

PRESS RELEASE ISSUED BY THE MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS: MED FORUM 2016 inauguration speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs of Malta George W. Vella

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Madam President,
Dear colleagues,

Merħba.

I am delighted to welcome you to Malta for this MED FORUM 2016.

Months of preparation have gone into this event and I am very thankful to the Anna Lindh Foundation for having chosen Malta as host.

A special word of appreciation goes to you, Mr Bouchamoui, for joining us and for the outstanding work you continue to do for your country.

We convene today in one of our national architectural treasures and precious symbols of Malta's deeply rooted Mediterranean identity. An identity that has been shaped by an innate attachment to the Mediterranean and by an underlying conviction that this region, despite its difficulties, continues to contribute enormously to cultural and social enrichment on a global scale.

Many of us gathered today have been fascinated by the writings of Fernand Braudel on our common sea - a thrilling journey through our thriving ports and affluent cities that has pretty much found its place in literary history as a landmark Mediterranean text book.

Yet, much as I loved these writings in my youth, the time for textbook thinking on the Mediterranean is over. We need to do away with overly structured and regimented approaches and breathe some new life into the stale Mediterranean paradigm. We need to think outside the box and we need new ideas when looking at the Mediterranean realities of today.

As it stands weeks away from its first ever experience as President of the Council of the European Union, Malta is intent on bringing renewed and fresh energy to a regenerated Mediterranean agenda, focusing not only on national government-driven policies, but also - indeed especially - on the voices and aspirations of our citizens.

We have to look at different ways to achieve the results we desire and your deliberations over the next couple of days, through such a diversified representation, constitute a further step towards this end.

Dear colleagues,

I will surprise none of you when I state that our Euro-Mediterranean region is facing a plethora of challenges. Perhaps none of them is as daunting as the threat of our youth being lost to radical or extremist ideology.

Disillusioned youth on the fringes of society are finding a home and purpose in violence and hate. The effects of radicalisation are impinging on society's most basic rights and this is not exclusive of any region, system or belief.

The only enduring tool we have to combat this disillusionment is communication, in a language which our youth can automatically understand and immediately relate to.

The recent partnerships being formed with ICT companies and social media platforms to develop robust communication strategies to prevent vulnerable youths from falling victim to the pernicious effects of radicalisation are very positive models to follow and exemplify the innovative action we should all be pursuing.

Malta fully supports those EU initiatives geared at preventing and countering radicalisation through education, youth work, inter-cultural dialogue and grass-roots interaction. It is these areas of tangible cooperation that will ultimately leave a durable impact and make our external relations and security policies effective.

Throughout this broad effort on multiple fronts and at different levels we must however bear one thing firmly in mind. We need to engage young people directly and ensure that they themselves are a part of this conversation. It is the most natural thing in the world for us to do whatever we can to protect our children, be they teenagers or young adults, but we need to realise that in order to render our efforts in the context of anti-radicalisation more effective, we need to listen to their views as well. It is high time to stop talking to young people on radicalisation and start talking with them.

Another area where Malta is investing a great deal of energy is rule of law and justice. Empowerment through the rule of law and strengthening the judiciary in the states where radicalisation is gaining ground is of paramount importance and that is why Malta is making concrete contributions in this field through the hosting of and participation in the Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law founded in June 2014.

The Institute has been very active in convening, in Malta, practitioners from all parts of the world to provide rule of law-based training to lawmakers, police, prosecutors, judges, corrections officials and other justice sector stakeholders on how to address terrorism and related transnational criminal activities within a rule of law framework.

Dear colleagues,

It often happens that solutions which we imagine to be completely out of our grasp and actually more within reach than we imagine.

I was very interested in noting a specific element in this FORUM's programme, which addresses the role of cities as incubators of dialogue. Against a backdrop of unprecedented mobility, cities possess vast potential to generate a self-fulfilling rhythm of dialogue, understanding and global solidarity.

Likewise, our schools are part of this intricate puzzle of inter-cultural dialogue. Education is, above all, not just about employability skills but about the well-being of society and the development of responsible and engaged citizens. This is where we are moulded with social, civic and intercultural competences that, if carefully mastered, result in non-discrimination, active citizenship and inclusive practices.

It is our values that lie at the heart of interpersonal and intercultural competences and which ultimately equip the individual and society at large with a sense of fulfilment. In this regard, the varied educational systems in our region have a cardinal role to play in instilling beliefs, skills and competences that mitigate against marginalization and prejudice.

Above all, we need to enhance critical thinking and media literacy if we want to fully engage our youth and avoid their alienation.

This brings me to a very sensitive issue that I make it a point to mention whenever I can in discussions related to the Mediterranean. The sense of futility that pervades the mind and heart of a young man or woman struggling to find decent employment cannot be underestimated at any point.

Youth unemployment in our region remains unacceptably high with an evident need to strengthen employment and labour market opportunities.

As governments' policies continue to register different levels of success, we could think of alternatives that focus on the development of common cooperation frameworks on youth-related issues for the sharing of best practices, information on youth partnerships and funding opportunities.

Non-formal learning and youth work-practice in the region could also be promoted with a view of enhancing employment and entrepreneurship.

Dear colleagues,

I cannot possibly speak of dialogue and non-discrimination without making a specific reference to the special role that women have in introducing change.

Let's face it, our region has often been wrongly branded as one that does not adequately prioritise female empowerment.

I frankly do not think that there is any one particular measure or benchmark through which one society can judge another. One size can never fit all. Rather than drawing up assessment sheets, we would serve our purpose much better by sharing expertise in ensuring equal access to education, disseminating information on rights and responsibilities related to gender equality and combatting stereotypes.

Men have an equally crucial role in breaking down stereotypes, appreciating the benefits of shared family responsibilities and overcoming traditional gender roles.

As a father and grandfather I shudder when confronted with unprecedented levels of biased portrayals of women's images, chauvinistic remarks and demeaning expressions, even by some political exponents near and far.

My appeal here goes to the media, which can turn the tables and make a difference. This valuable tool can play a fundamental role in our lives to influence the way women are perceived and appreciated in our everyday lives.

I am satisfied to note that a specific segment of your discussions is in fact focussed on the role of the media and I will be very interested in learning about the outcomes of your exchanges.

Dear colleagues,

I wish to take of couple more minutes to mention a most topical subject, which has become endemic to the challenges faced by our region, and which has had a visible impact on our values of tolerance and inclusivity.

60 million people - between refugees and internally displaced persons - are forcibly displaced by conflict, violence and human rights abuses.

This is the highest level of forced displacement since World War Two. This phenomenon had rattled stability in several countries, and at times also put European solidarity and mechanisms into question.

Malta, dear colleagues, has been on the forefront of this scenario for decades now. We have been consistent in our calls for urgent action on the fate of the many thousands who literally went through hell and high water to see their journey through.

For many years, we were only a lone voice in the wilderness.

It is only recently that, thankfully, the international community has come to the realisation that inaction is unforgivable. In several countries, migration is now being equated to a narrative of fear and exclusion.

There is little appetite to see the other side of the coin and genuinely consider what goes across the mind of a scared Syrian mother who embarked on a dangerous aboard a rickety boat with her toddlers to save her family's existence or the young Somali boy who witnessed unspeakable atrocities back home before crossing a scorching desert. We, at government levels, sometimes get easily lost in statistics, public opinion surveys, infrastructural shortcomings and unambitious integration plans.

The onus very frequently falls on you - civil society representatives - to remind us that we are dealing with human souls and not mere numbers, and, for sounding this alarm bell, you ought to be lauded and praised.

You have been championing a message of tolerance that many still fail, or refuse, to appreciate.

I am sure that your discussion on how migration and dialogue are intertwined will bring a very inspiring human touch to the global debate on this issue.

Excellencies,
Dear Colleagues,

I conclude by underlining my country's commitment to ensuring that the results and outcomes of this Forum find a prominent place on the Euro-Mediterranean agenda.

Malta will, during the coming months as Presidency of the European Union, strive to take concrete action to promote mutual understanding, very much in support of the Anna Lindh Foundation. You can rest assured, that now more than ever, Malta will live up to its much-acclaimed vocation to foster dialogue and tolerance in all its endeavours.

I have no doubt in my mind that this is a goal that unites us all, and look forward to visible results from our concerted efforts, for the benefit of present and future generations.
Thank you and good luck with your work.