

Opening speech ECNAIS conference

PROMOTING DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Mr. António Leite, Secretary of State of Education

Mr. Luís Virtuoso, Chairman of AEEP, the Portuguese Association of Independent Schools

Dear members of ECNAIS,

Dear students, headmasters, teachers, chairpersons, timekeepers, jurors,

Ladies and gentleman,

Dear friends,

Firstly, a very warm and heartfelt welcome to our friends from Ukraine. We cannot even start to imagine what this last year has been for you. But not a day has gone by that we did not think of you. We hold you in our prayers. It is today, 5 years to the day, that we met in Kiev, from 18 to 21 April 2018, for an ECNAIS conference with the theme Educational Freedom and Democratic Changes – the role of Independent Schools in Ukraine a European Perspective.

We also begin by embracing our friends from Turkiye in the aftermath of the terrible earthquakes that so ruthlessly decimated life and hope for so many in your country.

Secondly, I would like to officially congratulate the students that are with us today. Your hard work brought you here and we hope you find the experience fulfilling. You will most probably be focused on preparation for the 3 rounds of debate all of you will participate in. But please remember that debating is not the aim of your journey. The aim is to befriend others that think, live and believe in ways so different from your own; so foreign, to you and your way of living. Let yourselves be overwhelmed by the richness of diversity!

Thirdly, a special word of thanks to the staff of AEEP. This event is not our biggest, but the integration of the debate event certainly posed challenges. Thank you for all your hard work!

On behalf of ECNAIS, I welcome you all to the seminar “PROMOTING DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT”.

For those of you who are less acquainted with ECNAIS, we are a non-confessional, non-political association that today is based in Helsinki (Finland). ECNAIS was founded in 1988, by a group of

educators who wanted to learn more about the challenges and the vision of each other for independent education in Europe. We unite national associations of independent schools from all countries of Europe and our vision is to promote dialogue within countries and the freedom of education for parents and educators.

Today, we have gathered here more than 70 representatives of independent schools, from 11 European countries. Once again we pledge to stand for independent education as a hallmark of free and democratic societies. Independent education represents more than 18% of the students in Europe – more than 20 million students. This is us.

And now let me convey the reason for the theme of this seminar: **PROMOTING DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.**

As I stressed in Thessaloniki last November, when we were just out of the pandemic, a terrible war broke out, with devastating effects for the entire world. A long, treacherous war that will have a long lasting impact on the lives of the people directly involved in the conflict but also on the lives of all of us.

One of these impacts is the increase of polarization within our societies. “Them” versus “us”, “wrong” versus “right”, “I hate” instead of “I disagree”. This does not mean that there is no wrong and right. There certainly is. To battle polarization we do not have to embrace relativism. The strength of polarization as a way of living in the social sphere is that it makes complex issues seem simple; it gives people a seemingly safe way to navigate the complexities of the world. Polarization gives people that feel lost a sense of belonging; it gives people who are mad an enemy; it gives people who are frustrated an explanation for their desperation.

It is not that 20, 30 or 100 years ago people were very different from the people of today. The difference is that, today, social media and other information and communication technologies allow us to act out our feeling and frustrations with a significant impact on the public sphere. Furthermore, a great number of these technologies and platforms are designed and operated exactly to explore our feelings and frustrations.

Because of this, one could say that, to a certain extent, democracy is at risk. Maybe not democracy as a way of selecting our leaders, but democracy as a way of living together. Democracy is so much more than a political regime where leaders are selected by vote.



Democracy is a way of thinking and living that has the dignity of the person at its core and that thrives on diversity. Democracy is about speaking and listening instead of shouting. It's not a tyranny of the majority; but it's also not a tyranny of individual rights. It's about how people, equal in dignity but different in almost everything else, live together and contribute to the common good.

For ECNAIS, this is at the heart of education; especially independent education. Because education for democracy and civil engagement does not mean to water down one's values or to embrace relativism. It is educating from a specific value perspective or worldview, but with recognition of other perspectives and a will to engage in a meaningful conversation with people that have these other perspectives. I am able to accept the other and his/her difference, understand our differences and find a balance.

As educators, we have to juggle with all these different and conflicting perspectives that flood our students everyday. We have to help them navigate a sea of information and learn to distinguish true from false. Debating, we believe, may be a very powerful educational tool for this. Thinking about a topic, understanding its components, preparing arguments and counterarguments, listening to the others, reacting to what they say. A student that masters this process will most certainly be better prepared to be an active, value creating citizen.

But we do not act alone and so, to help us educators think about all these issues, we have invited professors Gonçalo Matias and Miguel Monjardino to share with us their insights on migrations and the classics. A pressing humane topic of today and knowledge that has been with us for centuries. It will be fun to see how each one of us integrates their keynotes in our educational frameworks. Thank you both for accepting our challenge.

Before I turn to more informative issues, I would like to thank Nuno Archer. Nuno has been the brilliant architect of our project. The teacher training, the debate rulebook, the juror training, all that is needed for our debates to occur. And I would also like to thank, from the bottom of my heart Porticus Iberia, in the person of Marion Stoler, that so generously and enthusiastically has supported this project. And finally, our partner DDI, represented by Josje van der Meer and their precious feedback and support for the teacher training and general brainstorming about debating.

To end, let me share some issues we addressed at the General Meeting of ECNAIS yesterday.

Firstly, on November 15th to 17th we will have our ECNAIS seminar in Budapest, with the theme “School leadership and school management across Europe - identifying good practices and specialites of private schools”. Thank you to our Hungarian friends for hosting the event.

Secondly, our April 2024 conference will take place on the 18th and 19th, in a city to be announced.

Thirdly, we have approved a proposal from EFEE, the European Federation of Education Employers, to become EFEE observers. This partnership will help us improve our visibility in Brussels, strengthen the possibilities of members to participate in international exchanges and strengthen ECNAIS as an organization.

Finally, if all goes to plan, the 2nd ECNAIS Debate event will take place in April 2025.

And with this I wish you an inspirational conference. And please take some extra time to enjoy your stay in the beautiful city of Lisbon.

Thank you very much

Rodrigo Melo
ECNAIS Chairman

Lisbon, 19th April 2023