

Opening words by **Rui Gomes**
Youth Department, Council of Europe.

Honourable secretary for youth and sport,
Dear partners from the European Commission and the League of Arab States,
Dear friends,

I am very pleased to be here with you today at this Mediterranean seminar, in one of the countries best placed to host such an activity. Malta, not only by its location, but especially because of its rich history and culture is truly at the crossroads of the Mediterranean today, as it has been for centuries.

I would therefore like to start by thanking the Maltese partners for hosting this event. It was high time that the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe held an activity in Malta. We have a long history of cooperation with the EuroMed Youth Platform and with the Youth Agency; and all of them, chiefly Miriam, always reminded us that Malta is European Union, Council of Europe and Mediterranean.

The Council of Europe has been a pioneer in Euro-Mediterranean and Euro-Arab cooperation in the youth field. Our first formal cooperation activities started in nearly 20 years ago with political youth cooperation. More recently, the partnership with the European Commission in the field of youth, has provided us the optimal framework to introduce capacity-building activities for youth work, human rights education and intercultural dialogue for active youth leaders. Mosaic – the T-Kit for Euro-Mediterranean youth work is perhaps the best legacy and instrument that resulted from it.

As Council of Europe, we have also initiated six years ago a cooperation with the Youth Department of the League of Arab States which has steadily evolved to embrace Euro-Arab youth cooperation and, more recently, a long-term training course for youth leaders and youth workers.

I see this seminar as the natural result of this work, as the cross at which various routes meet in search of a new or renewed meaning for our journeys.

The purpose and meaning of our presence and work here is well reflected in its history. This tells of the burning anxiety and desire to be present and to be part of history. The revolutions of the Arab spring in Egypt and Tunisia – in which young played a major role – called for action and solidarity by those in the countries concerned and in

Europe, who never stopped believing that young people crave for democratic forms of participation and that democracy can only be built with young people's active involvement.

How to be part of it when we are not really part of it?

How to be part of the future while being also part of the present and of the past?

Learning from history is, it seems, a difficult process. Some philosophers will tell us that those who can not learn from history are doomed to repeat the mistakes from the past. That's the optimistic view, which we also chose to embrace. Others, including Hegel, hold the opposite view: the only thing we can learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.

What the past year and the history of this seminar has taught me is that it is important to take time. To take time to see, time to judge and time to act. Time to understand.

I see this seminar as a privileged moment that we have to understand or, at least, to *try to* understand.

Understanding what has happened with young people during the Arab Spring movements. Understanding what has happened with young people in Europe. And, especially, understanding what is happening with young people today in the Southern Mediterranean and in Europe as their futures are perhaps more interdependent than ever. Despite the Mediterranean surrounding us, I believe that democracy – full of hopes and disillusion – is a new cement that will keep us together.

The Council of Europe was created to promote and develop human rights, democracy and the rule of law. If it is true that these values are better understood and respected in our 47 member states, it is also true that we are perfectly aware that a long way remains to live up to the expectations of the people – indeed some democracies in Europe are still in their infant years.

I believe that the special invitation to the Palestinian Authority and Tunisia as special partners for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe will soon be followed by other countries. We are also aware that democracy needs to be learned and taken ownership by each generation. We are not born democratic, we learn democracy. A lot of our action for youth policy development is in fact learning and teaching democracy through youth participation. We do this by supporting civic engagement and by supporting youth organisations which are, for many young people, their first real-life school of democracy. A lot of the 40 years of history of the European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and in Budapest and of the resources of the European Youth Foundation has gone in meaningfully associating young people and youth organisations to our work.

But youth participation is not an end in itself. The Council of Europe's youth policy official aims is to provide young people with equal opportunities and experience which enable them to "develop the knowledge, skills and competencies to play a full part in all aspects of society". Without equal opportunities, and especially without *real* opportunities to access and exercise the autonomy, youth participation becomes an appendix in young people's life stories.

Let us be frank: we all want to be forever young but none of us want to be forever dependent!

Young people in Europe have been also taking to the streets. Many because they have education, but no jobs. Those without education and jobs are worse off. And they are too many. Social conditions in parts of the big cities of Europe are another telling story about unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities.

What has driven young people to the streets in Madrid may be different from what drove young people to Tahrir square, but the underlying purpose is similar: to build a more cohesive and inclusive society, to build a society with a future for young people.

Politics, like Amartya Sen, the famous Indian Economist, has said, politics is about giving voice to those who do not have a voice, to make visible those who are invisible. Young people have a voice, young people are visible. It is perhaps now time to be heard, too.

Dear friends,

I see this seminar as an opportunity to learn. I am certainly interested in learning from all of you what has been happening and the meanings you give to it.

The seminar is also an opportunity to start building a different type of cooperation and exchange. To give intercultural dialogue and youth cooperation a different and more genuine meaning. We must learn from the past, but we can not stay prisoners of the past. We must engage with the future. In the present.

I can assure that whatever your conclusions will be tomorrow evening, the Council of Europe – and I am sure, also our partners – will remain committed to make its part to put them in practice.

Together with the other partners around the table, we hope of course to carrying them forward to the symposium in Tunis and the necessary practical measures that should result from that.

We are also working on the development of cooperation and capacity - building projects in youth policy, youth participation and citizenship with Morocco and Tunisia – hoping to extend it further to Egypt and Jordan.

With the League of Arab States and, we hope, the European Youth Forum we'll continue the Euro-Arab Youth Forum which we hope will be held in Ramallah in July.

With the League we also hope to initiate another Euro-Arab training programme for youth leaders at our European Youth Centre in Budapest.

I also very much hope that the Arabic version of Mosaic will be available this year – and that its publication will contribute to a better understanding of intercultural dialogue with young people, a dialogue that can only be among equals, and based on mutual respect and appreciation.