

Participation Now!
Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change

21 - 24 November 2012
Córdoba, Spain

Opening Address

by Thomas Krüger

President of Federal Agency for Civic Education (Germany)

- The spoken word takes precedence -

Dear Mr. León, Dear Kars Veling, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Let me warmly welcome you here in Córdoba on behalf of the Federal Agency for Civic Education. We are honoured to host such an important meeting of citizenship education experts and activists from all over Europe and from the Arab World in the beautiful city of Córdoba.

My special thanks go to our co-hosting partners, the ProDemos Institute in the Netherlands and the Ministry for Education and Culture in Austria. Our cooperation partners also played a crucial role in putting together such an ambitious transnational conference.

First and foremost I have to thank the Casa Árabe and director: Eduardo López Busquets, our partner here in Córdoba. We are equally indebted to Fernando Vallespin, an old friend of the NECE Network and director of the Fundación Ortega y Gasset and the Instituto de Estudios Sociales in Madrid. In Cairo, the Danish Egyptian Dialogue Institute was of enormous help in reaching out to experts and activists in Egypt. Its director, Jakob Erle, joined the NECE community already in 2005.

Our thanks also go to Ahmed Driss, the director of the Centre of Mediterranean and International Studies in Tunis, to DARE, the Democracy and Human Rights Education Network, to the Center for Citizenship Education in Warsaw and to the Czech Center for Civic Education. And we are very glad that the Robert Bosch Foundation and our joint fellowship programme for young Europeans are again contributing to this years' NECE meeting.

Last but not least I would like to thank the Institute of Foreign Cultural Relations and the German Federal Foreign Office for providing funds and assistance for a great number of participants from Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco present here in Córdoba. The Goethe Institute Cairo organised a delegation of Egyptian activists and experts to participate in our conference. Thank you, Ms. Gabriele Becker for your support.

Finally, I would like to thank Petra Grüne from the Federal Agency for Civic Education who together with Christoph Müller-Hofstede is responsible for our NECE activities and also for the realisation of this conference.

Dear Friends, Dear Colleagues,

Let me just make a few remarks on the meaning of this conference for our work in Germany and for our European NECE network.

For me personally the changes in the Arab World in 2011 can be compared with the historic change we witnessed in Germany and in Eastern Europe in 1989. Ziad Majed, a Lebanese intellectual and blogger, wrote some time ago that the fall of the “wall of fear” in most of the Arab countries today is equivalent to the fall of the “wall of Berlin” 23 years ago. Despite all the obvious differences between Eastern Europe 23 years ago and the Arab World today I can fully subscribe to that notion.

I was born and raised in the former GDR and have personal experiences and very lively memories of what it means to organize a democratic opposition in a police state. Our hopes for freedom and dignity, our feelings when organizing the mass protests and the popular uprising in the fall of 1989 can well be compared to the events on the Tahrir square in 2011. And, of course, we also had to cope with frustrations and setbacks and a sense of disillusionment with the democratic process. Democracy and democratic rights are, as we have learnt, not a gift but have to be defended and fought for again and again.

There are – to be sure – enormous difficulties ahead of us in the Arab World: Uncertainty still dominates the political future of all countries including those that have embarked on democratic transitions such as Tunisia and Egypt. The ongoing and worrying violence in the Gaza Strip and Israel and the Syrian civil war are part of a larger context of instability, of unmet social and economic demands and of ethnic and sectarian tensions to be found in all Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The situation in Europe is cause for concern, too. Citizenship Education in Europe is facing new challenges directly related to the lasting impact of the financial crisis on the political and intellectual infrastructure of the European Union.

The European Union – despite its many achievements and good results – is going through the worst crisis in its history. Austerity policies are imposed upon many countries in a way which is quite often perceived as ‘neo-colonial’ and unjust – to say the least. A serious loss of trust in democratic institutions and a sense of disillusionment – and often even rage against the ‘elites’ – are a direct result. Many citizens of Europe are taking to the streets these days and express a strong demand for more direct participation and more transparency.

At the same time, new nationalist and chauvinist movements, populism and xenophobia are a cause for serious concern. National politics are pushing countries apart and against each other. Ultimately this may lead to a break down of the European project and its institutions.

To put it shortly:

Our societies, too, face uncertain times which require new answers. If we want to safeguard and revitalize the European project, we have to reinvent its foundational idea and its legitimacy.

Europe has always been more than a peace project – however important and central this mission still is. The core of the European project centres around the concept of freedom; it also relies on human rights and the transnational and universal values and orientations of the enlightenment.

Dear Colleague and Friends,
Reinventing Europe and strengthening its democracies – that is easier said than done. Let me be very honest: I (and our political elite for that matter) don't have a quick solution.

But we really should try.

Because I am convinced: Only a unified Europe can survive in the 21st century; otherwise our visions of a revitalized democracy, of multicultural and tolerant societies, of social justice will come to nothing. That's why we are going to open up our agencies and institutions to reach out and cooperate with citizens' initiatives and grassroots organisations – inside and outside the European Union. And we will intensify our transnational cooperation in order to pool resources within Europe and with the emerging civil societies in Egypt, Tunisia and other countries.

Nothing of the above comes automatically and without efforts. That's why we will invest more into transnational and European activities like our NECE network. Our conference will serve as a platform not only to start an important dialogue between educators and civil society activists from Europe and the Arab World. We also aim at lasting partnerships and projects between European and Arab civic educators. Let's learn from each other and share experiences, let's build networks; I am sure that we should grasp this opportunity.

Thank you for your attention! I wish us all successful and inspiring days here in Córdoba.