

## NECE New Year's Reception

28 January 2014  
Brussels, Belgium

### Opening Speech

**By Doris Pack**

Member of the European Parliament (Belgium)

*- The spoken word takes precedence -*

### Speaking points: Citizens' participation in the EP Elections 2014

As this is a New Year's Reception, I think that it is appropriate to start by wishing all of you a successful and healthy 2014!

Politically, it will surely become an interesting and exciting year and one of the reasons for that will be the European elections taking place in a few months.

People vote if they think that the result matters and that her vote makes a difference. Since 1979, turnout in European elections has been in constant decline (1979: 62%; 2009: 43%) although the impact of the European Union has increased over the years.

This trend is clearly worrying even if I expect it to come to an end in May. But I fear, as many others do, that a lot of people will vote for populist and extremist parties. This is why I highly appreciate that the initiative *Networking European Citizenship Education* and its members feel so committed to these issues.

Citizenship education is crucial but requires at least a certain degree of interest and willingness among the target group. Unfortunately, people that are interested in citizenship education are often those who already know about the European Union and its function. This makes it even more challenging for you.

I understand that during your conference in The Hague at the end of last year, participants discussed – amongst other things – the so-called 'democratic deficit' of the European Union.

To my mind, since the Lisbon Treaty has come into force, this 'democratic deficit' is not characterized any longer by any deficient institutional architecture or any problem of lacking democratic legitimation.

The Parliament as the only directly elected institution is weak and has no influence?  
That's just a fairy tale from last century!

Indeed, there surely is a 'democratic deficit' but it won't disappear by simply changing the EU Treaties and by transferring competences from national to European level or vice versa: Generating public debate about political issues is crucial for every democratic system.

When it comes to EU politics, European citizens don't know and don't understand what is happening here in Brussels and what we are doing.

In many cases, there is just no basis for public debates about European policy: People feel uninformed and excluded from this anonymous power called "Brussels". In the long run, this feeling can – if it is shared by more and more people – endanger the European integration as a whole. This is what today's "democratic deficit" is about!

The question is: Who is responsible for this development and who is responsible to change it? Do politicians and EU institutions just not care?

You won't be surprised that to my mind, the answer is "No!"

As far as concerned external communications or rather press, media and public relations there is not such a thing as a "Brussels Bubble": Day by day hundreds of press releases, video messages, tweets and other statements are spread by EU institutions and their representatives.

Not only plenary sessions but also all committee meetings in the Parliament are live streamed at the Internet or can be watched afterwards. People can read our reports online and every single amendment tabled by a MEP is available on the Parliament's webpage.

Nevertheless, many people think that we are making policy in secret. But I can't imagine any Parliament that could be more transparent and open to the public than the European one. However, there is no doubt that it is not visible enough in public.

So, we also have to talk about the role of the media: I know that there are many journalists here in Brussels who would like to create more visibility regarding EU politics but their counterparts at home tend to keep out such content arguing that people don't care. This is what media's gatekeeper role can sometimes lead to.

But I don't want to make media bashing tonight:

There is no doubt that EU institutions themselves have to further improve their communication activities:

- Inter-institutional cooperation is bad when it comes to developing such initiatives in partnership.
- Many of the existing projects are not close to the people.
- Certainly, there are promising initiatives and projects that work. And it is a pity that sometimes, they are simply shut down as it recently happened with *Presseurop*.

Since it was launched in 2009, *Presseurop* had earned itself a reputation as a leading independent European Union news website. Each day, readers could find the best of the European and international press translated into ten languages. They could share and comment on the articles posted. A European community was thus created and more and more people from all over Europe were part of this community.

But the Commission decided not to renew the framework contract with the consortium of European publishers that was running *Presseurop*.

By the way, I do not only blame the Commission for this but also the member states which as you know have drastically reduced the EU budget for the next years. This was the reason why the Commission had to make hard decisions and had to stop certain projects.

And here's another odd and sad story: Until 2012, there was a unique educational tool called "Europa Diary". For several years, it was used in classrooms at hundreds of schools all across Europe. It was perfectly designed to address pupils in an age-based way and without spreading pure EU 'propaganda'. It had been launched by a small NGO in 1995.

Following a call for tender, a four-year framework contract between the Commission and the NGO was concluded in 2010 aimed at producing and distributing this publication. Only one year later, the Commission terminated this contract for questionable reasons and despite the tremendous success of this project.

It's just absurd: We kill things that have proven to be successful and again start from scratch!

By the way, if anyone among you sees a way to re-vitalize this calendar, I would be happy to assist you to get in touch with this NGO.

-----

It is crucial to approach young people, to make them understand what this European Union is about without only telling them boring stories about war and former times.

Some of our EU Programmes are perfectly suitable for that:

ERASMUS+

Europe For Citizens

European Volunteering

-----