balance of economic competitiveness and high social standards and protection
2. A European Union of values, caring for its most vulnerable people
3. A Europe which welcomes and protects migrants and refugees
4. A Europe which lives and cherishes diversity
5. Safeguarding Creation: Climate Change and the Environment
6. A fairer Europe which cares for the poor and the environment in a globalizing world

We need to organize a more intense dialogue with:

- Politicians
- Other parts of civil society
- Church members

Becoming critical friends concerning European integration is named as “silvertongued loyalty” (EKD chairman Nikolaus Schneider). This term mentions a loyal status concerning European integration but at the same time also a self confident perspective that refers to the values and commitment of the churches, that faces the danger of being instrumentalized but sees the need to collaborate for the common good.

We need a citizen-friendly European Union and should think how to support this aim.

To sum up the following 8 points should give us something to discuss:

- EYC is not a single project but an ongoing permanent process
- Key events and milestones needed
- Election to the European Parliament in May 2014
- Awareness building campaigns
- Statements on current political issues
- No support for Europe as a fortress
- Tackle burning issues such as unemployment, migrants and refugees
- Develop a global and cosmopolitan perspective; churches are global players

Finally: What is needed?

- Capacity building (education)
- Citizens’ empowerment
- A citizen-friendly European Union

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I will end with a quote of the Dalai Lama who is definitely not a European but his message can guide us also when it comes to the European Year of Citizens:

The planet does not need more successful people. The planet desperately needs more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers of all kind.

References

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