

**Welcome Address
To Open the Conference**

“National Experiences – European Challenges”

“Learning and Living Democracy” is the motto of the Council of Europe’s European Year of Citizenship through Education 2005. What this appropriate motto means is that democracy can only be practised and exercised in unison with democratic rights that are lived and applied. At this conference, which seeks to take a first critical look at the EYCE and its diverse activities in the EU member-states that make up the Council of Europe, the people who have been engaged in the processes of democratic civic education in those countries have the opportunity to present their results and collectively ponder the further development of their initial endeavours. I’m happy that this Congress, the product of common European efforts, is being attended by so many active participants. I’m also glad that as German Minister of the Interior, I have the chance here to clearly state that political institutions and active citizens in Germany share the same hopes. Just like you, they want to improve the dialogue between politics and citizens, and work together for more citizen participation. Like you, they want to nurture the development of a democratic culture in Europe.

I would like to thank all of the participants who supported and laid the groundwork for this conference that crosses national borders for their exemplary dedication. Among the many who deserve our appreciation, I’d like to single out a few people for personal thanks: Ms. Sigrid Steininger from the Austrian Ministry for Education, Science and Culture, Ms. Hannelore Chiout, the Chairwoman of the DARE Network, Mr. János Tóth, the President of the EAEA, and last but not least, Mr. Thomas Krüger, the President of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education and his team. With your efforts, you are already a part of the European public that you are trying to create. I am certain that the many examples of practices and impressive projects that will be presented here in the next few days will help strengthen the trust in European Unification. They complement European Commission initiatives perfectly, which for example envision more transparency in Council sessions, encouragement of European networks and projects, and plans to increase the number of people who vote in elections.

With what is known as “Plan D”, Ms. Margot Wallström, the Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication, has been doing everything in her power to advance these initiatives and democratic dialogue. However, for cooperative ventures and networks to function, and in the end for the development of a democratic culture, we need citizens who are engaged in civil society just as much as we need people who champion those causes in political institutions. As we know from experience, networks cannot be organized from the top down. They arise where they are needed – but to flourish, they need to be encouraged through policy decisions. The European Commission has expressed its desire to provide this support. Although creating a European public does not mean starting from scratch to form a transnational public realm, it does mean intertwining current national public realms. European nations have to do their part at a national level by encouraging broad participation of citizens and their representatives in parliament in the dialogue.

“Learning and living democracy” is a demanding goal, as well as an ongoing work-in-progress. That is also true of the questions surrounding social integration that are being asked all over Europe. Integration is only successful if it is coupled with democracy that can be perceived and a sense of belonging that can be experienced. We have a great responsibility to accept people here that have a background of migration, to help them gain qualifications, and to integrate them into our workforce. Together, we should create a climate in which the foreign is not viewed as a threat, but as an enrichment. This government will focus on that. At the same time, we may also expect that the people who have taken the opportunity to live with us will find it enriching to learn our languages, use our systems of education, and integrate themselves into our societies and systems of law. Civic education plays an important role in this process. We have a lot to offer. When it comes to the merits of our system of constitutional law, we have to go on the offensive and insist that those who live here play by the rules. We have every right to be proud of our civil rights, of our right to education and health care, of the right to protection that the state owes its citizens, of our basic rights and freedoms, and of the hard-earned ability to solve conflicts without resorting to violence. On the other hand, we can also learn much from other cultures, traditions, ways of life and religions. We should all cultivate the ability to differentiate based on knowledge rather than on prejudice and fear, and to apprehend the foreign without devaluing it.

At an event that has been largely organised by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education, it makes sense to remember that we Germans in particular have made a lot of positive strides towards

“learning and living democracy”. Civic education after the end of the Second World War was not only something that the occupying powers insisted on, but also – at least in some areas – the result of social commitment. Arnold Bergsträsser for example, who was forced to flee Germany under the Nazis and ended up teaching in Chicago, founded the Buchenbach Institute for Civic Education in Baden-Württemberg, and was a key figure both at the Tutzing Political Academy in Bavaria and in setting up the study of civics at German institutions of higher education. Back then civic education, introduced through the Federal Agency and state centres for civic education, became an extremely effective means of fostering the development of our democratic culture.

Since then, it has been our experience that democracy cannot be ordered from “on high”, but must be experienced and lived. And this is what we now have to accomplish under completely different circumstances at a European level. In many areas, “European democracy” is still missing this “experienceability”. We are also unable to assume a certain amount of obvious basic knowledge and an informed and aware consent from all of Europe’s citizens. A lot of polls and, at times, voting results have shown that many citizens of the EU view the consequences of European unification primarily in a negative light, and pay too little attention to its improvements and achievements. It has become clear that the legitimacy conveyed by the parliament of member states is not a substitute for European public opinion. Debates in parliament have to be enriched through the public conflicts that take place between those with different opinions and interests. When I speak of “public” in this sense, I mean civil society in all of its various means of expression and ways of taking action. In this scenario, the media play an important role as bridge-builders. Here it is important to perceive European questions increasingly from a common European point of view, and not just from the perspective of national interests.

European institutions are very aware of the need for transnational education exchange, and of the importance of supporting both democratic reforms and a common dialogue. This need became glaringly clear when French and Dutch majorities rejected the European Constitution in the early summer of 2005. But at the root of all of these efforts to narrow the gap between European institutions and the citizens is the insight that even a hybrid like the European Union, which is more than an international organisation but less than a state, still has to earn its legitimacy from the citizens of the EU. EU citizens are also national citizens, and are directly affected by important areas of union law in the country where they reside. That is why they have to know their rights and make use of them.

The Council of Europe started initiatives such as the “Education for Democratic Citizenship” project in 1997 both to find out what values and abilities individuals must have to become citizens that are also active participants, and also how those abilities could be conveyed to others. Since then, we have seen a large number of bilateral and multilateral cooperative ventures, studies and projects flourish. Once again, civic education has proven to be a valuable tool in helping to form a European public. I am confident that in the interaction between institutions and civil society – which is what this Congress stands for – we are taking a big step closer to a Europe made up of European citizens. On that note, I wish all of you a lively exchange, and many new impulses for the future.

Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble

German Minister of the Interior