

**Opening Speech, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the JEF
'Youth Activism: Protest, Promote, Progress' Seminar, 1 December 2018**

[Salutations]

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

In particular, dear young people.

It is always such a pleasure to address committed young people, who are prepared to further their knowledge.

Let me begin by commending JEF Malta, for creating this space for learning and sharing, through today's event and other forthcoming events.

The ethos of JEF, to promote European integration and friendship all over our family of nations, through diverse initiatives and activities, is truly inspiring.

I am informed that this seminar is creating a space for you, as young people, to share your experiences as activists, and as essential stakeholders in the political future of our country.

As young people, you are not only an essential part of our Maltese society, but also, of our European society as a whole.

This is why the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union highlights the importance of young people's participation in the democratic life of our European Union, in particular, through political participation.

In this context, it is encouraging to note that the Flash EuroBarometer on European Youth, published in 2018, states that a large majority of respondents voted in political elections at a local, national, and regional level.

It is even more encouraging to note that the participation of Maltese youth is one of the highest in the European Union, and stands at 78 per cent.

However, we must note that these same indicators state that when it comes to Maltese youth being involved in civil society, their participation drops to 30 per cent.

Therefore, let me take this opportunity to urge all of you, to be champions amongst your peers and within your communities, to encourage the further participation of our young people in civil society.

The beauty of civil society is that it includes the diversity of organisations and groups that are independent of the State.

Civil society is the much needed safeguard and regulating voice, in a democracy.

Civil society is a pillar of an ongoing democratic process, and a guardian of the values that make our society stronger, and more resilient.

Civil society is fundamental, to the development of policies, to ensure the holistic wellbeing of society.

Your participation, as the young people of this country, and most of all as active citizens, is essential to ensure that our democracy rises up to the next level.

Your active involvement within Maltese civil society organisations, will also be an opportunity for the necessary training, to become the future leaders of our country.

The experiences that you gain by working alongside different people will give you invaluable skills, to be of genuine service to society.

From my first experience, when I was a teenager and started working in a civil society organisation in my home town of Qormi, I learnt from the vert start the importance of connecting with others.

Looking back, I realise that it was from that moment, that I was developing the necessary skills to respond to the needs and aspirations of my community.

As young people, living in a time of increasing social changes, which are taking place throughout our country and all over the world, your participation in civil society is, today, even more necessary.

By connecting and sharing with others, you will develop abilities for critical thinking, and be able to raise your concerns about the challenges being faced by people in the Maltese Islands.

Furthermore, by being activists within civil society, you will be today's active citizens, and help to strengthen our democratic process.

The recent introduction of Vote 16 is evidence of the political will, to empower young people to have more of a say in the way that our society is developing.

However, just voting in an election does not make us full and active citizens.

On the other hand, in order to be responsible and effectively empowered citizens, all of us must be well informed and educated about our rights and responsibilities.

All of us need to embrace a human rights-based perspective and approach.

We have an obligation to bring dignity to our democratic process, by ensuring that when we voice our views we do so in a respectful manner.

I believe that young people have the opportunity to be role models, for a healthy democratic life, by pursuing the values of solidarity, respect, peace, and collaboration.

Such values cannot simply be learnt in a classroom, they must be lived out, in practical ways throughout our daily lives.

As the young members of a democratic country, I urge you to make use of your right to be heard, about the issues that interest you and affect you, and also, that affect our society.

It is your responsibility to be active collaborators, to achieve the relevant changes, which will continue to make our democracy more relevant for today's needs.

Our greatest enemy is complacency.

As the world moves closer together, through globalisation, and as our country transforms into a more multicultural society, then we must also become activists for peace.

We must be courageous, and promote the values that unite us as one human family.

We need to build bridges across our linguistic, ethnic, political, and cultural diversity.

Our democracy will not be stable if we only associate ourselves with people who share the same culture or the same point of view.

I know, from my many visits to schools, post-secondary educational institutions, and universities, that young people are very open to forming friendships with diverse groups.

I am convinced that young people have the ability to lead the way.

According to indicators from Eurostat published this year, young people have identified three key areas, for the future development of our European countries.

These are the need to promote:

- a) critical thinking;**
- b) the ability to search for information, in order to combat fake news and extremism; and**
- c) the need to create behavioural change, through environmentally-friendly projects.**

Let me therefore conclude by urging you, as young people to be active participants within your communities, to make these three areas an important part of your present and future endeavours.

I would also like to encourage you to work for a united society in our Maltese Islands and our European Union, by acknowledging that our differences are not as important as the values that we share in common.

Thank you for your attention.