

European Conference
**The European Union and the Promise of Democracy:
 What can Citizenship Education and Civil Society contribute?**

14 - 16 November 2013
 The Hague, the Netherlands

Welcome Address

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 the Rule of Law (the Netherlands)

- The spoken word takes precedence -

Your Excellency, ladies and gentlemen,

A very warm welcome to all of you.

It is a privilege and a great honour for ProDemos to host the international NECE Conference 2013 in The Hague, the centre of Dutch government and national democracy. A city that is home to many international institutions working towards peace and justice.

And let me say right away that the organisers of the conference, the German Federal Agency for Civic Education/bpb, the Austrian Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and ProDemos – House for Democracy and the Rule of Law, are very grateful to the House of Representatives for the use its facilities, for instance this beautiful hall.

At the end of the 18th century it was built as a ballroom belonging to the new palace of the Orange family. Though it soon became a parliamentary meeting room – until 1992 – I am sure that during this conference, its original function of being a place for networking will be revived.

NECE is a growing and vital network of institutions all over Europe promoting citizenship. Networking is a very effective and stimulating way of cooperation. We have experienced this once more since the Córdoba Conference last year, within focus groups, workshops and many informal contacts. And – as I said – networking is what we are doing tonight and in the next few days.

What binds us is a strong common conviction.

Citizens are not consumers. Citizens are not just observers. Society is more than an audience. Democracy under the rule of law depends on the involvement of people who take responsibility. Citizenship constitutes democracy. Support by informed and involved citizens is essential for maintaining the rule of law.

Democracy cannot be taken for granted.

We know this as we live in established democracies. Lest we forget we should listen to those fighting for democracy, for freedom and justice. The possibility of doing so is one of the reasons that I am glad that we have people in our midst from Northern African countries. Today, we have the possibility to do so. In our midst we have citizens from countries of Northern Africa. I would like to thank the Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs for the support in obtaining visas for them. Colleagues from Tunisia and Egypt, please tell us your stories,

share your concerns. Remind us of what is really important in developing democracy. I hope that you will be encouraged by participating in our conference.

This conference is taking place a few months before the European parliamentary elections. So Europe will be an important topic during our conference.

A controversial topic as we all know it. Not just because of the financial and economic crisis and the tension between countries within the Euro-zone: in all our countries we are seeing widespread disinterest and also hostility towards Europe and its institutions.

Our organisations for citizenship education do not take specific political positions in the debate about European integration strategies. But what we should stress is that citizens of EU member states are European citizens. Europe is part of our reality and consequently it is part of our responsibility.

It is not easy to bring forward convincingly the European perspective. We should realise that there are different perspectives. Last summer, a NECE workshop developed four different scenarios on the future of Europe in preparation for our conference. You can find the outcome of these thought experiments in the brochure *Citizenship in Europe 2030*. The participants of the workshop distinguished two dimensions that reflect two fundamental uncertainties.

Will the European Union in – say – 2030 be dominated by top-down governments or by bottom-up forces? Secondly, will Europe be a unified or rather a diversified Union? These two dimensions make four scenarios. From a Great Unified Europe to a Strong Union of Communities, from a Network of Nations to a diverse bottom-up Union that has been called a ‘European Spring’.

I hope that we can benefit from the scenarios in our discussions. We just heard Thomas Krüger calling on us to bring politics back into citizenship education. I think he is right.

Civic education is about considering political choices, about debating the Pros and Cons, about trying to gain influence, about winning or losing elections. Never a dull moment in citizenship education. Our future is at stake. I’m sure we will have an exciting conference.

And the use of scenarios also can enrich our discussions by forcing us to argue in terms of developments of strategies.

To make a start we will listen to the opening speech of the NECE Conference 2013 on *The European Union and the Promise of Democracy* by the minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Mr. Frans Timmermans.

We are honoured that you are willing to address our conference. We know your strong involvement in the European project. We look forward to hearing what you will tell us.

Mr. Timmermans, may I invite you to the rostrum. The floor is yours.