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Let's Get to Know Each Other Better

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**Intervention by Speaker Anglu Farrugia,
Speaker of the House of Representatives,**

Parliament of Malta

Session I

***Current Challenges: Threats to European Unity, Bridging the gap between the
EU and its citizens***

In 2006, the European Union was discussing the issue of Bridging the Gap between Europe and its citizens. Ten years on, and the European Union is still discussing the same conundrum. The European Union as we know it is the driving force of the majority of economic activity in our respective countries, the main promoter of human rights and the political machine of the continent. But, what is Europe doing to become closer to its citizens? In theory, one might give a detailed technical account. However, How European do we feel in reality?

As you are aware, I come from a small country in the periphery of the European Union and I must confess that, awareness of the European Union and the quest for citizens to feel more European, aside from my place of work, has only increased in the past years or during a build up for a related event. When it comes to feeling European, the Union may be alienated and detached, as information campaigns and current programmes, which aim at creating European citizens, are mostly directed at specific target groups and lack a holistic reach. The EU should start off by becoming more personal with its citizens and gain trust across the board by being more available and more reachable.

A precondition for the legitimacy of the EU is trust in its institutions. However, according to Eurobarometer, defiance vis-à-vis EU institutions doubled between 2007 and 2013, marking a sharp rise from 32% to 60%. This evidence has shown that the gap between the European Union and its citizens has widened. Trust can be established by fostering knowledge about the EU through experiencing benefits at first hand. In addition, citizens need to associate these benefits with the EU itself. For instance, EU citizens should be made aware of the fact that they owe the advantage of free movement to the EU.

Furthermore, trust also correlates with voter turnout. Participation in the European Parliament elections is not only low across EU Member States (42.54% in 2014), but it has also drastically decreased over the years, further reducing the EU's legitimacy. According to Eurobarometer, the most important reason for low voter turnout lies in the lack of trust in the EU. In the last EU Parliament elections, the largest group of abstainers consisted of young people, aged 18 to 24, which raises severe concerns about the EU's future legitimacy. Hence, an effective policy is needed to address the issue of trust, especially targeting youth.

In the last election for Members of the European Parliament, the voting turnout in Malta was that of 74.81% - a decrease of 4% from 2009. This was the lowest turnout ever in an EP election in Malta, where, in the 2009 election, voter turnout had already decreased by 4%. This sends a strong message from the Maltese public, when, as compared to the local general elections held every 5 years, the average turnout is 93%. When compared to other EU countries, such a turnout for EP elections is quite high, but in Malta, this does not necessarily reflect the interest of the Maltese in EU affairs, and it also does not necessarily reflect the feeling and intellect of the general public.

In Malta, an initiative which could be a step towards the right direction is the Vote 16, where we are in the process of considering changing the voting age from 18 to 16. This has already been tested in the local council elections in 2015 and we aim to move forward and practice the procedure for the general elections in the near future. This is a step forward towards participatory democracy on a national level, which may be extended to the European level in the years to come.

Participatory democracy should not only be kept to the national level. Malta makes good use of participatory democracy as we ensure that parliamentarians are kept close to their constituencies and since we are a small country, then the relationship between the citizen and the parliamentarian is a close one – perhaps too close at times! As Europeans, we must go beyond participatory democracy on the local level, and engage, as enthusiastically on a European level.

As Speakers, we must represent our parliaments through setting the right example. We must feel European ourselves before leading our citizens to feel European themselves. I look forward to the contribution of my colleagues to discuss how we as Speakers can be the bridge of this unity gap.