

NECE NEW Years' Reception

28 January 2014
Brussels, Belgium

Opening Remarks

by Thomas Krüger

President of Federal Agency for Civic Education (Germany)

- The spoken word takes precedence -

Dear Ms Pack, Dear Paul Scheffer, Dear Alicja Pacewicz, Dear NECE Partners, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour for me to welcome you tonight here in Brussels.

Since 2004 we will have our 10th birthday this year - the NECE Initiative with its partners from Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia has promoted a new and transnational form of citizenship education for Europe. We give initiatives, institutions, agencies and NGOs from all over Europe a platform to discuss joint projects and exchange experience. With our conferences, workshops and online tools we are aiming to create a much-needed transnational public space for experts, activists, young citizens and citizenship educators all over Europe.

Tonight we want to take a close look at the importance and meaning of the upcoming European elections.

We feel there is an urgent need to start a dialogue between citizenship educators and European policymakers. At this moment we are facing common challenges. Here are the most pressing issues:

- the current crisis of trust and the uncertainties about the future of the European Union in the middle of our societies;
- the contribution and relevance of European citizenship education for the further democratic development of the Union and the problem of communicating and funding this contribution
- and finally we need to discuss how to organize a common and effective intervention in the European election campaign in order to increase voters' turnout in May

As we gather here in Brussels, doubts, worries and fears about the European Union are growing in our countries that are easy to exploit by right wing and populist parties and movements. Their favourite topics, which are immigration, austerity and the rejection of Brussels, already dominate the national agenda in quite a number of countries. And these European 'tea parties' as the 'Economist' has called them may gain a significant number of votes in May 2014.

This is bad news for all of us who want a more transparent and democratic Europe. That's why we propose a common intervention by citizenship educators and European politicians and campaigners in the coming months.

We first want to encourage voters to participate in the European elections. If many voters simply do not bother to take part it will be a gift to the populist parties and help them in their ambitions to shape European politics. If we do not want that, we have to mobilize for an increase in voters' turnout.

Our aim is nothing less than to stop the dangerous downward trend in voters' turnout at European elections since 1979.

That's why we have invested some time and energy into the design of a European voters' advice application: the Vote Match Europe, which will be launched in March.

Our own system in Germany the 'Wahl-O-Mat' was used by more than 13 million people during elections in September 2013 and has contributed to an increase in voters' turnout in Germany. We will present the design and first results of our Vote Match expert group tonight.

But at the same time we should be realistic about the growing discontent with the 'elites' in Europe: The crisis of confidence is deep seated and cannot easily be ignored. We therefore do believe that doubts and worries of citizens in Europe should be taken seriously and not dismissed as primitive and reactionary.

It should not be: you are 100% pro-EU or you are 100% anti-EU - friend or foe? Instead we have to make a connection to the large majority of the European population, which is neither fanatically nationalistic, nor fanatically 'europhoric'. Let us not fall back on a TINA (there is no alternative) rhetoric, which has done so much damage in the European crisis.

On that note let me welcome you again. I am looking forward to a good debate and practical results for our work towards the European elections in May.

Thank you for your attention.