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# The European Democratic Divide



## Abstract:

This paper summarises the essential points in the debates that took place during a seminar devoted to "The Economic and Social Councils and the expectations of European civil society" which took place at the Economic, Social and Environmental Council in Paris on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014. The full debate proceedings can be found by clicking on the following link: <http://www.lecese.fr/content/les-conseils-economiques-et-sociaux-face-aux-attentes-de-la-societe-civile-europeenne-le-14-novembre-au-cese>

## INTRODUCTION

This introduction summarises the debate between Jean-Paul Delevoye, Chair of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC), Hans Joachim Wilms, Deputy Chair of the European Economic, Social and Environmental Committee and Jean-Dominique Giuliani, Chair of the Robert Schuman Foundation, who notably presented a summary of the most recent opinion polls undertaken across Europe.

The democratic divide between the political world and its citizens is the focus of public debate now more than ever before. There is a fear of losing status, a feeling of exclusion from places of power and by those who occupy that space: it has to be admitted that a feeling of mistrust now reigns within European civil society. Disenchantment with Europe is not inevitable however. Solutions can be found to revive citizen enthusiasm, to encourage their renewed acceptance of the European cause and of the project for society which this implies. This means reconciling economic and social results.

Like the Europe 2020 strategy responses to the present challenges faced by Europe have to be long term and be discrete from electoral calendars.

To do this a review of public opinion has to be made along with the most recent Eurobarometer surveys. A precise review like this might be used as a base for thought. At the beginning of this the 21st century survey results reveal the extent to which definitions of democracy have become confused and how the exercise of fundamental democratic rights sometimes take on surprising shapes and form. Three questions can be raised to decipher the statistics that we have on the opinion of civil society: Is the European Union seen as a democratic space? Are its institutions seen to function effectively? And finally what place is there for any intermediary organisations in this new definition of European democracy?

### 1. Is the European Union democratic?

Contrary to popular thought polls show that 60% of Europeans believe that the European Union is democratic. Democracy is in fact one of the values that embodies the European Union the best, after peace and the defence of Human Rights. This refers to article 2 of the Treaty on European Union which provides that "*the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. (...)*"

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**2. Does the problem lie in the functioning of the European institutions?**

Although Europe is considered to be a democratic entity the way its institutions function does not give satisfaction. 44% of the Europeans interviewed say that European democracy is not satisfactory. Hence we are facing a confidence crisis in the institutions which originates in the idea that “my vote does not count” (52% of those interviewed) and also in the feeling that the Union is distant from its citizens (55%) and that it is too complex (only 29% of the Europeans interviewed believe that they are well informed about the European Union) and not transparent enough (34% believe that the European institutions are transparent). These answers confirm the citizens’ mistrust regarding the European elites.

**3. What place is there for the intermediary organisations like the ESCs in this new configuration?**

This issue was core to the seminar. As part of a revived democratic process the role of the Economic and Social Councils has to be redefined. The latter now have to ensure that they become true venues in the quest for citizen consensus.

It is clear that new forms of democratic debate have already been tried out in other European countries offering alternative tools in the quest for citizen consensus. In 2012 in Ireland a Convention was introduced to take decisions on eight issues that were a source of polemic within a one year time span (these included same sex marriage, increasing women’s participation in politics and the reduction of the presidential mandate to five years). The Convention comprising 100 citizens (66 of whom were chosen at random from the electoral rolls and 33 were MPs appointed by the political groups) worked for a year in all transparency and at the end of the period made thirty-eight recommendations. The Irish government now has to respond either via a debate in parliament or by referendum in which it would support the recommendations.

Belgium launched the G1000 initiative in 2011 which has taken place in several stages: firstly a public consultation in the shape of an on-line platform open to everyone was set up. Following various proposals put forward, 25 recurrent themes were selected and several hundred citizens were then selected randomly to take part in the discussion phase. The third phase aimed to draft recommendations via a citizens’ panel. In this “conference of consensus” participants decided how the question to be addressed was to be formulated, together with the methodology and they put forward the conclusions that were to be debated publicly.

Finally the German inter-party *Mehr Demokratie*, created in 1988, has been working for year on the facilitation of direct expression in the part of citizens in democracies, particularly via referenda and proposals to reform the electoral law. To achieve this goal *Mehr Demokratie* puts forward and supports campaigns, gives advice and makes scientific analyses, as well as writing legislative proposals on issues concerning democracy. *Mehr Demokratie* has initiated 19 Citizens Initiatives in Germany and in Europe. Amongst others it initiated a constitutional complaint supported by 37,000 people against the European Solidarity and Budgetary Pact.

These various European initiatives are food for thought in terms of the role and approach made by the Economic and Social Councils.

**I – DEMOCRATIC DIVIDE IN EUROPE: REPRESENTATION GAP, POPULISM AND A SOCIAL ISSUE**

The first round table focused on the various forms of democratic divide in Europe. The Union’s political legitimacy crisis, the rise of populism and extremism within the context of the present economic and social crisis and more generally European citizens’ disenchantment with their elites, which are all equal factors in the political divide, were debated by Pascal Perrineau, University Professor

at Sciences Po; Christophe Quarez, a member of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, Opinion Rapporteur "EU at a crossroads"; Antonio Marzano, Chair of the CNEL Italy, and Radowlas Markowski, University Professor in Social Science and Humanities Warsaw, member of the Academy of Science of Poland.

## 1. A climate of mistrust of the European and national political elites

### a. High citizen mistrust of political leaders

Mistrust of the political elites is increasingly evident in all countries across the Union. It targets both national and European political leaders equally, and bears witness to the citizens' disconnection from those in power, whom they believe increasingly indifferent to their interests. According to wave 5 of the "Political Confidence Barometer" undertaken in January 2014 by the CEVIPOF in partnership with the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, 36% of the French are especially mistrustful of the politics. At the end of 2013 87% of them considered that these elites were not really interested – and even had no interest at all in what they thought.

### b. Sharp criticism of the overall way that democratic institutions function

Still according to the "Political Confidence Barometer" 69% of the French believe that democracy functions badly. Expectations expressed in terms of representativeness, participatory democracy, the more general modernisation of the way the institutions function have not yet been met by present policies. However dismay is not directed to one political party in particular: indeed it seems that 60% of the French do not trust either the left or the right when it comes to governing the country. Mistrust of civil society, which became particularly apparent through high abstention rates and the surge in votes for the populists in the most recent European elections, is not just due to partisan affinities.

### c. Trust is still there but between citizens themselves

The "Political Confidence Barometer" paradoxically reveals mutual citizen trust and a feeling of social proximity that is still high. Indeed, 94% of those interviewed seem to trust their families and those close to them, 74% trust their neighbours, 66% trust people from another religious culture. Hence there is still trust at "grassroots" level, within civil society itself. These results are an invitation it seems to political and economic leaders to re-invest the capital of trust that is available.

## 2. High uncertainty about the future

### a. The recent economic crisis, a true catalyst of citizen uncertainty

The economic and social crisis experienced by the countries of Europe since 2009 has catalysed citizens' concern and has fed fear of the future. The sharp rise in unemployment, and more particularly amongst young people, is a major factor in this uncertainty. Policies undertaken by national governments are considered largely to be short term measures, cut to suit electoral calendars, therefore showing little concern about putting mid or long term programmes to the citizen. This lack of visibility on the part of the populations of Europe as far as the future is concerned naturally contributes to the loss of confidence which typifies our societies. This means breaking from short term management that focuses on the electoral calendar and presenting real mid or long term scenario.

### b. In quest of leadership; who will ensure continuity in Brussels?

The European Union is suffering a deep leadership crisis. Those who will ensure continuity are not coming forward and citizens believe that those who lead community policy are too technocratic and mainly cut off from their concerns. In addition to this, effective intermediary organisations are required to serve as links between European

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decision makers and the populations who are increasingly demanding, better informed and more sophisticated in terms of what they demand.

### 3. The growing technicality of European discourse and mechanisms

The debate that preceded the most recent European elections did not allow room that real European issues deserved: in France, there was no “prime time” debate, which, as a result, did not provide people with a clear presentation of the institutional process and European political and budgetary issues. On top of the hyper-politicisation of national discourse came the technocratization of European discourse which is doubly damaging to Europe’s intelligibility in the eyes of each and every one of us. National politicians have to accept Europe so that they can make it more accessible and more attractive in the long term.

## II – WHAT COLLECTIVE RESPONSE IS THERE TO THE DEMOCRATIC DIVIDE IN EUROPE?

In addition to the review set out in the first round table real proposals were then put forward in terms of closing the democratic divide in Europe. What kind of levers do we have to establish greater proximity between the political elites and their citizens? The democratic divide is a real European crisis but it is also one that is internal to its Member States. How did we get to this point? Daniela Schwarzer, Director of the German Marshall Fund, Berlin; Joao Diogo Pinto, representative of the Liaison Group, European Economic and Social Committee; Jean-Marc Roirant, CESE Consultant France, Associations, Ligue de l’enseignement, and Stefano Palmieri, Chair of the Europe 2020 Steering Committee, the European Economic and Social Committee answered these questions.

### 1- Better understanding of the origins of the divide to provide improved collective response

#### a. From European integration to its governance

In the 1950’s and in the wake of the trauma of the Second World War the idea of “building Europe”

was based on real consensus. The validity of the project was not even discussed then, and citizens seemed to accept the process of integration as a general rule. This is what has been called “permissive consensus”. The result of this was a chain of democratic legitimacy between the citizens and the European Union. At that point in the European project the political and administrative elites did not, it seems, fulfil their mission in terms of justifying themselves to the people. As a result civil society lost interest feeling that it had been excluded from the European project: this was revealed by the referendum on the adoption of the Constitutional Treaty for Europe in 2005. The “no” vote in the Netherlands and France highlighted that people had lost their bearings after a wave of successive enlargements. This gap that typifies Europe today is weakening the historic consensus originally reached over the European project.

#### b. A Union lacking means

Although the countries of Europe have succeeded in creating an institutional entity that is organised and enjoys specific competences, they have not provided the necessary means for the smooth functioning of this Union. The introduction of a monetary zone, linked to the European Central Bank, which is now responsible for monetary policy, is an unprecedented step forward. However European economic policy only enjoys limited scope, reflected in the inability of the governments to agree on a common fiscal policy. Moreover its budget is still extremely insufficient in view of the wide-ranging, complex competences with which it has been provided.

The gap that exists between the tasks asked of the institutions and the extremely limited means they enjoy contributes in effect to a growing democratic divide.

#### c. Have fundamental goals been lost from sight?

To this purely budgetary issue we might add the too frequent flouting of goals that are nevertheless

part of the Treaty. Hence article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union 2009 provides that *"the Union's aim is to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples"* and that *"it offers its citizens an area of freedom, security and justice without internal frontiers,"* that *"it shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment."* But for the last five years the European Union has been plunged in a multi-faceted crisis: deflation, growing unemployment, unstable youth employment, etc.. Europe's decision makers seem to have tried, as a priority, to maintain the markets' confidence rather than that of its citizens. Hence the social and societal goals that are part of the European texts have not been achieved.

## **2. Possible levers to re-establish confidence – listening, including, rethinking political action**

### **a. Rethinking the role of political players**

European political parties which are supposed to make the link between the citizens of Europe and the Union thanks to elections by direct universal suffrage do not yet enjoy any real identity. The importance of the European parties, which are still just an assembly of national parties, is reduced because they barely have any profile in the national political debate. As a result citizens only interact with these parties once every five years during the European elections. Indeed it is vital for democratic life not to be limited just to the exercise of a voting right but for it to find expression on a more regular basis and in various ways.

However an important step was taken during the European elections on 22<sup>nd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> May 2014 with the promotion of the *"Spitzenkandidaten."* This refers to the candidates that the German parties put forward for political positions such as the Chancellor

for example. Taken up within a European context this term refers to the candidates appointed by each European party for the Presidency of the Commission. The implementation of the *"Spitzenkandidat"* procedure strengthened the partisan dimension of the choice of the President of the Commission since Jean-Claude Juncker was appointed as the lead candidate of the European People's Party (EPP) which came out ahead in the European Elections in May 2014. This process led to greater visibility and created slightly more interest in the election. It will be difficult to go back on this.

### **b. Listening to Civil Society**

Renewed interest by the population in the European project should first be based on *"listening more"*. Paradoxically whilst here and there corruption and financial affairs erupt, more and more Citizens' Initiatives are being created. These *"unidentified social subjects"* should be taken more into account. The Economic and Social Councils would gain in particular from joining forces with these new players, in order to increase their legitimacy in the future. Specific attention should be paid to young generations who have grown up in Europe that has already been built and in which the freedom of movement is a given.

Taking on board the Citizens' Initiatives is all the more important since it is impossible for the European institutions to be in direct contact with 500 million Europeans. Hence the baton has to be handed over to civil society which is better *"placed"* to play the role of intermediary. Indeed the associations that make up civil society help towards citizen representation in their diversity. To date democracy has only concentrated on representing the majority. The grass roots level must be lent greater value however in terms of citizen communication since it is better adapted to direct relations with the citizens.

Finally educating and raising citizens' awareness should not be neglected. Ignorance of Europe alone can lead to mistrust. It is therefore important

to help citizens take ownership of the history of Europe and the way it functions. Curiosity about the culture and the language of other Member States might also benefit from being fostered. Learning languages is evidently an inexpensive, vital solution from this point of view. Finally encouraging youth mobility and vocational training in other countries might also help re-establish confidence in the European project.

### **III – WHAT ROLE CAN THE ESEC AND THE ESC PLAY TO REVIVE TRUST IN EUROPE?**

The Economic and Social Councils would benefit as venues for dialogue between various socio-professional categories and also citizen representation if they positioned themselves more as lead players in the settlement of this confidence crisis. This crisis, just like the weakness of social dialogue in many European countries, calls for the revision of the approach to participatory democracy. It is within the present context of wanting proximity between citizens and institutions that the issue of civil dialogue and the strengthening of partnerships should be guiding European governance to a backdrop of increased consultation and participation. By which means can the national ESC's and the European ESC help to reduce the democratic divide? Marcos Pena Pinto, Chair of the Spanish Economic and Social Council; Lalko Dulevski, Chair of the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council; Paul Windey, Chair of the Belgian National Labour Council (CNT Conseil national du travail), and Evelyne Pichenot, member of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council and of the European Economic and Social Council contributed greatly to this debate.

#### **I. The Economic and Social Councils: a venue in the quest for consensus**

The Economic and Social Councils should be venues in the quest for economic, social, environmental and societal consensus. With an overall view of the situation and especially high representation of all socio-professional groups as a base, the Economic

and Social Councils should rise to the challenge in terms of education and communication covering the entire range of complex issues that they have to address. European normative production, the Union's budget, the specific features of the new Juncker Commission are all themes that the ESCs must make clearer to civil society. To be able to continue the defence of the model of social culture which they embody, these organisations, which represent driving forces, must succeed in asserting themselves as privileged areas of exchange – of knowledge and also know-how, of political processes, expertise and of co-decision between the various players in civil society.

#### **II. Closing the gap between local concerns and European policies**

The loss of trust pinpointed here has not just been caused by mass unemployment, but also because of more general disillusionment. The position of the Economic and Social Councils as a venue for public debate depends on their ability to close the gap that exists between local and European problems. Economic and Social Councils notably benefit from the organisation of regional debates so that citizens and social partners can contribute to drafting real proposals. The ESCs have to invite every citizen, via carefully planned means of communication and simplification to take interest in European issues and to understand their unique multi-tiered content, due to the very existence of the subsidiarity principle in terms of community law. New technologies and the internet could comprise significant levers of action to guarantee a wider distribution of ideas and to ensure a high level of participation as possible.

#### **III. Embodying a modern vision of democracy: participatory, multiple, transversal**

The number of problems has increased and their nature has changed. The citizen is a worker but also a consumer, producer and an associative player. This more complex structure increases the potential tasks of the Economic and Social Councils.

In order to provide real support to projects involving

participatory and deliberative democracy the ESCs must move into new areas of dialogue and consultation by joining forces with small, existing structures that distribute information on different levels (town, neighbourhood, schools and hospitals). Major international debates have to be better anticipated so that the ESCs can provide early, specific expression to European civil society. Finally the Economic and Social Councils must engage in specific multi-dimensional projects on the model of present European policies and new preoccupations expressed by citizens which are increasingly transversal and plural in nature.

#### **IV: How can citizen participation in the European institutions be improved?**

The present time is typified by a decline in European citizens' trust regarding the Union's institutions. The rise of euroscepticism, and even europhobia, in some Member States is a symptom of the gap that has developed between the citizens and the places of European decision-making. With the renewal of the community institutions (Parliament, Commission and President of the European Council) how can we encourage people to take interest in political issues in Brussels and Strasbourg? Four MEPs took part in this debate: Maria Joao Rodrigues, S&D; Pascal Durant, Greens/EFA Sylvie Goulard, ALDE, and Constance Le Grip, EPP.

##### **1. Pinpointing the problems to solve**

Several structural and political problems were highlighted and deserve specific attention to improve citizen participation in the European institutions.

###### **a. Structural problems**

The European Union's lack of means was discussed during previous round tables. Europe enjoys a wide range of competences but its leverage in terms of action is inadequate to enable effective work in the areas in which it acts. An example that has already been mentioned is that of the euro zone which must be deepened to overcome its state of incompleteness. In the present context of the economic crisis cooperation

has to be enhanced for the definition of joint growth strategies and to remedy problems of a financial nature.

###### **b. Political problems**

Many political factors can explain why it is hard to take part in the European decision making process. Firstly overlapping discourse contributes to political vagueness that typifies the European electoral landscape. There are still major gaps between campaign promises and the real work undertaken in Brussels. This contributes towards citizens' disinterest, as they lose confidence in their representatives. In order to involve the citizens more political classes must be more transparent and be exemplary. To do this it would be beneficial to undertake regular surveys of civil society – a reflection of citizens' opinion.

###### **c. Recovering trust**

Firstly a general lack of optimism is impeding citizen involvement in the European Union.

The lack of political will, the "spirit of negation" are the most evident impediments to this involvement. Although mechanisms have been created here and there, there is no will to act on a European level. The same applies to the responsibility of national political decision makers who lack real European courage and do not want to relinquish a share of their sovereignty to the benefit of a collective Union level dynamic. This is a problem the significance of which should not be ignored. We have to ensure that the European Union does not lose its fundamental base, its values, the origins of integration, at a time when war is on its doorstep.

However in the midst of this moroseness institutional instruments have been developed to improve the visibility and impact of citizen participation in the revival of the institutions.

##### **2. Towards a parliamentary democracy?**

Over the last few months some new institutional tools have been introduced and deserve to be used more to help reduce the democratic divide.

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Article 17 paragraph 7 of the Treaty on European Union provides that *"taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members."* But to date the requirement *"to take into account the elections to the European Parliament"* has remained without any specific effect. The European elections of May 2014 lent it full meaning, by imposing a candidate at the head of each party, who would be presented as the candidate for the presidency of the Commission if his party won the majority of votes. These candidates were the centre of gravity in the electoral campaign. The European People's Party (EPP) came out ahead in the elections and its appointed leader, Luxembourger Jean-Claude Juncker was then officially appointed candidate

by the European Council. This appointment was made official by the European Parliament vote in July. The exact application of article 17 (7) of the Treaty, heralded the beginnings of parliamentary of democracy in which appointments are no longer within the political scope of Brussels as a bid is made to draw closer to Europe's citizens. With this parliamentary appointment Jean-Claude Juncker is now "accountable" to the Strasbourg Assembly. However it is a shame that the appointment of the other commissioners did not follow the same approach since the latter continue to be put forward by the States.

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## ANNEX

### Seminar Programme

9h00: Inauguration

**Jean-Paul Delevoye**, Chair of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council

**Hans Joachim Wilms**, Deputy Chair of the European Economic and Social Committee

9h15: Introduction

**Jean-Dominique Giuliani**, Chairman of the Robert Schuman Foundation

"Presentation of a summary of recent opinion polls across Europe"

#### 9h30: Round table no.1: The Democratic Divide in Europe, representation gap, populism and social issue

*The first round table focused on the various forms of democratic divide in Europe. The Union's political legitimacy crisis, the rise of populism and extremism within the context of the present economic and social crisis and more generally European citizens' disenchantment with their elites, which are all equal factors in the political divide.*

Moderator: **Yves Veyrier**, Chair of the Section "European and International Affairs" of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council  
"presentation of the results of the survey amongst 22 national ESCs and the European ESC"

**Pascal Perrineau**, University Professor at the faculty of Political Sciences

**Christophe Quarez**, member of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, Opinion Rapporteur "the EU at a crossroads."

**Antonio Marzano**, Chairman of the CNEL Italy

**Radowlas Markowski**, Professor at the University of Social Science and Humanities Warsaw, Member of the Academy of Science of Poland

#### 11h15: Round table no. 2: What collective response is there to the democratic divide in Europe?

*In addition to the review set out in the first round table real proposals were then put forward in terms*

*of closing the democratic divide in Europe. What kind of levers do we have to establish greater proximity between the political elites and their citizens?*

Moderator: **Gabriele Bischoff**, Member of the Employees' Group, the so-called "Group II" of the European Economic and Social Committee

**Daniela Schwarzer**, Director of the German Marshall Fund, Berlin

**Joao Diogo Pinto**, Representative of the Liaison Group, the European Economic and Social Committee

**Jean-Marc Roirant**, CESE France Advisor, Associations, Ligue de l'enseignement

**Stefano Palmieri**, Chair of the Europe 2020 Steering Committee, European Economic and Social Committee

#### 14h: Round table no.3: What role can the Economic and Social Councils play to revive trust in Europe?

*The Economic and Social Councils would benefit as venues for dialogue between various socio-professional categories and also citizen representation if they positioned themselves more as lead players in the settlement of this confidence crisis. This crisis, just like the weakness of social dialogue in many European countries, calls for the revision of the approach to participatory democracy. It is within the present context of wanting proximity between citizens and institutions that the issue of civil dialogue and the strengthening of partnerships should be guiding European governance to a backdrop of increased consultation and participation. By which means can the national ESC's and the European ESC help to reduce the democratic divide?*

Moderator: **José Isaias Rodriguez Garcia-Caro**, Deputy Chair of the Employers' Group – the so-called "Group I" of the European Economic and Social Committee

**Marcos Pena Pinto**, Chair of the Spanish Economic and Social Council

**Lalko Dulevski**, Chair of the Bulgarian Economic and Social Council

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**Paul Windey**, Chair of the CNT of Belgium

**Evelyne Pichenot**, Member of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council and of the European Economic and Social Committee

15h45: **Round table no.4: How can citizen participation in the European institutions be improved?**

*The present time is typified by a decline in European citizens' trust regarding the Union's institutions. The rise of euroscepticism, and even europhobia in some Member States is a symptom of the gap that has developed between the citizens and the places of European decision-making. With the renewal of the community institutions (Parliament, Commission and President of the European Council) how can we encourage people to take interest in political issues in Brussels and Strasbourg?*

Moderator: **Luca Jahier**, Chair of the Various Activities Group – the so-called "Group III" of the European Economic and Social Committee

**Maria Joao Rodrigues**, MEP, S&D

**Pascal Durant**, MEP, Greens/EFA

**Sylvie Goulard**, MEP, ALDE

**Constance Le Grip**, MEP, EPP

17h30: Conclusion

**Harlem Désir**, French Secretary of State for European Affairs

**Jean-Paul Delevoye**, Chair of the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council