

**I would like to welcome you, Your Excellency, and your delegation, on your state visit to the Maltese Islands.**

**Your Excellency,**

**Your state visit to Malta is an occasion for us to remember that Malta and Italy have a special bond, through our historical and cultural heritage.**

**Political relations between our nations are excellent, and in September 2014, Malta and Italy celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the establishment of diplomatic relations on the 21<sup>st</sup> September 1964.**

**Relations have been strengthened through a solid bilateral legal framework, covering sectors ranging from education, to healthcare, to consular matters.**

**An important highlight in our relations were the five consecutive Financial Protocols, between 1979 to 2002.**

**Furthermore, Malta is very appreciative of the cooperation and support the Italian authorities have provided in the past, and we are pleased to note the signing of the new agreement on the Representation of Malta by Italian consular authorities, in examining applications and issuing Schengen visas, on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2016 in Rome.**

**Another important milestone in our relations is the signing of the letter of intent on the Malta-Sicily gas pipeline project, in May of this year. This is a welcome development for the energy sector in Malta, following the successful completion of the Malta-Sicily electricity inter-connector.**

**Let me also take this opportunity to mention the positive relations between Malta and Italy on Defence and Coast Guard collaboration, and bilateral collaboration at a technical level.**

**Where the phenomenon of migration is concerned, Malta stands in full solidarity with Italy to help and deal with the current migratory pressure, from the Central Mediterranean Route. During its Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Malta kept migration very high on the European Union's agenda, with this subject being one of the overarching priorities of the Presidency.**

**I believe that our European family of nations can play an active role in promoting a comprehensive approach to migration, while upholding international principles and a sense of global solidarity, to ensure that the best interests of all affected individuals, families, and communities are met.**

**Such a focus, on the dignity of each and every person, both migrants and citizens, is a cornerstone of the commitment Malta and Italy feel to safeguard the wellbeing of all.**

**In fact, our continued and numerous high-level exchanges are clear evidence of the excellent relations between our two countries, and of the shared values and aspirations, which we hold so dear.**

**Therefore, I am pleased to note that cooperation at governmental level, as well as collaboration between private entities and non-governmental entities from Malta and Italy, has also intensified.**

**Such synergies continue to be enhanced as a result of various joint-projects, held under European Union Funding Programmes.**

**Italy remains Malta's biggest trading partner by a very wide margin, with bilateral trade exceeding a billion Euro, year after year. Italy is also Malta's number one import market and, as of the end of March this year, there were 3,320 firms with Italian shareholding interests in Malta. This is by far the largest number of shareholders in Malta from any country.**

**With regards to our respective diasporas, Italian nationals working in Malta make up the largest community of European nationals in our islands. Moreover, there are hundreds of Maltese nationals living in Italy.**

**Malta and Italy have always enjoyed close socio-cultural relations. The amount of cultural events and educational**

**exchanges, and over 60 twinnings between Maltese and Italian towns and villages, are a testimony to this closeness.**

**Therefore, Malta augurs the continued enhancement of cultural relations between our communities.**

**A number of cultural agreements have been signed with Italy over the past decades. The last one took place very recently, on the 16<sup>th</sup> August 2017, and is based on a cultural collaboration agreement first signed in 1967.**

**This agreement identifies the cultural activities, and priority lines of action, to be followed by our two countries for the period 2017 to 2019.**

**As Valletta will be the European Capital of Culture in 2018, Malta also looks forward to this unique opportunity, to enhance artistic cooperation between our peoples.**

**Such an important event should, above all, express our shared European values of democracy, universal human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. These are the major pillars upon which all our dialogue and hopes for long-lasting peace must be built.**

**Before I conclude, I would like to convey a special thanks to the outgoing Ambassador Mr Giovanni Umberto De Vito, for his endeavours to continue to strengthen our bilateral relations.**

**Your Excellency, President Mattarella,**

**I am confident that the strong friendship between Malta and Italy shall continue to flourish and to grow, for many years to come.**

**May our friendship always be a source of strength and confidence, for the mutual benefit of both our peoples, and the prosperity of the forthcoming generations.**

**Let us raise our glasses, to drink to the health of President Sergio Mattarella, and to the people of Malta and Italy.**