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**European Economic and Social Committee**

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## **Anniversary of the fall of the iron curtain and 2004 enlargement: civil society created history**

**A commemorative debate held yesterday at the European Economic and Social Committee's plenary session emphasized the important role played by civil society in bringing down the iron curtain and in the last waves of EU enlargement.**

At the meeting, chaired by EESC President **Mario Sepi**, prominent guests and EESC Members discussed the dramatic changes which have occurred in Europe over the last 20 years. Speakers included **Catherine Lalumière**, former vice-President of the European Parliament and current president of the French Federation of European Houses, **Olli Rehn**, EU Enlargement Commissioner and **Jarosław Pietras**, former Polish Minister for European Affairs.

The EESC observed a one-minute silence to remember those who died struggling to overthrow the Communist regime and who made the breakthrough of 1989 possible.

"The reunification of Europe, marked by events in 1989 and 2004, was not just a milestone for the EU itself, but also for the progression of peace throughout the world", said **EESC Vice-President Irini Pari**. However, the new challenges now facing Europe can only be met if, "representative democracy is complemented by participatory democracy to shape adequate responses to emerging problems".

**Olli Rehn** stressed the vital role of civil society in creating history, "of which the events of 1989 and 2004 are fine examples". Civil society's contribution to "social capital" can never be overestimated. "It spreads the European spirit, resists nationalisms and builds bridges over rivalries between ethnic groups". The Joint Consultative Committees between candidate countries and the EESC, which aimed to put civil society organisations in touch with European affairs, "helped transform these countries and adapt them to the EU", said the Commissioner. Turning to future accessions, he warned against complacency and stressed the "magnetic pull of the European perspective" in South-Eastern Europe.

**Catherine Lalumière** warned against repeating the mistakes made during the previous enlargements. "It was not properly explained to the public in the "old" Member States why it was actually a good thing to embrace new countries. Neither was it made sufficiently clear to the "new" Member States that the accession was not just about the Copenhagen criteria". She admonished the EU for "condescension" towards acceding countries. "We have a great deal to learn from "new" countries with a view to instilling new ideas into the European project".

**Jarosław Pietras**, likened the events between 1989 and 2004 to the creation of the Communities in the 1950s. "Over half-a century ago, countries went through a process of peaceful cooperation and adaptation. The nature of this process was similar to the one that led to a bigger Union in 2004".

Looking into the future, the EESC Group Presidents insisted on the need to build on the lessons that had been learned and to continue the process of European integration. "For the EU to demonstrate its leadership, we have to ensure that the values that have served the EU so well are respected", said **Staffan Nilsson**, President of the EESC's Various Interests' Group. Likewise, Employers' Group President **Henri Malosse** called for a comprehensive vision for Europe over the



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next 20 years and stressed the need to "remove the barriers remaining in people's minds". Employees' Group President **George Dassis** underscored the need for the widening and deepening of European integration to go hand in hand.

The EESC has prepared a special clip to mark the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the EU10 enlargement. To watch it, visit <http://eesc.europa.eu>

**For more details, please contact:**

**Barbara Gessler at the [EESC Press Office](#),**

**99 rue Belliard, B-1040 Brussels**

**Tel.: +32 2 546 9396; Mobile: +32 475 75 32 02**

**Email: [press@eesc.europa.eu](mailto:press@eesc.europa.eu)**

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