

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It may be argued that the institutions and the actions of the European Union, ever since the 1950's, have been inspired by what we may call today "Human rights, fundamental rights, the fight against discriminations", etc. In the 1950's indeed, there was no doubt regarding the evil of totalitarianism, of racism in particular. While most people know exactly what they don't want, this does not mean that they have any clear perception of what is most desirable, positively speaking. When facing extermination, genocide, total war, we do not need the help of teachers and masters to come to the conclusion that everything must be done to keep such evil at bay. Suffering does that work in an indelible manner. But we do need education to understand what citizenship and human rights actually mean and require for each of us. When after sixty years of existence for the European Union, we still need it. Of course, we don't expect education to let children and students swallow ready-made answers; but we would be happy to have them learn how to ask the right questions, to enter into a fruitful dialogue with other people, discuss and negotiate the best possible answers.

Human rights, if I may try my hand at defining them, are the rights to which every human being is entitled, by just being human. The whole society must guarantee these rights for those who are its most vulnerable members: children, youngsters, even women, even men...

Citizenship is not the same thing. It is about what everyone in society may, could or should do to make the whole society work better.

These are beautiful ideals. I would like to emphasize how meaningful there are, not just as ideals but also as the key features of success for the European Union, as its ambition is to have a sustainable, inclusive growth. Indeed, I fear that

when we say that some ideas are beautiful, it is a polite manner to say that they are purely decorative, something of a luxury... Well, it is not.

European Youth have made our Erasmus mobility scheme a huge success. We discovered that young citizens in Europe are eager to go explore other cultures, speak other languages, establish new connections, make new friends. They gave citizenship a new spin, and the European ideal, a boost which was unexpected at the time. They want to live in a more open society, when it is okay to be different and even vulnerable in some ways, and that it is a good thing to be compassionate and respectful. Noteworthy is the fact that our new programme, Erasmus+ includes Youth as well, which was not part of the Lifelong Learning predecessor programme.

As you know, the European Union has made this year special: it is the *European Year of Citizens*. In that context, this is certainly an appropriate year for the collaboration to start between the Council of Europe and the European Commission on pilot projects “Democracy in Action”. This is taking place with the Directorate General Education & Culture and it is important to say that, however new and recent this action may seem, there are and there have been many actions undertaken by many DG’s within the European Commission to promote human rights and fight discriminations.

These pilot-projects are very special for us, at DG Education & Culture: education is increasingly being recognized as playing a major role in implementing human rights and citizenship issues. Actually both are intimately linked. I would like to stress the fact that not only education is a sine qua non component of effective implementation of human rights in any given society, but also that human rights are a very good indicator of the quality of education in any such society. The same goes for citizenship: the faith and trust an eager

student puts into his/her education are of the same kind than those we wish to see in citizenship. One must have faith and trust in one's society to wish to contribute to its operation, including doing one's best at school. When we, at the European Commission, look at the stats regarding early school leavers, we feel that education and training systems, to say the least, are not convincing enough. One may say that these dropouts do not have a brain set for studies, and this may be true in some cases, but the harsh reality and converging evidence tell us that more work is needed not only in pedagogy, but also in terms of inclusiveness, tolerance, acceptance of differences, respect and caring assistance for those who struggle... Actually, while I was describing ways to improve the performance of E&T systems, I was also listing the main trends of fighting discriminations, instilling a sense of worth and confidence, intercultural dialogue, respected for children with special needs, etc.

Within the confines of its community competences in the field of education, the European Commission is nevertheless considering with heightened attention the dimension of "civic competencies". In education and training, "civic competences" cover human rights and citizenship education.

Civic competences are a priority area reflected in the EU2020 Strategy and, in particular, in the Communication *Rethinking Education*. Moreover, important surveys and reports on these issues have been recently released: *Eurydice*, the European Commission's education information network, made available in May 2012 a report on "*Citizenship education at schools in Europe*", presenting updated data from 31 countries. Also from the European Commission, CRELL – the Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning (Ispra, Italy) published in January 2012 a report on "active citizenship competence composite indicator".

We are waiting for these pilot-projects to come to fruition. We know we are going to learn a great deal from them and those which will be generate by the next round, in 2014. And I would not want to miss this opportunity to convey the Euroepan Commission's warmest thanks to Yulia Pererva and Marc Hory for masterminding what we see already a success. Yes, this is way too much optimism. But this is how good citizenship works: you believe in something beautiful and you make it happen.

Thank you...