

The spoken word applies!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues of the University of Potsdam

Tolerance, international understanding and respect for difference - it is hardly conceivable that the European Union tolerates states in its community in which these values must be defended. But if it was really the case, I could not be the person who has the honour to receive the Voltaire Prize of the University of Potsdam this year. I would like to thank you very much for this honour and accept the responsibility that goes with this prize.

I.

In my home country Hungary, the fundamental values of European civilization and culture have been repeatedly challenged by the political leadership.

In everyday practice and as a role model, those in power show intolerance against the people who look different, who live differently, and who think differently. Against all kinds of autonomies - be it the civil society, the academy, the independent press or the political opposition. Critics are enemies that are to be excluded by offensive and humiliating terms.

Instead of international understanding, hate campaigns against the so-called migrants are on the agenda who are depicted as inhumane hordes on posters of the government and the ruling party.

And there is no respect for ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, material and ideological difference. In the eyes of the rulers, those who do not belong to the group of heterosexual, white Christian middle-class men are of much less value. Refugees, Roma, homeless people - in the hands of the ruling they become instruments that are used to gain more power.

II.

The paradoxical choice of words "illiberal democracy" means that the political system of rule in Hungary is much more illiberal than democratic today.

"Illiberalism" is a complex system based on the denial of European values such as the rule of law, human rights and pluralism. It disguises that the constitutional barriers of public power are being dismantled, that the controlling rights of the opposition parties are harshly reduced, and the public is dominated. The potential counterweights in civil society but also in the economy have been eliminated.

The result is a monolithic exertion of power over a homogenized society. Hungary is the realized populism that celebrates concentration of power and anti-pluralism behind a democratic backdrop. Illiberalism needs dependent subjects who quietly assemble cars in factories but never discuss and criticize anything.

III.

As a university teacher who is also heading a non-governmental organization (NGO) and passionately engages in the topic media, I am directly affected by the illiberal regime in all my professional positions.

Universities and academic institutions - as sources of autonomous thinking - are also under strict control. This is mainly executed by using organizational and financial instruments: without consulting the universities, the government appoints a chancellor who heads all universities responsible for all financial matters. Deliberately, the law, however, does not clearly define how the financial questions can be decoupled from scientific ones and where are the boundaries between the responsibilities of the rector and the senate on the one hand and the chancellor on the other. This, of course, leads to constant conflicts about competences. Also state funding is neither predictable nor transparent. The government can end education programs overnight, even push an entire university out of the country. The academic research institutes were also occupied by the government making the future of the researchers completely uncertain. Under this pressure, universities and other academic institutions are trying to adapt to the constantly changing conditions and this also affects the personal scientific freedom of individuals.

The lecture hall and seminar room still offer my greatest freedom. The control is not so perfect that it could prevent me from speaking openly and honestly with my students. There questions are not yet understood as an attack, debates do not consist of one-sided statements. At the same time, it has also happened that students published an essay on a pro-government news portal on their professor's statements that were critical of the government - and the portal subsequently announced that it would encourage and continue to publish such "disclosures".

Nevertheless, my experiences with the students are largely positive. I've learned in the past few years that they can, but must, be inspired. They reward the teacher's openness and curiosity with attention and activity. Teaching and learning require a close trusting relationship in which both parties take each other seriously.

On the other hand, I constantly have to choose between the roles of the distanced researcher and the vehement activist. I always have to make sure that it is not my job to convince but rather: where I publish, whom I invite to a conference, to which organization I submit an application, which examples I choose for a lecture. These questions cannot only be answered according to technical aspects, but are in any case also a choice of values. We live in moral overload in Hungary - our decisions always have moral consequences.

IV.

The civil society and NGOs have been the enemies of the government, the enemies of the state for many years. They were simply included in the narratives of anti-migration and the Soros's devilish plan: the most important human rights organizations get money from Soros and therefore they are actively involved in the organized flooding of Europe.

These NGOs, however, endeavour to uncover abuses and to inform the domestic and international public. The legislative, financial and communicative attacks against these organizations are a remarkable example of manipulative political communication. Their stigmatization as foreign agents simply makes it unnecessary to respond to what they say. It is enough to point out who they are - as in the worst conspiracy theories.

With regard to the NGOs funding, however, it must be noted that their financial resources are not diverse. Public funds are completely absent, and the largest western donor organizations have left Hungary after its accession to the EU. For this reason, the Soros foundations are indeed important donors, but their commitment creates an uncertain situation for the NGOs. A stronger engagement of German foundations in Central Europe could improve this situation.

The media and the public have been the subject of a heated debate at the European level since 2010. There is evidence of discrimination and a constant defamation of independent media and journalists, obstruction of parliamentary reporting and access to public information, using the media for slander and hostile propaganda. The extensive manipulation of the media and advertising markets is clearly documented as well.

There is certainly no longer a media market if the largest advertiser is the state itself. State advertisements are published in the loyal media regardless of what they actually do. Since 2018, a foundation has been hiding a media conglomerate unprecedented in Europe which owns almost 500 press products and media services. It has monopoly rights in regional newspapers, free newspapers and national private radio stations as well as leading positions in news stations, news portals and tabloid newspapers. The loyalty of these media is guaranteed by the generous public funding and the personal dependencies of their owners.

While the last independent media and journalists struggle to survive every day. According to our calculations, they only have access to 20 percent of the financial resources of the media market. In addition, they are less and less able to get out of their own audience bubbles. Nevertheless, they continue to work thoroughly and make an important contribution to critical information.

Instead of public service media, we have mere governmental ones, which, in return for comprehensive government donations, are the most loyal players in propaganda and manipulation. Legally confirmed corrupt news, dismissals and charges against journalists who are not entirely uncritical, as well as one-sided reporting documented by international organizations even during the election campaigns are part of daily practice.

Even if there were no severe distortions in the electoral system and if there were not that many rural voters completely dependent on the ruling powers due to public employment opportunities, this manipulated public would still be reason enough to question the fairness of the elections.

It is also true that you could learn so much about the media system and democracy in hardly any other situation: Where are the invisible weak points of media finance? What are the real symptoms of the political bias of a formally independent regulatory body? How do European values work in practice? We have learned enough.

V.

I must also emphasize that I consider the reactions of the European Union and the Western European countries to be largely disappointing.

The Western European media companies, for example, played an essential role in the expansion of the pro-government media: After the financial crisis, they wanted to leave the Central European region, where they had the leading role after the system change because these markets were no longer profitable enough. In this process, they often acted deliberately in consultation with our illiberal government. For example, ProSieben, Sat.1, Deutsche Telekom and Axel Springer knew that the buyers of the media they had left behind were the current oligarchs.

The EU's repeated criticism of dismantling democracy had mostly no noticeable consequences -political actions, unprincipled compromises, short-sightedness and lack of understanding: After almost ten years of illiberalism, European efforts could not prevent that a politically biased media authority was established again in 2019 with a mandate for nine years. Although the European Commission has lodged a complaint against the funding of the public service media, it has not used the available and effective means against the illicit state aid in recent years.

The EU significantly contributed to its success not only by helplessly tolerating the various illiberal measures but also by financing the system with European funding. The financing of corrupt and anti-democratic regimes not only destroys the individual states but ultimately weakens their integration completely.

My favorite word in German is "Klartext". (stop beating about the bush! get to the point! say what you mean!) It is high time to clearly identify and curtail undemocratic populist regimes in Europe. One should not be afraid that voters in these countries are therefore turning against the EU: these voters have no opportunity to freely obtain information from reliable sources and to honestly express their opinions. If they received clear signals from the EU that they were not left alone, they would also be braver in the polling booths.

VI.

The most important social finding from the democratic transition in Central and Eastern Europe over the past 30 years is that constitutional organization and formal economic integration alone do not create democracy. Democracy is about values -values that at best are supported and shaped by a majority of the society. Neither the affected school systems nor the political actors had been prepared for this.

The greatest of the many gifts I received from Germany – such as fundamental knowledge of media law and media freedom, resources for my research, living in an inclusive community, my children's experience of another way of learning at school – are the concept and practice of political education. The fact that I cannot translate this expression into my mother tongue quite perfectly describes the situation in Hungary. It reveals a big deficit that we must reduce.

We must find ways how to make people understand the connections between our own lives and political decisions, why liberal democracy will always be the only form of government that enables mental, moral and economic prosperity for the whole society, and why this requires all of us to make an effort. At school, at the university, on Facebook or in discussions with our neighbors, we should work to make the values of democracy perceptible.

For me, this award is an important feedback on my work so far and a great support for the future. It is difficult to find the motivation to keep going on in an indifferent or even hostile environment. But let me end my speech with the simple campaign message of the Hungarian Civic Alliance Fidesz: We will continue!