In the fifty years of its history, the European Union has achieved extraordinary results (Beck, Grande 2006; Giddens 2007), and many others seem to be within its reach (Kühnardt 2007). Although the European Union still has great potential, this proves difficult to realize because of a number of major obstacles. One of them is indubitably the great distance perceived – and perhaps also real – between the institutions of the European Union and its citizens; a distance such to entail, according to some commentators, a democratic deficit within the European construct (Della Porta, Caiani 2006). Another obstacle is the lack of a shared sense of European citizenship able to give full legitimacy to the work of the Community institutions. In face of such difficulties, the idea is rather widespread – and is also to be found in documents produced by the bodies of the European Union – that the multiform reality of civil society can contribute decisively to overcoming these obstacles by closing the distance between the Community institutions and citizens, stimulating public debate, and providing citizens with concrete opportunities to participate (Trenz 2009). However, there is no lack of those who suspect that the emphasis given to the role of civil society in the construction of Europe is highly exaggerated (Fraise et al. 2010), and that when civil society actors concern themselves with the European dimension, they do so for covertly instrumental reasons.

This paper presents the main results of empirical research carried out by administering a questionnaire to more than 2,700 citizens belonging to ten large Italian civil society organizations. The research was enriched by ten case studies, one for each of the ten organizations surveyed. The aim of the study was to investigate how, in concrete terms, the organizations considered Europe – in the awareness, however, that the data collected do not represent the entire range – extremely rich and complex – of the relationships between civil society and Europe, and that they are therefore in no way able to confirm or to confute either the optimistic and enthusiastic views on civil society’s role in Europe or the pessimistic ones. The paper describes only a small cross-section of civil society – and for that matter only Italian – in order to illustrate how, in some specific cases and in regard to a small number of contexts, the relationship between civil society and Europe can take shape and, especially, be perceived by its members.

Analysis of the information gathered suggests that civil society – at least the portion of it considered – indeed contributes to the construction of a common European consciousness, as well as stimulating participation by citizens. But it still does so to an extent and with results that fall largely short of expectation. There are, in fact, many people whose membership of civil society organizations is only formal and passive, and who have developed no European sensibility over time. Nevertheless, as found by the survey, there are others whose participation in the activities of the organizations to which they belong has altered
their attitudes towards Europe, The potential of civil society should not be exaggerated, therefore, but nor can it be denied.

References