

## **New Year's Reception | Voltaire Prize Winner's Speech**

*Elisabeth Kaneza*

Dear Professor Günther,

dear Professor Markschies,

dear Professor Schweigert,

dear Professor Schnellhuber,

dear Professor Ette,

ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you, Professor Markschies, for the laudation. Thank you for this special recognition!

It is a great honor for me to be selected as the winner of this year's Voltaire Prize. It is an award for tolerance, international understanding, and respect for difference. In my research as well as through my commitment as a human rights activist, I want to make my contribution to the elimination of inequalities. In this context, I deal with anti-discrimination law and legal and political approaches that can help make the ongoing racism in Germany and around the world visible and strengthen the rights of those affected.

In my work, I criticize the German interpretation of racism. It is based, firstly, on a German exceptionalism and secondly, on the idea that manifestations of racism can be reduced to right-wing extremism and xenophobia. The fixation on National Socialist injustices did indeed cause this dark chapter of German history to become branded onto social consciousness. However, this also meant that racist attribution processes and related crimes that took place before the Nazi era and continue to affect the exclusion of population groups to this day were excluded from the story. I mean German colonialism and the injustices committed in the colonies of that time. The repression of racism to the time of National Socialism also meant that current forms of structural and institutional racism became a taboo subject. This interpretation of racism is based on racism without hierarchies and thus ignores that it concerns society as a whole. The concept of racism is being relativized in this country. When racism is mentioned, hardly anyone sees himself or herself as part of a systemic problem. Inevitably, you have to come to the conclusion that you are not a racist if you have no connections to the right-wing milieu and consider yourself open-minded. This becomes evident in the glorification of "color blindness". Labeling these dividing lines, which come with privileges for those in this country who are white and have both a German citizenship and belong to Christian religion, is largely considered an exaggeration of the conditions. Therefore, attention is rarely paid to those who are victims of discrimination on a daily basis and to the question of how their equality can be ensured. Too often, the focus is solely on the moral condemnation of racist acts, insofar as they can be recognized and assessed as such. When those affected become the focus, they are often problematized. The migration background serves as an example here. Instead of shining a light on social barriers that make equal participation difficult for minorities and result in unequal educational opportunities and discrimination, the migration background is used as a justification for deficits and cultural differences. What that says is: The culture of the "other" is the problem, not the prevailing racism.

It often seems as if admitting that structural racism, social exclusion, and hatred are still taking place in the middle of our society in a democracy – especially in our post-1945 democracy – is tantamount to a failure, which is difficult to accept. Racism is a flaw in the German consciousness, even a reproach that is very severe. The repression of this issue and the discomfort it creates are pervasive. However, a confrontation with the past and the present of racism is essential if conditions are to change for the better. Can we successfully fight racism and intolerance without referring to certain

groups? There are opinions that suggest that research into difference reproduces classifications and that it must be possible to address discrimination without referring to characteristics. I find this post-categorical approach interesting, but in my opinion, it falls short. Because inequality cannot be measured if we don't know who is affected by it. The claim that there can be no racist structures and related inequalities because racism is frowned upon has no statistical basis. If there is no recording of discrimination categories, there is also no equality data.

The human rights mechanisms of the United Nations call for data to be collected on population groups who can provide information about how they are affected by racism and discrimination. However, in its last state report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the federal government announced that no data on ethnic origin had been collected in Germany since the Second World War, and justified this with the experience of National Socialism. However, the migration background was recorded as a statistical category. In light of this, it is not surprising that research on racism, which has not yet been able to establish itself in Germany because it lacks resources, is mainly assigned to the research focus of migration and integration. Those who research racism and discrimination often only have "German" and "foreign", "with a migration background" and "without a migration background" as categories for difference.

I also faced the challenge in my research that I could not find any official statistics on groups that went beyond these categories. How could I research the legal situation of black people without data? I therefore started to examine judicial cases based on the grounds of discrimination that were given by people who are victims of racial profiling – these are identity checks by the police that are based on supposedly racial or ethnic characteristics. In the cases I examined, I was able to identify those affected as black because the plaintiffs claimed that the police checked them without cause solely based on their skin color. They referred to Article 3, Paragraph 3, Sentence 1 of the Basic Law, in which the constitutional prohibition of discrimination is anchored. The Basic Law forbids discrimination based on a person's skin color.

For the fight against racism to be successful, the focus must be on eliminating disadvantage and creating equality. In order to be able to eliminate structural disadvantages, it is necessary that the situation of those affected can be grasped. This is not only a legal requirement to enable equality, it is also a basic requirement for the creation and implementation of political measures that are tailored to the specific needs of those affected. The anti-discrimination law is specific because it lists individual and group-related categories of discrimination. So the law labels difference. However, not to codify it in a negative way, but to recognize it. Being able to label and recognize difference is also an important prerequisite for overcoming racism and intolerance. I think that with this perspective, we would move significantly closer to a common understanding of what racism is and how it can be addressed in order to eradicate inequalities.

I would like to accept the Voltaire Prize on behalf of the many people who work every day to fight racism and discrimination, be it in research or in civil society, on large stages or in small projects. For me, this award is an appreciation of this important commitment. I would also like to dedicate this award to young people in our country who are part of a minority and who have to overcome structural barriers. It is supposed to give them courage and confidence. As a child and adolescent, I could never have imagined that one day I would be standing here. So today, I think above all of the special people who have helped me follow my own path successfully and achieve my goals.

During the years I spent working on my doctorate, I learned that it is crucial who accompanies you on this journey. I would like to thank my doctoral supervisor, Prof. Dr. Norman Weiß, for providing guidance for and supporting my dissertation. I would also like to thank the University of Potsdam and the Stiftung der Deutschen Wirtschaft, who supported my doctorate with a scholarship. I would also like to thank the Human Rights Center at the University of Potsdam and my colleagues. My special thanks go to my parents, my siblings and my extended family, my friends, my colleagues in the Kaneza Foundation for Dialogue and Empowerment e. V. and the many fellow activists. The Voltaire Prize is a special award that encourages me and will support me in reaching the next scientific milestones. I would like to thank the jurors for this opportunity.

Against the backdrop of the unexpected and big challenges that the pandemic has caused for us, I hope, above all, that you stay healthy in the new year 2021!