President of the European Court of Auditors,
Members of the European Court of Auditors,
Honourable Minister,
distinguished representatives of the European Parliament,
Auditor General of Malta,
Auditor General of the Vatican,
Dr George-Marius Hyzler,
academics, public officials, distinguished guests,

It is a privilege to address you today in the Grandmasters' Palace, a building that does not merely host ceremonies, but carries within its walls the memory of authority, responsibility and constitutional development. This Palace was, for many years, the home of the Parliament of Malta. Within these walls, laws were debated, governments were questioned, budgets were approved, public expenditure was authorised, and the democratic voice of the Maltese people was expressed through their elected representatives. Therefore, it is most fitting that, in this Palace, we speak not only of audit, but of the deeper duty of public institutions to deserve the confidence of the people they serve.

I speak today as Speaker of the House of Representatives of Malta, but also with respect for the wider family of national Parliaments across Europe and beyond. Our Parliaments are different in history, size and constitutional form, yet they share one solemn responsibility: to ensure that the authority granted by the people is never exercised without scrutiny, and that public money raised from the people is never spent without accountability. In this sense, the relationship between Parliament and the national audit authority is not a domestic technical arrangement. It is one of the safeguards by which democratic government remains worthy of its name.

This is not the first time I have placed these principles before institutions of accountability. At the EU Contact Committee held last year here in Malta, I underlined that integrity is not an accessory of governance, but its very foundation, and that power may be delegated, but it must never be left without scrutiny. At the conference on the role of the Ombudsman also held last year, I insisted that truth is the one thing no institution, no narrative and no political preference can overturn, and that integrity must be felt in every action, not claimed in every speech. Those were not ceremonial phrases. They were statements of democratic duty. Today, before this distinguished audience, I place them within the specific and vital context of public audit.

Public audit may appear to be a technical discipline of accounts, controls, reports and recommendations. But in truth, it is much more. It is the disciplined examination of whether power has remained faithful to its purpose. It asks whether public money has served the public good. It asks whether the citizen has received value, honesty and fairness from the institutions created in

his name. It asks whether the State has respected not only the letter of legality, but the moral obligation that comes with spending money which is not its own.

And this brings me to the real question — the question that many prefer not to ask, and fewer still wish to answer. After a Parliament votes public money, who truly makes sure that it was not wasted, mismanaged, abused, hidden behind bureaucracy, delayed without justification, or spent without delivering real benefit to the people? That is the question. Not whether speeches were made. Not whether budgets were announced. Not whether projects were launched. But whether public money, raised from the sacrifice of citizens, was used properly, honestly, effectively and in a manner that can withstand the light of scrutiny.

The answer must be given without hesitation. Parliaments must answer it. Governments must answer it. Public administrations must answer it. National audit authorities must help our democracies answer it with independence, evidence and professional courage. And every person entrusted with public power must be ready to answer calmly, clearly and without fear. Whoever is clean in public life should never fear scrutiny. Whoever acts in good faith should never fear transparency. Whoever administers public money properly should never fear audit. On the contrary, such a person should welcome it, because audit separates fact from suspicion, responsibility from negligence, and service from self-interest.

This is why audit does not exist to flatter power, echo convenience or decorate a system with formal reports. It exists to place facts before Parliament and, through Parliament, before the people. If those facts are uncomfortable, the answer is not to weaken the auditor, dismiss the report, politicise the finding or bury the recommendation. The answer is to correct what must be corrected. A serious State does not fear truth; it organises itself around truth. A mature democracy does not hide from scrutiny; it grows stronger through it.

The citizen does not measure our institutions by the elegance of our statements. He measures them by whether his rights are respected, his money protected, his services delivered and his trust honoured. He does not care for excuses. He does not applaud speeches simply because they are well delivered. He demands results. He demands that institutions work. He demands that public money is protected. He demands that failures are corrected. That is the citizen's legitimate expectation, and it is the duty of democratic institutions to meet it.

For national Parliaments, this responsibility is central. Parliaments vote public expenditure, approve budgets, debate national priorities and give democratic authority to the use of public funds. But the vote of expenditure is not the end of parliamentary responsibility; it is the beginning of a deeper obligation. If a Parliament authorises expenditure and then looks away, it has fulfilled only half of its duty. The citizen does not only want to know that money was allocated. The citizen wants to know whether that money reached its purpose, whether it produced value, whether weaknesses were addressed and whether the administration learnt from what the Auditor General, or the equivalent national audit authority, placed before the House.

The relationship between Parliament and the National Audit Authority must therefore never be reduced to ceremony or routine. It is part of the democratic architecture of the State. The Auditor General examines the use of public resources and reports to Parliament. Parliament must then ensure that those reports do not become documents politely tabled and quietly forgotten. A report must lead to questions. Questions must lead to explanations. Explanations must lead to correction. Where the same shortcomings appear year after year, Parliament must have the courage

to ask why. Where recommendations are ignored, Parliament must ask who is responsible. Where public value is absent, Parliament must insist on reform.

Across all national Parliaments, the principle is the same: institutions of accountability must remain strong, independent and respected. This is not a formality. It is the difference between democracy that breathes and democracy that suffocates. If oversight is weakened, if audit findings are ignored, if recommendations are left without follow-up, then power becomes less accountable, administration becomes less disciplined, and the citizen becomes less protected. Where wrongdoing is allowed to hide, public power begins to decay.

Let us be honest. One of the greatest dangers in public life is not always the great scandal that shocks everyone. Sometimes the greater danger is the weakness repeated so often that everyone becomes used to it: a recommendation not implemented, a deadline missed, a procurement weakness repeated, a project delayed, a reply not given, a control ignored, a report noted but not acted upon, a public body promising improvement only to return again with the same deficiency. This is how trust is weakened — not always by one dramatic collapse, but by the slow erosion of seriousness.

That is why accountability without follow-up is unfinished accountability. And unfinished accountability is dangerous because it gives the appearance of scrutiny while allowing the substance of failure to continue. Democracies cannot satisfy themselves with the publication of reports. They must insist on consequences. Not punishment for its own sake, not political theatre and not institutional humiliation, but consequence in the proper sense: correction, reform, discipline, learning and improvement.

Public money is not government money. It is not ministerial money. It is not departmental money. In every country represented here or not, it is the money of the people. It comes from workers, pensioners, families, businesses, consumers and citizens who contribute because the law requires them to do so, but also because they trust that the State will use those resources for the common good. When that trust is respected, citizens accept sacrifice with greater confidence. When that trust is weakened, even necessary measures become suspect. This is why oversight of public expenditure is not a bureaucratic luxury. It is the foundation of public confidence.

The national audit authority must therefore be respected not because it is convenient, but because it is independent. Its value lies precisely in the fact that it is not there to please those in power, nor to satisfy those who oppose them. Its duty is to facts, evidence, legality, propriety, good governance and value for money. The auditor does not govern. The auditor does not legislate. The auditor does not replace political judgement. But the auditor gives Parliament and the country an independent assessment of whether public resources have been properly managed. That role must be defended, because when the independence of audit is weakened, the citizen is weakened too.

Public audit is not merely a profession of figures. It is a profession of public conscience. It examines accounts, but it also protects confidence. It studies systems, but it also defends the citizen. It reviews expenditure, but it also reminds the State that money raised from the people must return to the people in the form of value, service and justice. Public audit is, in that sense, a calling: a commitment to ensuring that public money always serves a public purpose.

At the same time, audit must never be misunderstood as an exercise in humiliation. The best audit report is not the one that embarrasses. The best audit report is the one that improves the State. But improvement requires humility. It requires the humility to accept that a weakness identified is not an insult but an opportunity to correct. It requires the humility to admit that good

governance is never completed once and for all. It must be renewed constantly through vigilance, discipline and reform.

This is why Parliaments must be active and not passive. A report laid before a Parliament must become part of a living process of democratic oversight. Committees must examine it seriously. Ministers and entities must respond clearly. Recommendations must be followed up. Timelines must be respected. Repeated failures must be challenged. Improvements must be acknowledged. Citizens must be able to understand what was found, what was recommended, what was corrected and what remains unresolved. If audit remains locked in technical language and specialist circles, the public will not feel its value. Parliaments have the duty to give audit the democratic meaning.

The world in which audit operates has changed profoundly. In my view, if you permit me to describe it in this way, public audit today operates in a new world disorder. This is not a dramatic expression; it is a realistic one. It reflects the world we are living in: geopolitical instability, war, inflation, migration pressures, climate risk, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity threats, defence and security expenditure, European funds, public-private partnerships, emergency spending and increasingly complex financial systems. Public money today moves through structures that are often far more complicated than in the past, and sometimes less visible to the ordinary citizen. Therefore, audit must be capable of following complexity without being captured by it, and Parliaments, too, must be capable of understanding that complexity without surrendering their duty to scrutinise.

During my intervention at the European Union Speakers Conference held in Copenhagen in the first week of May this year, I also referred to the Hybrid CoE, established in 2017 as a platform bringing together Participating States with the European Union and NATO to strengthen resilience against hybrid threats. Malta has been active in this organisation since its accession in 2022.

I questioned the impact that the withdrawal of a key participating State, such as the United States, could have at a time when hybrid threats in Europe's neighbourhood are increasing. My point was not to criticise one country, but to underline a wider concern: security structures must not become dependent on the political direction of any single State. They must be built on continuity, shared responsibility and institutional resilience.

The panel acknowledged this concern, while stressing that the Hybrid CoE's strength lies in the collective participation of many States, and not in any one member alone. This is a lesson for all democratic institutions: resilience must be strong enough to endure political change, while remaining transparent, accountable and effective.

Technology, in particular, must illuminate and never obscure. It must serve transparency, not conceal it. Artificial intelligence, digital platforms and data systems can strengthen public administration, but they can also hide decisions behind algorithms, automate errors, conceal responsibility and distance citizens from explanations. Technology must never become a curtain between the citizen and the State. If public money is spent through digital systems, those systems must be auditable, explainable, lawful and fair.

In this new world, it is no longer enough to ask whether money was spent according to the rules. That remains essential, but it is not sufficient. We must also ask whether expenditure achieved its purpose; whether the public received real value; whether risks were properly assessed; whether emergency powers left behind permanent weaknesses; whether public-private

partnerships truly served the public interest; and whether the most vulnerable citizen actually received the service promised in the respective budget speeches. These are not secondary questions. They are the modern questions of democratic accountability.

This is the deeper meaning of value for money. It is not only about paying less. It is about achieving more public good for every euro entrusted to the State. A project may be legal but wasteful. A programme may be fully funded but poorly delivered. A contract may be properly signed but badly managed. A reform may sound ambitious but fail to reach citizens. A budget line may be exhausted while the public problem remains unresolved. That is why audit must look beyond the surface. And that is why Parliaments must have the courage to look beyond the announcement.

Accountability is not a brake on progress; it is its compass. Those who say that scrutiny slows down government misunderstand government. Good oversight does not prevent progress. It prevents waste. It prevents error. It prevents arrogance. It prevents weak systems from becoming public failure. Where oversight is strong, public investment becomes wiser. Where transparency thrives, competitiveness deepens. Where institutions speak truth, democracy strengthens.

There is also a wider European dimension. The European Court of Auditors reminds us that the European project depends not only on ideals, treaties and declarations, but also on sound financial management, reliable evaluation and public confidence. Across Europe, citizens are asking whether public money is being used properly, whether European funds are producing visible benefit, whether defence and security expenditure is being properly scrutinised, whether climate and digital transitions are being managed honestly, and whether large public ambitions are matched by disciplined implementation. Europe cannot ask citizens for trust while treating accountability as secondary.

Permit me, at this point, to speak not only from the Chair that I occupy, but also as a European citizen, and as someone who has served and continues to serve in national and international parliamentary responsibilities. When public resources are mobilised in times of war, defence, security, emergency or solidarity, the political decision may belong to Governments and European institutions; yet once public money is committed, the democratic audit question begins. And the question is not comfortable, but it must be asked: are we spending to prevent war, or are we spending only to sustain the management of war? Are we reducing human suffering, or merely financing the continuation of instability? Are we bringing a just peace closer, or only becoming more efficient at paying for its absence? These questions are not accusations. They are questions that taxpayers have the right to ask when vast public funds are committed in their name. The European Court of Auditors does not decide war or peace; but it helps ensure that money spent in the name of Europe's values can withstand the scrutiny of Europe's citizens.

This European dimension does not replace national accountability. It strengthens it. The European project is built through national Parliaments, European institutions, independent auditors and citizens who expect that every level of governance will act with seriousness. The higher the ambition of public policy, the greater the need for audit. The more complex the expenditure, the greater the need for clarity. The more distant the decision feels from the citizen, the greater the duty to explain it.

Small States and large States alike share this responsibility. In smaller countries, institutions are often closer to the people. That closeness can be a strength, because citizens can feel public decisions directly. But it can also be a challenge, because proximity must never replace impartiality,

and familiarity must never weaken formality. In larger systems, distance and complexity create different risks. Yet the principle remains the same everywhere: independence must not only exist on paper. It must be seen, respected and lived.

The same applies to all guardian institutions. The Auditor General, the Ombudsman, Parliaments, the courts and other constitutional bodies are not obstacles to government. They are safeguards of democracy. Those who misunderstand oversight as obstruction misunderstand the nature of democratic authority. Oversight does not weaken legitimate power. It strengthens it. Power without oversight may appear efficient for a time, but it becomes fragile because it is not trusted. Power with oversight may be questioned and corrected, but it becomes stronger because it is accountable.

This is also the lesson of this Palace. When Parliament sat within these walls, it represented the authority of the people. Today, even as Parliament has moved to its new building, this Palace remains a symbol of the continuity of Malta's constitutional life and of a wider democratic truth: institutions are greater than the persons who occupy them. Governments change. Office holders change. Majorities change. But the duty to protect public trust remains. We are temporary custodians of permanent responsibilities.

For that reason, I will not speak today in vague terms. Citizens have the right to ask whether money is being spent properly. They have the right to ask whether public contracts are managed fairly. They have the right to ask whether projects deliver what was promised. They have the right to ask whether failures have consequences. They have the right to ask whether Parliament follows up on what the auditor reports. And those of us who hold public office must not be offended by these questions. We must answer them. If we have acted properly, we should answer with serenity. If mistakes have been made, we should answer with correction. If systems are weak, we should answer with reform.

That is the standard to which public life must be held. We should not fear evaluation; we should welcome it. We should not fear scrutiny when it is based on facts, truth and good faith. Public life must not be afraid of light. Light is what gives public life legitimacy. Institutions must never ask citizens simply to trust them because they say so. They must earn trust by the way they behave, by the way they respond, by the way they correct mistakes and by the way they allow themselves to be examined.

Therefore, the message today must be clear: audit must not be treated as a post-mortem exercise after damage has already been done. Audit must be part of a culture of prevention, learning and better governance. It must help public administration identify risk before it becomes failure. It must help Parliaments understand where systems require reform. It must help citizens see that democracy has mechanisms to protect their money and their confidence. And it must help all of us remember that public funds are not numbers on a page, but a public trust placed in our hands.

Distinguished guests, as you begin these days of reflection in Malta, I hope that this Summer School will serve not only as an exchange of professional knowledge, but as a reaffirmation of democratic purpose. Auditors, parliamentarians, policymakers, academics and administrators must each remain faithful to their role. The auditor must speak with independence. Parliament must listen with seriousness. Government must respond with responsibility. Administration must implement with discipline. Academia must challenge with evidence. And the citizen must remain at the centre of everything.

In a world of disorder, public audit brings discipline. In a world of noise, it brings evidence. In a world where trust is fragile, it brings reassurance. In a world where public money is under constant pressure, it reminds us that every euro spent in the name of the people must be justified before the people. That is not bureaucracy. That is democracy.

May our Parliaments have the courage to scrutinise. May our audit institutions have the independence to speak. May our administrations have the humility to improve. May our European and national institutions remember that accountability is not a limitation on ambition, but the condition that makes ambition legitimate. And may our citizens always know that the money they contribute to the State is guarded, examined and used with the seriousness that their sacrifice deserves.

I am stating such because, in the end, the true measure of public expenditure is not found only in accounts, reports or balance sheets. It is found in the confidence of the people. And when the people know that their money is protected, their trust is strengthened. When their trust is strengthened, democracy itself is strengthened.

Thank you.