

Conference on the Future of Europe

National Report - Malta

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SEM

Servizzi Ewropej f'Malta

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INTRODUCTION

Servizzi Ewropej f'Malta led the national events to promote the Conference on the Future of Europe in Malta. The Agency adopted a two-pronged strategy namely:

- To raise awareness and encourage participation of citizens and organisations to contribute to the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference with their ideas.
- To organise discussions and debates at national and local level for different age groups and interests. The outcome of these events was then individually uploaded in event reports on the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference.

The Conference was promoted using different methodologies including the organisation of debates and dialogues as well extensive promotion on social media, radio and TV programmes to encourage citizens to share their ideas on the future of Europe and the use of the multilingual digital platform. All activities included citizens from all walks of life and brought them together to discuss topics such as European values, climate change, migration, employment and health. A total of €25,000 were spent by the Agency on events and promotion related to the Conference on the Future of Europe in Malta.

The Agency was actively involved in promoting the platform and in assisting different organisations on how to use the platform and share their ideas. Amongst the feedback received, citizens showed a desire to have a Union for all which does not adopt a one-size-fits-all but that takes into account the interests of citizens particularly those living at the peripheries, the protection of our diverse cultural values, the need to protect the environment and having regulations and policies that take into account the national realities.

Young people highlighted the importance that dialogue, and diplomacy should always be at the forefront of the European Union's foreign policy, especially within the context of the current situation in Ukraine. They also expressed their concerns that their voices are at times ignored by decision makers. On the other hand, children showed great interest in having the EU adopt a more active role in protecting our environment and that together we should strive to live in a more social, just and equal Europe.

PROMOTING THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE IN MALTA

Official Launch

The Conference on the Future of Europe was officially launched in Malta during a press conference held on May 18, 2021, in the presence of Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Evarist Bartolo and Minister within the Office of the Prime Minister, Carmelo Abela.

Minister Bartolo explained that the biggest challenge for the EU is to listen not just to those who participate in the Conference on the Future of Europe, but also to those who will not, due to their dissatisfaction and disillusion with the European Union.

Minister Abela spoke about a number of challenges facing the EU that need to be addressed, such as economic recovery after the pandemic, regular and irregular migration, security and terrorism, as well as poverty and social justice. He encouraged citizens to come forward and give their views, opinions, and suggestions about the future of the European Union.

SEM CEO Mandy Falzon spoke about the national plan to implement the Conference in Malta and Gozo, consisting of debates and discussions on themes such as the environment, the post-COVID economy, education, migration, and the role of Malta on Europe's periphery.

Raising Awareness on different communication channels

In terms of awareness-raising on the multilingual digital platform, various channels were addressed, namely:

- Regular and boosted social media posts on SEM's social media channels to promote the Conference in general and the individual topics of the platform.
- Participation in four radio programmes on the national broadcaster during a magazine programme discussing with the audience the future of the EU in the context of the Conference.
- 360 radio adverts spread over two weeks, between August 16 and 27, and October 18-22, on six nationwide radio stations (Bay radio, ONE radio, Calypso

radio, VIBE FM, Radju Malta, NET FM), with the highest audience share in Malta. The October campaign has been aired in collaboration with the European Parliament Liaison Office in Malta.

- Three full-page advertorials on magazines published with two Sunday newspapers distributed nationwide.
- Seven articles on printed newspapers, one in English (The Malta Independent) and six in Maltese (L-Orizzont).
- Five online articles in a weekly newsletter published by one of the leading trade unions in Malta, UHM Voice of the Workers.

Engagement with civil society organisations has also been continuous through direct communication to encourage them to contribute to the Conference with their ideas, organise events and upload them on the digital platform.

Engagement was maintained with Maltese MEPs who form part of the European Parliament's Delegation to the Conference Plenary (EPP European Parliament Vice President, Roberta Metsola and S&D MEP Dr Josianne Cutajar) as well as Maltese members of the European Economic and Social Committee to ensure involvement and collaboration.

Engagement with civil society organisations has also been continuous through direct communication (mailshots) to encourage them to contribute to the Conference with their ideas, organise events and upload them on the platform.

Participation in working groups and plenaries

The CEO of the Agency has actively participated in the working groups and plenary sessions held in Strasbourg and has intervened several times to provide an update on the events and activities being organised in Malta to promote the Conference.

Organisation of National Events

In terms of the organisation of events on a national level, SEM aimed to target different sections of the population from different backgrounds and interests. Events in 2021 have been limited to a hybrid format, due to the restrictions by the national Health Authorities for public events. All events were live streamed on the Agency's social media channel.

Events in 2022, namely local and sectoral discussions were held in physical format.

Participation in public events was promoted among all civil society organisations, through social media channels intended for citizens more broadly, and on the SEM website.

1. The Future of Education and Training in Europe and Malta

In June and July 2021, five panel discussions were held with educators and citizens to discuss the five pillars of the new Strategic Framework for Education and Training 2030. The five themes were: 'Improving Quality, Equity, Inclusion and Success for all'; 'Making Lifelong Learning and Mobility a reality for all'; 'Enhancing Competences and Motivation in the education profession'; 'Reinforcing European Higher Education'; 'Supporting the Green and Digital transitions in and through education and training'. The sessions were held in close collaboration with the Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and the Ministry for Education.

The sessions were held in a hybrid format (a panel of experts physically present in a boardroom and online participation by stakeholders) and featured the participation of a few hundred educators and citizens. The outcome of each of the sessions were uploaded in separate thematic events on the Multilingual Digital Platform.

The topics of the sessions addressed aspects such as the quality of education, inclusion, equity, lifelong learning, mobility, competences, and motivation of the education profession and, higher education.

- Improving Quality, Equity, Inclusion and Success for All

The first session, held on **June 10**, was addressed by the Minister for Education, Dr Justyne Caruana and the Minister within the Office of the Prime Minister, Carmelo Abela, followed by a panel discussion. 58 participants joined the session online.

Minister Carmelo Abela emphasised that education and training are crucial for citizen development, and therefore they ought to have the opportunity to not only discuss but also to shape the future of education. He explained that SEM's role is crucial as an agency that involves citizens, organisations and other stakeholders in local and European-level decision making in sectors such as education.

Minister Justyne Caruana said that the Government's vision is to ensure education excellence. The Ministry for Education is working towards an equitable and modernised education system able to maximise the opportunities afforded by the digital economy and the green transition.

- Making Lifelong Learning and Mobility a Reality for All

Societal, technological, digital, environmental, and economic challenges are increasingly affecting everyday life, including the distribution of jobs and the demand for skills and competences. The high number of career transitions that the average European citizen is expected to go through, coupled with the increase of the retirement age, make lifelong learning and lifelong career guidance, essential for a just transition, as education and skills levels continue to be a fundamental factor in the labour market.

In this context, on **June 17**, SEM and the Ministry for Education held the second online discussion with interested stakeholders on the new Strategic Framework for Education and Training 2030. 33 online participants took an active part in the discussion.

The online session focused on adult learning, reskilling, and upskilling, the quality of guidance systems, and to make lifelong learning for employees more easily accessible.

The panel of experts was composed of Sandra Ebejer (Director, Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes, Ministry for Education), Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino (Pro-Rector, International Development and Quality Assurance Rectorate, University of Malta), Aleks Farrugia (Director, Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability, Ministry for Education).

Issues that were raised by participants during the discussion:

- Offering better quality lifelong learning for all learners, including through ensuring flexibility between different learning pathways in various forms and levels of education and training, as well as validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- To have a learner-centric high-quality education would also mean less focus on textbooks and confinements in classrooms and more outdoor learning in the

early/primary years. Need to focus more on emotional intelligence and integrate STEM education in primary classes.

- Wider upskilling and reskilling training opportunities, including at higher qualification levels and throughout the working life. This would only be possible for employees through employer-employee agreements, also giving the possibility for training during working hours.
- Time has come to focus more on project-based learning rather than us teachers teaching isolated subjects.
- Online learning and flexible working hours allow for further opportunities to upskill and develop potential, giving special attention to issues which particularly affect women.
- More incentives need to be introduced including the full sponsorship of Master's and Doctoral degrees. This will surely make training inclusive irrespective of the financial limitations and other loan-commitments of the participants.
- Flexibility (both in the delivery of sessions as well as in the mode of assessment) is a must in today's context. Covid19 accelerated the speed of these, much required changes in the way teaching and learning is conducted.

- Enhancing Competences and Motivation in the Education Profession

The constantly changing world of education and training, with increasing demands, responsibilities and expectations on the profession and the professionals, have an effect not only on the competences required, but also on teachers' and trainers' wellbeing and the attractiveness of the teaching profession.

Therefore, development of key competences, their validation and the provision of competence-oriented education, training and learning should be supported by establishing good practices for better support of educational staff in their tasks and improving their education, for updating assessment and validation methods and tools, and for introducing new and innovative forms of teaching and learning.

These issues were addressed on **June 24**, during the third online discussion on the new Strategic Framework for Education and Training in which 33 stakeholders participated online.

Panel Members: Joanne Rita Grima (Chief Executive Officer, Institute for Education), Dr Colin Calleja (Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Malta), Emile Vassallo (Director General, Directorate for Educational Services, Ministry for Education).

Issues that were raised by participants during the discussion:

- Support innovation, inclusion, quality and achievement in education and training.
- Care for well-being of teachers, trainers, and educational staff.
- Implementation of policies must involve not only teachers, but parents, guardians and the whole community.
- Increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession.
- Facilitating networking, knowledge sharing and mobility among institutions.
- The services are there, but they should be pushed into schools and not the other way round.
- Experiences abroad for educators increase motivation and gives them the message that they are worth investing in.

- Reinforcing European Higher Education

The online session on **July 1**, with 21 online participants, focused on Higher Education and addressed the actions needed to encourage more work-based learning and enhanced cooperation between institutions and employers, while fully respecting the holistic approach of higher education and the autonomy of higher education institutions.

Panel Members: Dr Roseanne Cuschieri (Chief Executive Officer, Malta Further and Higher Education Authority), Dr Mario Cardona (Deputy Principal, Technology and Applied Sciences (VPET), Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology), Prof. Tanya Sammut Bonnici (Pro Rector, Strategic Planning & Enterprise, University of Malta).

Issues raised by participants during the discussion:

- Education should not be job-centred but person-centred. What motivates one to study should not be the prospect of having a good job, or financial gain, but about quality of life, learning for the sake of learning, and life enrichment.

- In the last decade, the notion of upskilling and reskilling has been addressed from an economic perspective (education for employability). Education is about individuals and jobs. So, the primary aim of lifelong learning should be that of making better persons, not better jobs.
 - As a nation we need to invest more in STEAM education from as early as Primary schooling. We need to move away from textbook-based teaching and present more experiential learning. This will nurture a cohort of students who will address the needs of our country in the future.
 - As a country we need to encourage more students to apply for Master's and Doctoral degrees. This will address Targets 5 and 6. One way of encouraging more studies to further their studies is through a full sponsorship.
 - Need for more incentives for more people to attend courses and provide better quality teaching and learning.
 - Need for training in soft skills for people who are already in their job such as integrity, dependability, effective communication, open-mindedness, and teamwork.
- Supporting the Green and Digital Transitions in and through Education and Training

The cross-cutting priorities on the EU's agenda for the next decade - the green and digital transitions - were discussed during the fifth and last session held on **July 8**, with 18 online participants.

The Council Resolution on European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and Beyond (2021-2030) establishes that both the transition to an environmentally sustainable, circular and climate-neutral economy as well as a more digital world, will have significant social, economic and employment impacts.

This is to ensure that all citizens obtain the necessary knowledge, competences, skills and attitudes to cope with these changes, for a socially just transformation of the EU.

Panel members: Grazio Grixti (Director, Directorate for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills, Ministry for Education), Edwin Zammit (Deputy Director for

Innovation, R&I office, Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology), Melchisedech Zarb (Head of Project Design, Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools).

Issues raised by participants:

- Education for Sustainable Development is very relevant for the green transition and to aid for a change in behaviour which is required to a positive environmental change and to find a balance between Environment, Economy and Society. This is important for all learners, both formal and informal.
- A lot of kids in the present generation will most likely have 'green jobs', and now they are not being sufficiently trained to have the skills needed for sustainable development in schools.
- With regards to digital literacy, training should be extended to all stakeholders in schools (including subject coordinators etc..) as a lot of them still have a very narrow-minded definition of the use of technology in schools, especially post-Covid.
- An important consideration in all areas of the curriculum is processing and content. Processing must be pointed out and taught for it teaches the learners how to think. Educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of learning starts off from the lowest level of learning, that is to remember what you understand, apply, analyse, evaluate, and finally create.
- It is important that when developing strategies, stakeholders (State, Independent and Church schools) are consulted not only individually but together, so that resources are maximised, and the different players collaborate for better outcomes.

2. Summer School - 'The future of Europe with and for Children'

In order to reach out to and involve children in the Conference, a series of 26 interactive sessions for children attending the government-run summer school - 'Skolasajf' - were held in **July and August** in 26 centres across Malta and Gozo, reaching some 260 children aged 9-12 years.

Titled, 'Building Tomorrow... Today', the sessions allowed children to engage in a discussion and come up with ideas on how they would like to see their own future as European citizens.

To facilitate the discussion a poster was designed specifically for the purpose, portraying in the following four themes: child-friendly societies; healthy lives; education for life, and protection for security. The poster included blank spaces where the respective class facilitator could write the children's ideas.

At the end of the sessions, the filled-in posters were collected, and the ideas were compiled together under different themes and headings.

The conclusions and recommendations of the activities were presented at an activity held on September 2, by two children to the Minister within the Office of the Prime Minister, Carmelo Abela and the Minister for Education Justyne Caruana.

The children's responses highlighted their aspirations to see the value of RESPECT practiced and safeguarded for them to have a better future. While children wish to be respected and protected, they also claimed that they are ready to respect others so that they can live in a society in which acceptance and equality are practised and promoted.

The full set of conclusions has been uploaded on the multilingual digital platform.

3. Stakeholder Discussions - 'The Europe I would like to see'

A series of three discussions with stakeholders in specific fields of interest were held as follows: September 16, on a European Union for Health; September 30, on the European Way of Life, and October 14, on the green and digital transitions for a fairer society.

The discussions involved a panel of around eight participants (physically present at a chosen venue) discussing the respective topic with a journalist from the national broadcaster. The panel of experts in the field were joined by online participants from different backgrounds, but mostly related to the topic being discussed.

The outcome of each of the discussions will be reported on the multilingual digital platform.

- A European Union for Health

The discussion, held on **September 16** saw the participation of a number of experts who work in different areas in the health sector.

The panel was composed of Gertrude Buttigieg (Malta Health Network), Dr Stefan Buttigieg (Digital Health Malta), Daniela Calleja-Bitar (Richmond Foundation), Dr Chris Barbara (Director of the Pathology Department, Mater Dei Hospital), Dr John Cachia (Commissioner for Mental Health), Samantha Pace-Gasan (Commissioner for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) and, Michelle Galea (Entitlement Unit, Ministry for Health).

Given the wide representations of sectors in the field of health, a number of themes were put for discussion namely, health protection and prevention, the digitalisation of health systems, the treatment and cure of transborder diseases, modern equipment to address future crises like the pandemic, the strengthening of coordination between health authorities in Member States to address common health threats.

The following were the main interventions by the panel and participants:

- Health should be the underlying consideration for all policies and mental health should be mainstreamed in all EU policies.
- Health policies should always have the patient at the core of decision-making.
- Need for more investment in upskilling of health professionals and workers.
- Citizens need to have more access to digital health, not only to equipment, but also to knowledge about available services and software. Teaching them how to access and use such services is important.
- Patients need to know their rights, explained to them in a simple manner.
- The short-term and long-term effects of the pandemic on children and minors need to be given more attention and proper studies and actions need to be commissioned and taken.
- Introduction of the rights of access and choice of treatment in other countries especially in the fields of disability and rare diseases.
- NGOs should be given more resources to reach out to patients where they live as in their fields of specialisation, they are best placed to assist patients with specific health conditions.

- Protecting and Promoting European Values

The second discussion in the series was held in Gozo in **September 30** involving a panel of speakers representing different sectors. The panel members were Dr Sean Zammit (Association for Gozitan Employees in Malta), Mario Borg (Gozo Regional Development Authority), Eric Grech (Gozo University Group), Daniel Borg (Gozo Business Chamber), MEP Josianne Cutajar (S&D), Dr Samuel Azzopardi (Member of the Committee of the Regions) and, Dr Elena Grech (Head of the European Commission Representation in Malta).

The discussion focused on the way forward for the European Union in consolidating the values of democracy, solidarity equality and social justice. The main interventions were the following:

- The EU should have only one value - tolerance. This applies not only to divergent opinions but encompasses all aspects of inclusiveness in all its forms. This also means the mainstreaming of the application of the concept of the common good in all that it does. Including all minorities.
- The rights of EU citizens are to be safeguarded in practice, not on paper, so that these truly result in concrete benefits for citizens.
- The economy should not be the aim in itself of EU policies, but the economy should facilitate the achievement of the wellbeing and quality of life of all.
- Regions and islands that are at the periphery of the EU are disadvantaged more than others. However, the benefits of EU membership may result in bringing out the potential of such regions when it comes to more and better opportunities of the green and digital transitions. To achieve this, the EU cannot apply a 'one-size-fits-all' approach but has to consider the peculiarities of different regions.
- EU citizens need to see the value of solidarity implemented in practice, such as in tackling migration.

- The Future of Work for a Fairer Society

The discussion held on **October 14**, focused on how the green and digital transitions have an impact and result in a fairer society.

The discussion saw a panel of speakers representing the employment and social sectors: Liam Axisa (National Youth Council), Josef Bugeja (General Workers Union), Joseph Farrugia (Malta Employers' Association), Esmeralda Micallef Zarafa (Lino Spiteri Foundation), Alfred Gixti (Foundation for Social Welfare Services), Josef Vella (Union Haddiema Magħqudin - Voice of the Workers) and Diane Vella Muscat (Department for Industrial and Employment Relations).

The outcome of the discussion may be summed up as follows:

- Workers need the necessary training to be prepared for the green and digital transition. Innovation and quality are two important elements for this transition, whilst guaranteeing social protection and working conditions.
- Companies and businesses should work towards a mentality that puts upskilling and reskilling on the same level of the upgrading of infrastructure and operating systems.
- Future jobs must contain a high element of flexibility in all aspects, except in working conditions.
- Education systems must be geared towards skilling in technology, given that 65% of future jobs will envisage such skills.
- While remote working is applied both for the public and private sectors, the rights related to health and security must be safeguarded. The monitoring of workers must focus on the work itself rather than on the employees, on productivity and not on what the employee is doing remotely.
- The future of work in the EU must focus on the person. Technology is there only to serve the person and not itself. This would ensure that workers are not exploited.

4. European Researchers' Night - 'Sowing Seeds'

This event was held in Malta on **September 24-26** with the theme, 'Sowing Seeds'. SEM's participation, in collaboration with the European Commission Representation in Malta, targeted secondary level students and youths through four performances on the European Green Deal. Following the performance, SEM officials discussed with youths their contribution to build a greener future and the EU's initiatives for the green transition.

The main message of the sessions was that the European Green Deal will only be successful when we work together to transform the way we live, work, consume energy and move from one place to another. During the sessions, children, and adults alike, were asked to give their views on how they would like to see Europe in the Future when it comes to the environment and climate.

The following were the main contributions:

- Vehicles should run on hydrogen, not on batteries. The disposal of lithium-ion batteries still damages the environment, apart from serious issues related to the extraction of lithium.
- Plant more trees, grass, and flowers.
- Create more open spaces, nature parks and nature reserves.
- Hold politicians personally liable for the damage they do to the environment, e.g., when building roads and tunnels, they must see that the environment incurs the least possible damage and resultant materials are disposed of and recycled properly.
- Introduce new and more stringent laws for big companies to reduce emissions and waste.
- Ban the production and use of plastic completely.
- Every city shall have its own powerhouse to increase energy efficiency.
- Replace the use of toilet paper to water.
- Initiate awareness campaigns to respect one another and the environment.
- Use AI more to replace human activity that pollutes.
- For every car that is manufactured, a bicycle or a scooter should be produced.
- Promote the use of bicycles by making cities more bicycle-friendly rather than car-friendly.
- Give more incentives to schools to take action for climate.

5. Freshers' Week on Campus

Between **October 4 and 8**, the Conference was promoted to university students On Campus in collaboration with the European Commission Representation in Malta. Freshers' Week represents the opening of the University scholastic year and serves as an event where various entities, including student organisations, can engage with students to familiarise them with aspects of students' life and students' organisations. In this regard, students will be invited to share their ideas on the future of Europe, via an idea tree.

6. 'Migration Face to Face' - Open Dialogue

Migration is one of the most pressing issues the European Union has been facing over the years. The issue has therefore gained a lot of media attention, resulting in diverse perspectives and opinions among citizens.

To this end, on **November 16**, SEM teamed up with the European Parliament Liaison Office in Malta and the NGO 'VisMedNet' to organise an open discussion about legal and humanitarian aspects of migration.

The programme dealt with safe and legal routes as well as the media narrative of migration, with a special focus on narratives from Nigeria. Furthermore, there was an input from 'The Real Picture' - an Erasmus plus project that promotes social justice and aims at informing citizens about the reality and danger migrants face.

Participants had the opportunity to get different perspectives on the issue of migration, facilitate exchange and express their points of view and to come up with constructive ideas.

7. Going Local - 'The Europe I would like to live in'

A series of open discussions in different localities in Malta and Gozo was initiated in December 2021 to take the future of Europe for discussion in different localities in Malta and Gozo.

The events were promoted through the agency's social media channels, stories and posts by a popular media personality who also moderated the discussions and mailshots to organisations in the respective locality and neighbouring localities.

- Discussion - Southeast Malta

22 representatives of youth organisations, others working in different areas of social inclusion and cultural organisations, participated in the first of such local debates, held in Żejtun on **December 14**, with the participation of the Minister within the Office of the Prime Minister, Carmelo Abela and SEM CEO Mandy Falzon.

The following were the main interventions:

- The EU should always adopt a 'bottom-up' approach in its decision-making processes.
- Reduce the bureaucracy in the processes of accessing EU funds. Regional funds for projects in localities should be administered directly by local authorities rather than being centralised in national authorities.
- The EU should invest in youth centres built purposely for youths to learn new skills.
- Funding schemes of small monetary value should be available for small organisations to serve them to gain experience in applying for and managing bigger projects.
- The EU should allocate more funds for the social sectors, directly addressed to help individuals and families live a better quality of life.
- More importance should be given to vocational education and training by providing training in trades and crafts, for those who would otherwise leave the educational system without either academic qualifications or VET skills.
- Support to organisations involved in youth activism to implement youth exchanges as this would highly benefit the younger generations.
- Addressing the issue of underpaid jobs would ultimately address the problem of rising racism.

- Discussion - Central Malta

22 representatives of civil society organisations took part in the second discussion of the series, 'The Europe I would like to live in', which took place in Mosta on **January 25**, 2022.

The participants in this discussion spoke on a wide range of topics:

- The environment and climate change must be a priority for every European for Europe to have a better future. For that to happen, we need come together as one community working towards common goals.
- Integration must be a priority for the EU, to bring out the beauty of diversity and multiculturalism in Europe. Therefore, more meetings that bring together people from different cultures, should be organised.
- The EU must be more realistic when it comes to diversity and should respect the diverse cultures and traditions of different countries. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach should not be the standard to follow, as in its nature, the EU was established to act in unity and not in uniformity. When drafting the Habitats and Birds Directive, among others, this principle was correctly applied through the introduction of derogations specific to different countries, reflecting the diversity of their cultures and traditions. This is no longer the case. In this sense, the European Union should not treat small countries in a discriminatory way, merely because of their size.
- The 'one-size-fits-all' attitude is vexing many people. For example, in the adoption of the Single-Use Plastics Directive, the preliminary studies should have taken into account the country's infrastructure and resources, and how these can affect different people in different situations. Large companies and countries cannot be treated just like small companies and countries, by applying to the latter what applies to the former.
- In the EU, young people coming from difficult and disadvantaged backgrounds should be given more opportunities to voice their ideas and opinions. This is how social inclusion should be practised.
- The EU should invest more in health, particularly in mental health services for youths.
- The investment that the EU must make in health should be through concrete and financial aid to NGOs, bringing the state get closer to the patients as they are closer to them than the state, while also being more knowledgeable of the needs of specific diseases and conditions. In this way the state would save a lot of money, while NGOs have the necessary resources to work with.
- In an ageing society, the EU must pay more attention to the elderly and their needs.

- Discussion - Gozo

The third in a series of discussions on the Future of Europe was held in Xewkija in Gozo on **February 25**, 2022, with 25 representatives from the Gozo community, namely the Gozo Business Chamber, Europe Direct Gozo, the Gozo Regional Committee, the Gozo Regional Development Authority, NGOs representing the environment, cultural heritage, young people and the LGBTI+ community.

SEM and the Ministry in the Office of the Prime Minister hosted the discussion to enable people from different sectors to take part and put forward their opinions, ideas and suggestions on different aspects they would like the European Union to address in the coming years. As remarked by Carmelo Abela, Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, in his pre-recorded intervention, by having such discussions in Gozo, Gozitans can present the challenges they face daily and provide their own aspirations for the future of Europe. "No one is in a better position than you to speak about the challenges and opportunities faced by the Gozitan communities in the daily life", said Minister Abela.

CEO of SEM Mandy Falzon opened the discussion by remarking that the main aim of this Conference is to provide a space where citizens can voice their daily challenges and put forward any ideas and suggestions on the future of Europe. Citizens have the opportunity to actively participate in this Conference not only by attending activities such as this, but also by providing their feedback through a Multilingual Digital Platform developed specifically for the Conference. A common sentiment among all those present was that the European Union needs to heed more the concerns and difficulties faced by islands and island regions by moving away from a 'one size fits all' approach. Instead, it should focus on an approach that caters for the needs and realities of the respective regions across the Union, especially insular regions such as Gozo.

The ideas and suggestions that were raised during this discussion reflected this common sentiment of participants:

- The European Union needs to be more grounded in its approach towards regions. The European Parliament, as the only European Institution elected by citizens, should be further strengthened to ensure that the citizens and the realities of the regions they inhabit are continuously represented at a European level.

- More needs to be done by the European Union to counter-react the insularity of regions such as Gozo especially with respect to regional development and economic growth.
- Economic development in Gozo should no longer be measured by the Gross Domestic Product per capita, as this does not provide a realistic picture of the situation. This stems for example from the fact that companies in Gozo are registered in Malta and therefore, their profits are also registered in Malta. The Regional Development Authority in Gozo is currently undertaking an exercise aimed at addressing this issue so that development in Gozo can be compared more realistically with that in Malta and with the average in the European Union.
- The European Union should allow for specific concessions on VAT to be available to regions. Such a concession has already been given to islands in Greece to adopt a different VAT system from that of the mainland.
- Need for genuine consultation of regional stakeholders with the national Government when preparing plans for large-scale, national projects to be submitted to the EU. The plans for the projects related to the Recovery and Resilience Facility were mentioned as a typical example. The European Union should introduce a mechanism that ensures effective and genuine dialogue between regional stakeholders and national authorities prior to submission and approval of national plans to the EU.
- In the field of youth, the European Union should seek to mainstream youth policy across all policy areas to ensure that youths are not left behind. In line with this, decisions-makers at all levels need to not only hear the voices of young people but actively listen and act on their opinions and ideas.
- Small regional youth NGOs feel that they are marginalised by the EU especially in comparison to larger regional organisations. It is suggested that a European framework composed solely of small youth organisations is set up. This would allow them to voice their common concerns and interests and ensure that their voice is not lost among the larger organisations.
- The European Union should continue to promote and incentivise small scale regional initiatives and activities that involve the participation of citizens. Through such initiatives the EU can have a direct and tangible impact on the daily lives of its citizens.
- To ensure that the heritage and traditions of regions are not lost, the European Union should increase funding opportunities through small funding schemes that focus on Vocational Education and Training (VET) for the promotion of artisanal work.

8. Youths discuss the Future of Europe - Youth Brunch

A group of 25 young people came together to exchange their views and suggestions on the future of the European Union at a business brunch hosted by SEM and the National Youth Council (NYC) on **March 5**, 2022.

Present for this discussion were President of NYC Liam Axisa, who also chaired the discussion, CEO of SEM Mandy Falzon and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, Carmelo Abela. The participants were divided into small groups around different tables where they had an intra-table discussion on the following topics within the context of the future Europe: environment, security and migration, EU international relations, connectivity among youths in Member States and Rule of Law.

This was then followed by an open discussion between the participants on different tables during which they discussed the future of the European Union's relationship with Russia, and security and defence of the Union's borders. Other topics that were touched upon include the freedom of the media and youth activism.

A common sentiment expressed among the youths present was that diplomacy and negotiations should always be at the forefront of the European Union's foreign policy. This is especially within the context of the Union's relationship with Russia. As Russia is Europe's neighbour and significant efforts need to be undertaken to not jeopardise any future relations. Minister Abela concurred with the youths on their points and emphasised that diplomacy must always prevail.

On this point, youths added that there must a distinction between Russia and the regime of its President. The European Union should focus on sanctions that target Putin, and those closest to him, whilst ensuring that the Russian community is rallied against their regime and in turn brought closer to the EU. This would ensure that Europe's relationship with Russia is preserved and continues to thrive in the future.

On the topics of security and defence, youths present had different opinions on the approach that the European Union should take. Some youths felt that the EU should develop its own European Army, to ensure strategic autonomy and move away from dependence on the United States of America for defence. However, others expressed that by building a European Army, the European Union would be contradicting its core values of peace and unity.

In light of the increasing number of Ukrainians seeking refuge in the neighbouring Member States, those present expressed that they wish for the EU to seek a long-term strategy on all types of migration. Such a long-term strategy would provide a harmonised plan for all Member States that takes into consideration the integration of migrants into European cultures and economy. Minister Abela here added that such a long-term strategy is difficult to achieve at a Union level due to the diverging views and realities of the different Member States.

Separate from the European Union's external matters, participants presented their suggestions on internal matters such as the media. Young people present expressed that they would like to see a reform of the media across Europe. Such a reform would seek to make media across Europe independent and autonomous, free from any intervention of states.

Youths present also expressed their concerns that their voices are at times ignored by decision makers. Going forward, young people want to see that their voices are not dismissed, and that awareness is increased on initiatives that allow young people to voice their opinions. CEO of SEM Mandy Falzon, stressed that young Europeans have an important role to play in shaping the future of the Europe and that their voices deserve to be heard at all levels of the Union.

Minister Abela concluded the discussion by thanking those present for their inspiring interventions and as the leaders of the present and the future he encouraged them to continue voicing their ideas and suggestions to shape a better future for themselves and for Europe.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, citizens were indeed interested in sharing their views on what they would like to see happening in the EU and that the Conference should not be just a one-time exercise but an integral part of the EU's decision-making process.

The recommendations put forward by citizens are indeed a reminder to never stop listening to what citizens have to say. The message was clear that more effort should be made by all institutions to ensure that there is adequate communication and follow up of what happens with such ideas because citizens are and should always be at the core of each decision taken.