

Mr. João Costa, Minister of Education of Portugal

Dear Chairman of ECNAIS

Dear members of ECNAIS,

Dear students, Headmasters and teachers,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I welcome you, all to Lisbon.

It is an honor for AEEP to host this event and to participate actively in the first ECNAIS debate event.

The last time ECNAIS organized an event in Portugal was in 2008, in Porto. Exactly 15 years ago. And these were an exciting 15 years for independent schools in Portugal. Both for good reasons and for not so good reasons.

Firstly, in 2008 we had more than two hundred and four thousand students (204.992). Today, we cater for more than two hundred and twelve thousand (212.176). An increase is needed to say that is the result of more and more private VET schools and alternative secondary education. This is good.

Secondly, the country had a financial bailout in 2011. During a very hard 3 years, families made a special effort to keep their children in the independent schools, schools made a big effort to keep tuition as low as possible and our staff - teachers and non teaching staff – suffered stagnation of their salaries and even an increment in working hours. This was very demanding.

Thirdly, and this was the best part of these 15 years, we had a very intense but positive negotiation with the government in 2012 and 2013 and a new Statute of Independent Schools was put into law. This new statute, based on curriculum and organizational freedom was a very important instrument for independent schools and created the conditions for us to start innovating. More recently, remote teaching and learning because of COVID put us all to the test and I dare to say that independent schools passed with flying colors!

Before I end, let me just share with you some highlights of Portuguese history.

Portugal was founded as an independent country in 1143. Up in the north. From then, Portuguese kings fought their way down to the south and in 1249, the Kingdom of Portugal reached the size that it has kept till today. This is the first interesting fact I wanted to share with you: Portugal's borders have not changed for the last 774 years.

Secondly, and considering that the debate event is about democracy and civil engagement, I would like to tell you the story of the first time that our king was chosen by the people. Well, not chosen as we chose our leaders in modern democracies, but the first time that the will of the people was taken into consideration to choose the king. In 1580, the Spanish king became king of Portugal. In 1640, because the King of Spain was fighting in Catalunya, the Portuguese nobility revolted and D. João was acclaimed as the new king of Portugal. He was not in line for the throne. But it was argued that the people loved him and the voice of the people had to be considered in the selection of the king.

Thirdly a note about the Portuguese empire. Though it was never designated as an empire, and rightly so, I will call it like that for lack of a better word.

It began in 1415 with the conquest of Ceuta in North Africa. At its peak, this empire included Brazil, Angola, Moçambique, Guiné, Cape Vert, Goa, Damão, Diu, East Timor, and Macau. It ended in 1999 when Portugal gave to China sovereignty over Macau. Being a poor and small country, it was the knowledge that made Portugal universal. Knowledge about the seas, about building boats, but, most of all, knowledge about the stars and the winds. Back day, there was nothing more high-tech than a sextant, an astrolabe, or a compass. It is also worth noting that the small number of Portuguese people made it impossible to run such an extension of the land. The trick here was to engage with the locals and enculturate. Of course, there was some level of violence (or threat of violence). But the bottom line is that without some form of collaboration, it would not have been possible for the Portuguese to have such large and far away domains.

In 1910 we became a Republic after King D. Carlos and his older son D. Luís was assassinated in 1908. From 1933 to 1974 we had a right-wing dictatorship that followed the very unstable 20 years of the Republic. In 1974 we had a very left-wing revolution. Some argue that the

Portuguese revolution was part of the bigger conflict between East and West, the USSR and the USA. After some confusing years, we entered the European Union in 1985 and became a stable Western democracy.

Because Portugal has defined borders for 700 years, none of the world wars were fought on Portuguese land and we did not have any civil wars, the country has a very rich monument and you stumble on history all around Lisbon.

In the present day, you will find Lisbon to be a very interesting city. It has all the benefits of a small city in comparison to the big capitals of Europe, lovely weather, very safe and upbeat. But, simultaneously, all the perks of the big cities: are culture, education, leisure, business, and opportunities. That is why today Lisbon thrives with foreigners coming to live with us. Just last year, a new independent school, offering an international curriculum opened in September with over 200 young students whose families had never lived in Portugal until a couple of months before.

To sum up, the better parts of Portugal, its openness to the world, were only possible because they were based on peace, knowledge, and dialogue between cultures.

In a nutshell, this is what we aim for our students: to learn how to live peaceful, engaged, meaningful lives with all the other people who inhabit this planet of ours.

And what we will be doing today and tomorrow is an integral part of this education: learning how to debate in a structured way, and really engaging with people who will be arguing for the exact opposite of your position is a great way to develop your democratic toolkit.

I wish you all the best of luck.

Thank you very much.