Welcome Speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs
Dr George W. Vella
53rd Anna Lindh Foundation Board of Governors
8 March 2017

Madame President,

Excellencies,

It is indeed a pleasure for me to welcome you to Malta at the 53rd Anna Lindh Foundation Board of Governors meeting. So many familiar faces round the table. It is only logical, as a testimony to our Mediterranean vocation, that we host such a significant meeting during Malta’s EU Presidency. This all the more so following the highly successful ALF MED Forum that was held in Malta in October 2016.

I was pleased to learn of the fruitful discussions held during the Union for the Mediterranean Senior Officials’ Meeting that was held yesterday. Regrettably, I was unable to address you in that forum as I was asked to chair two EU Meetings that were held in Brussels yesterday. I am nonetheless satisfied with the outcome and wish to thank all of you for also having contributed to those deliberations.

I continue to actively support the enrichment of synergies between initiatives, such as the Union for the Mediterranean, the Anna Lindh Foundation, the Western Mediterranean Dialogue and the League of Arab States, 5+5 Med. Their distinct mandates are a complimentary component of laying the foundations of a promising future for the Euro-Mediterranean region.

As the region’s primary reference point for intercultural dialogue, the Anna Lindh Foundation has spent more than a decade investing in people-to-people cooperation across the Mediterranean region. In the face of unprecedented levels of violence and extremism in the region, as well as cultural misconceptions that have evolved over time, the Anna Lindh Foundation has risen as a beacon of light across the Mediterranean.

It is only through enhanced dialogue between the key actors that the Mediterranean narrative can be changed.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Malta has been a staunch supporter of the Anna Lindh Foundation since its inception. We consider soft security tools – foremost among which inter-cultural dialogue between civil societies – of utmost importance.

Excellencies,

We have had the opportunity to work in close collaboration with the Anna Lindh Foundation during an 18-month preparation process leading to the MED FORUM gathering, which has been a defining event and a reference point for the Maltese Presidency in terms of bringing civil society and youth dialogue to the heart of the policy debates.

The ALF MED FORUM has produced several multipliers, and presented “A Blueprint for Moving Beyond Extremism”. The Forum also served to build consensus on a number of sectors for the Anna Lindh Foundation’s renewed role as a central institution for intercultural dialogue. These are cities, media, education, mobility and entrepreneurship, and actors such
as youth, women and artists. The launch of “Young Mediterranean Voices” during Med Forum by the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini represented a major milestone as it provides a platform for enhanced debate amongst youth and effective dialogue. We would like our institutions and networks to partner in this central initiative for connecting youth agency across the region.

The large number of active participants present at the Forum was inspiring and encouraging to say the least. The global outreach and visibility was impressive, and provided an important platform for the Foundation’s future action.

Excellencies,

I also wish to express my appreciation for the work carried out by President Madame Guigou, Ambassador Atallah and the ALF Secretariat as well as the Advisory Council, for their relentless efforts and work. The essential role of the ALF must be duly recognised as a unique resource, based on a true North/South partnership, championing intercultural dialogue across its diverse network of regional actors and partners.

The excellent relationship between Malta and the Anna Lindh Foundation holds proof that this renewed partnership delivers. We look forward to continuing this partnership based on understanding and shared ideals.

This ties in very well with one of the main priorities of the ongoing Malta EU Presidency – the “Mediterranean”, together with two other priorities, Migration and Maritime. The “EU Neighbourhood Mid-Term Review”, is also a key feature of our Presidency, which will provide a policy focus on intercultural dialogue and an Institutional milestone for regional actors.

Excellencies,

Increased people-to-people contacts have a crucial role to play in consolidating stability, particularly in the Mediterranean, where, despite their differences, people still communicate on a human level, in many sectors of society for various reasons, especially today with the use of modern media and methods of communication.

In the forthcoming months, we intend to follow up on the outcomes of the October 2016 Med Forum of the Anna Lindh Foundation, with a view to ensure that this legacy continues.

Our aims should be directed at deepening the partnership with the Foundation in the main domains identified in the Forum as well as through a strategic focus on bringing “Mediterranean thinking” a Mediterranean mentality and approach to the global issues of today. The cooperation now in place with the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC) will be key to this, including a joint annual event on cultural relations that can become a central benchmarking moment in the Euro-Med dialogue agenda.

It is our responsibility to develop and deliver a powerful message in favour of enhanced dialogue.

Promoting the culture of solidarity and unity in diversity, throughout the term of our Presidency is very much in line with the mandate and the work programme of the ALF.
Excellencies,

Engagement with members of civil society is essential in forging the future of the Mediterranean, and youth must be placed at the heart of possible solutions to the pressing challenges we face today.

The youth equation is a crucial factor in actively creating alternative narratives to the apparent lack of prospects, which plague various parts of our region. It is invigorating to discover that the outcomes of the MED Forum have assisted in placing youth at the centre of policy-making and have also resonated with the youth of our region. I would therefore like to reiterate the importance of focusing on youth-led action as a fundamental component of addressing the root causes of radicalisation and extremism. Youth are usually the victims of these phenomena. We want youth to be the ones who defy the destructive tendencies of these movements towards the bottom of human decadence.

At the 5+5 Dialogue meeting for Foreign Ministers on the 28th October 2016, the youth sector expressed their support of the large-scale projects advocated by the ALF through the MED Forum, that was held a few days earlier. It is also encouraging to note that this effort, translates into projects such as the Young Mediterranean Voices.

I also appreciate that the recurrent theme on acknowledging youth as a driving force towards a better future for the Euro-Mediterranean region, was a central theme at the Second UfM Regional Forum, which took place in Barcelona last January.

Throughout these events, there seems to be an unequivocal consensus that Youth should be given prominence in the policy making of the countries of the Euro-Med region.

Excellencies,

Allow me to express Malta’s commitment to consolidate what has been achieved so far.

In the course of its EU Presidency, Malta is reinforcing its historic vocation as a catalyst of an innovative vision on the Mediterranean. We stand ready to take concrete action in promoting mutual understanding, together with the Anna Lindh Foundation.

We need to provide an antidote to the lack of prospects, and sheer misleading doctrines and ideals spread in the process of radicalisation. This is one of the unprecedented challenges in our region. The tangible progress on migration, at the Summit of EU Heads of State and the Valletta Summit follow-up SOM in February 2017, is a significant step forward in the right direction to be complimented by dialogue and understanding between our peoples.

Against all odds, there is an alternative narrative to be promoted, and we are adamant on collaborating with our valued partners within the ALF framework to forge a brighter future for the Mediterranean and its peoples.

I would like to wholeheartedly extend my wishes to all participants for a productive exchange of views at today’s meeting of the ALF Board of Governors Meeting which is aimed at advocating the role of the Foundation within the nexus of Mediterranean regional initiatives. Having in mind the strategic focus of today’s Meeting of the Board’s “Working Together Towards 2025” programme, let me underline the importance and urgency of unity to further reinvigorate and strengthen our shared Euro-Med vocation. The Foundation has proved its capacity to act, to create a real north/south partnership, and turn intercultural dialogue into
tangible results. As Member States, we now need to collectively step up, and through action demonstrate our political courage to pursue our common goals.

Prior to leaving you to the constructive discussions ahead, I wanted to share one final thought.

Last October, I emphasized that “We can build bridges, but we also need to spur and convince people on both sides to cross these bridges”. The time has now come for us to walk across the bridge together.

Thank You.