

Good afternoon.

I am happy to be here to share my thoughts at this PES and Rainbow Rose event held here at the Committee of the Regions.

Indeed, I am proud that our political family is deeply committed to the widening of the scope of equality legislation and protection against all sorts of discrimination and hatred;

And that we engaged at both the European and national levels, delivering some of the most comprehensive and forward-thinking developments in this field over the years, even in unfavourable settings.

Remember the steady developments that we managed to implement in the various European countries over the years with regard to gender and LGBTI equality.

The PES is strong in its fight against sexism including gender-based violence.

We are equally strong in the fight against all sorts of discrimination against minorities, and that of course includes LGBTI people as any other group.

In today's challenging times, Europe – *and indeed the world* – needs more than ever to hear our voice and witness our impact.

In my view, we have no moment to waste;

And these events need to serve as a call for action and a space for us to develop concrete plans to safeguard what we have achieved, and further advance the principle of equality in every social transaction.

It is with this thinking that I have worked as a Minister over the past three and a half years, turning around unfavourable public opinion, thanks to a strong partnership with LGBTIQ civil society, and also thanks to the political leadership of our Prime Minister, Dr Joseph Muscat.

Indeed, when we were elected to power in March 2013, Malta had just introduced divorce for heterosexual couples.

In the meantime, our country was still fighting against the rights of a trans woman at the European Court of Human Rights who had changed her legal gender and wanted to marry her male partner;

This in spite of the fact that she had already won the right to marry in two national courts; and

In spite of the fact that this right had already been extended to trans people by the European Court of Human Rights in 2002.

These two points alone should illustrate how socially conservative Malta was just three and a half years ago.

However, that did not hold us back from aiming high in terms of equality and protection against discrimination.

We quickly moved a proposal to allow trans persons to marry their heterosexual partners, and reached an out of court settlement with the trans woman in question.

Incidentally I'm happy to note that not only is she now married to her husband,

but they are in the process of jointly adopting a child.

We subsequently proposed a Civil Unions Act on a par with marriage, providing all couples with the right to enter a civil union, recognised foreign marriages of same-sex partners, and provided these couples with the ability to apply for adoption.

We changed our Constitution to include sexual orientation and gender identity as grounds of anti-discrimination, for the first time with a unanimous parliamentary vote on LGBTIQ related issues.

We held the IDAHO Forum along with the Swedish Government, and later other events

with the Council of Europe and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to promote the universal applicability of human rights to all.

Then, we advanced the Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act which entirely changed the situation of trans, genderqueer and intersex people, and Malta embarked on an exchange with other States that were keen to learn from our experience.

Indeed, following the passage of this law, that once again was adopted unanimously, anyone can change the legal gender without any medical or surgical interventions, while

intersex persons are protected against unwanted and unnecessary interventions on their bodies.

We then adopted an LGBTIQ action plan, and are currently implementing it.

We have policies in the fields of education and prison with regard to trans, gender variant and intersex people.

We also have gender neutral toilets across all government institutions including all ministries, parliament and the law courts.

Pathologisation related to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression is now a thing of the past.

Likewise through another Act, we have criminalised conversion practices against LGBTIQ persons.

I know that this is a tall order.

But I referred to all of this to state that change is possible and achievable when we show determination, explain our goals to the electorate, and work things out in the best way possible.

We want to bring this same energy to our EU Presidency starting in little more than a month.

We want to ensure that Europe brings out its ‘social soul’ and is most relevant to the citizens, especially the most marginal groups.

Our programme therefore contains a number of events in this regard building on what was achieved by our Trio partners.

On 3rd February we will hold a conference tackling violence against women and gender-based violence.

On 23rd February we will then hold a Ministerial conference on LGBTIQ equality, promoting partnership between governments and civil society, and also promoting the mainstreaming of LGBTIQ

equality by highlighting the fields of education, healthcare and safety.

I hope that many of you will be able to join us for one or the other event.

During the CSW we will be holding yet another side event to address LGBTI women's discrimination.

Later in the year, around IDAHO – the international day against homophobia and transphobia – we will build on the work of the Dutch Presidency and mobilise visibility of LGBTIQ issues through the raising of the rainbow flag on EU institutional buildings and permanent representations.

We will also hold an exhibition at the Justus Lipsius building and later at the BOZAR around the Day and leading to the IDAHO Forum, that this year will be organised by Belgium.

All this, without forgetting the important role that we need to play in the advancement of the Horizontal Anti-Discrimination Directive amongst other initiatives.

We are doing this to achieve a momentum for concentrated progress.

Of course, no Presidency can do it alone.

Europe needs action for change on all fronts and we all have a role to play.

The Committee of the Regions needs to play a role, the Parliament, the Commission, the Council ... we all need to put our part into it.

Only then can we replicate the sort of landslide change that our citizens and marginalised people across Europe deserve so much.

Thank you.