

New Year's Reception 2026

Awarding of the Voltaire Prize for Tolerance, International Understanding, and Respect for Diversity

Acceptance speech | Recipient Dr. Haci Cevik

Professor Günther,
Dr. Friede Springer,
Dear colleagues, dear friends, and distinguished guests,

Standing here today and accepting this award is something I still find quite hard to fully put into words.

I carry the same name as my grandfather, who left his village in the late 1960s and came to Germany as a so-called “guest worker.” He worked here for many years under very difficult conditions. Sadly, he passed away in the early 1990s, before I ever had the chance to meet him. I grew up listening to stories about his life, about migration, labor, and endurance. So standing here today, carrying his name and receiving such a meaningful academic award, is deeply moving for me.

Receiving an award named after Voltaire, a thinker who placed reason, critique, and tolerance at the center of public life, has a special meaning for me. I accept this award as a Kurdish academic whose work focuses on a people who have been forced to live under conditions of war, displacement, and political pressure for decades, and who has personally experienced the consequences of doing such research.

Migration is one of the most urgent and contested issues of our time. The rise of the far right and the growing hostility toward those labeled as “others” is not something abstract for me. It is part of my daily life, as well as the core of my academic work. Throughout my career, I have tried to understand marginalized identities, those pushed to the edges of society. Migration has always been central to this effort.

For me, migration is never just about crossing borders. It is a deep social and political process that transforms both those who move and the societies they arrive in. Trying to understand these transformations, and to make them visible, has been one of the main motivations of my life.

My academic journey began with research on the Kurdish community, of which I am also a part. Today, Kurds are the largest stateless people in the world, divided by artificial borders across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. For nearly a century, they have lived under conditions of conflict and repression. I was born in a Kurdish village in Central Anatolia, a region where Kurdish communities were forcibly displaced centuries ago and which today is one of the strongholds of Turkish nationalism. Studying Kurdish identity was not only an academic interest for me; it was a way of understanding my own history and existence.

I followed the migration routes of Kurds from Central Anatolia to different parts of Europe. My research focused on the social and especially political transformations these communities experienced after migration. At that time, under very difficult political and financial conditions, and with the support of my supervisor, Dr. Yücel Demirer, who later lost his position as a peace

academic, I conducted fieldwork in Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland. I wanted to understand how migrants relate to their identities, because these relationships shape both the irreversible changes within migrant communities and the integration processes in host societies.

One key finding stayed with me: in societies with stronger democratic traditions and less political pressure, Kurdish communities are able to build a healthier relationship with their language, culture, and identity. This, in turn, strengthens their belief in a more tolerant and inclusive society. My thesis was later published as a book by İletişim Publishing House in Turkey, becoming the first academic study based on scientific methodology focusing specifically on Kurds from Central Anatolia.

At the same time, doing research on Kurdish identity has always come with a cost. Over the years, I faced multiple groundless legal cases because of my work. In political systems built around a single dominant identity, critical research is easily criminalized. Despite having all the formal qualifications, I was repeatedly pushed out of academic positions due to political pressure.

As authoritarianism intensified in Turkey, I eventually realized that continuing an academic career there was no longer possible. At that point, migration stopped being only something I studied and became something I lived. Like millions of others over the past sixty years, I decided to migrate to Germany, hoping for a space with more academic freedom. Much like my grandfather's journey decades earlier, this was the beginning of a very difficult period.

In Germany, while trying to rebuild my life and find work suited to my education, I also struggled to complete my PhD. My doctoral research focused on another highly stigmatized group: Syrian refugees in Turkey. I studied their experiences of discrimination, identity struggles, and social exclusion. I documented how early public tolerance slowly turned into hostility, how refugees were pushed into informal labor, and how deeply this affected their sense of belonging. I completed this work largely outside academia, while navigating the realities of survival as a newly arrived migrant. For my wife and me, the early years were extremely difficult.

During this time, I worked at a refugee center, where I had the opportunity to work with unaccompanied refugee minors. Watching their daily transformation was a powerful experience. What stayed with me most was the hope in their eyes. Despite everything they had experienced, they believed in the possibility of a better future. Their hope strengthened my own belief in the values of reason, dignity, and critique that thinkers like Voltaire stood for.

In 2024, I finally began my postdoctoral research at Humboldt University, hosted by Professor Gökçe Yurdakul and supported by the Einstein Foundation. These past two years have been among the most meaningful of my life. After nearly a decade of working different jobs and doing academic work at night, I experienced what it means to focus entirely on research. Through my publications and conference work, I truly felt what academic freedom can look like.

This may sound like a very personal story, but I know it is not unique. Across the world, many scholars are forced to migrate because their research or identities conflict with political power. Over the last two decades, migration routes have increasingly become academic routes as well. As a Kurdish academic from Turkey, I know I share this experience with many others.

Even so, it is not easy to stay hopeful in a world that often feels like it is moving away from the ideals of reason and tolerance. My position at Humboldt University will end in two months, and once again I face uncertainty. Still, I remain committed to the idea that knowledge, critique, and dialogue matter. I will continue my work, believing in the Enlightenment ideals that Voltaire defended: reason over fear, critique over silence, and coexistence over exclusion.

That is why I accept this award not only in my own name, but on behalf of all scholars who continue to produce knowledge under pressure and who still believe in a more rational, tolerant, and just world.

Finally, I would like to thank Professor Aileen Edele and Professor Pauline Endres de Oliveira for nominating me for this award, and Professor Jürgen Mackert for supporting me during my early

years in Germany. I also thank all my colleagues who have supported me along the way. Most importantly, I thank my wife, Ezgi, who has shared every difficulty of this journey with me. I dedicate this award to my sons, Roni and Dewran, with the hope that they will grow up in a world shaped not by fear and exclusion, but by reason, tolerance, and the spirit of the Enlightenment that Voltaire imagined.

Thank you very much.

Dr. Haci Cevik is a researcher at the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research (BIM) at Humboldt University, supported by the Einstein Foundation. Trained in political science and migration studies, he completed his Bachelor's degree at Kocaeli University, his Master's at Ankara University, and his PhD at Hacettepe University, where he also served as a research assistant between 2019 and 2022. His work examines ethnic politics, Kurdish studies, diaspora formation, and the everyday dynamics of identity and belonging. His early research focused on Kurdish communities in Central Anatolia and their migration trajectories to Europe, exploring how mobility reshaped political and cultural identities long overlooked in scholarship. His doctoral research investigated the socio-cultural integration and identity negotiations of Syrian refugees in Turkey, analyzing how nation-state ideologies and local social boundaries shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion. In his current postdoctoral project, Dr. Cevik explores the construction of sub-identities within the Kurdish diaspora and the internal diversity of ostensibly homogeneous migrant communities, with particular attention to how diasporic politics reverberate back to Turkey. He also collaborates on several research articles and book projects related to ethnic politics, migration, and diaspora studies.