

## Final Speech Hans Heinrich Hansen – 21.05.2016

### FUEN Congress 2016 in Wroclaw

Dear Friends,

It's hard for me to give this final speech before you as president. But time moves on, and faster than I would like. You are already thinking about the election of the next president – isn't that fantastic, that we've made it so far, that two people are running for the office of president? That is also a sign that the FUEN has become more attractive and more important in recent years.

When I think back over my term of office, about what was most important, it is always the fight for equality, respect and recognition. One important component is missing in this list, money. But I'll leave that aside for the moment.

Let me start with the last item, recognition. I have often said this at such meetings, recognition is one of the foundations of life that one can build on. Recognition is part of the dignity of human existence. You can recognise your own importance, but that is usually not enough. Recognition needs to be reflected, it needs a sounding board amongst others, and in society. On the other hand, if we don't give ourselves the recognition we deserve, and that we need, then recognition by others only helps to a limited degree. Recognition is give and take. If you can't afford yourself recognition, it is difficult to do the same to others. Both are inextricably linked.

Recognition requires generosity. You have to be able to look further than the end of your own nose if you want to perceive others as they are. You have to be able to recognise that they are different. If you want to be able to say "he's different", then you have to be sure you are on safe ground. Metaphorically speaking, our safe ground is our homeland, recognition of belonging to a particular region, to particular customs, to what we represent culturally and in terms of our values. We want to be recognised for what and how we are.

And what about respect? Recognition and respect are siblings, separated by several years and experiences. First comes the search for recognition. Respect comes later, but is strangely enough older, because respect presumes knowledge and experience, and means that when you respect another, you are able to form an opinion about them and accept them.

So you can show respect but also demand it. We minorities are sensitive when people fail to pay us respect. For us, being disregarded means that we are not treated with respect. And this is why we demand positive discrimination. We do this because we are so few, and disregard is effectively our death sentence. And we are quite right to be afraid of this.

We minorities want to be respected for being different. And it is easier to respect the majority, also because we have no choice. The majority is after all the majority.

Maybe in one or other of us there is a part of us that says that we minorities are something special because we are different.

Up in the German-Danish border country, where I come from, it has recently even become chic to belong to a minority. Previously I have always spoken about how we have mutated from being enemies to being friends. There was a time when we Germans in Denmark were beaten up, and occasionally we did the beating. Today we are sought-after dialogue partners, and many young people find it cool to be part of a minority, regardless of whether it is German, Danish or Frisian. Just the Sinti still have a hard time, but there are also young, well-educated Sinti, who are admired as being something exotic and who are gladly invited to public events.

They are perceived as being different for what they are, and now and then being different is also good. It's a question of definition and a question of excess for a society. When a lot of refugees arrive that are different but poor, who come for assistance, the respect thing is not very viable.

What I mean is that there are a lot of obstacles to be overcome before you respect someone or before you are respected. These obstacles bear names like vanity, false modesty, and ignorance; repeating things parrot fashion, indifference – one of respect's greatest enemies – envy and maybe even contempt.

On the other hand, respect also demands something of us if we want to be respected. We have to be honest, to behave well, whatever that means in a social context; we must have values and live in harmony with them.

On such a basis of give and take we can both demand respect for ourselves and afford respect to others.

This path leads us directly to equality. Respect is prerequisite for equal treatment. I say time and again that there is a great difference between equal rights and equality.

You can demand equal rights, but equality is a gift that includes both esteem and respect. Equality comes from the heart, equal rights from legal texts and demands.

Maybe now you will understand a little better why the terms recognition, respect and equality have been so important for me and my work.

Equality, respect and recognition are the key words for good co-existence between majority and minority.

Dear Friends,

I have very fond recollections of these years with you. There have been many good encounters and some very cordial friendships that I hope will last for a long time. We have been able to get to know each other well.

I look back gladly at moments of heartfelt welcome, small peripheral discussions, sharing in worries and needs, and also that we have been able to share the good moments with one another. I often returned home from our annual congresses exhausted, but also full of good memories.

On our journeys we have had pleasant and bizarre experiences. I remember a visit to Valerie Dill in Kyrgyzstan, to a horse farm on a mountain pasture in a sun-drenched landscape. Here they produced soured mare's milk, a universal remedy for everything; or a flight from Tiflis to Moscow with Georgian Airlines, where not only the plane was shaking, but we too.

I remember also asking a man about the same age as myself how he'd managed to stay looking so young. He explained that he occasionally ate rotten food, just to strengthen his immune system.

I remember the cordial welcome we were given by the women in Komotini at the last annual congress up in the mountains, as they fed us at a moment's notice and we didn't want to leave.

I remember our fact-finding missions, which were not always without danger but always very exciting. In Ingushetia we were protected by 16 heavily armed soldiers in our hotel.

I remember when brothers soon to be enemies met us on neutral territory in the border region to talk to use. Such encounters will also be initiated out of the House of Minorities, and hopefully they will achieve what I said at the beginning of my farewell speech, that we must never give up on the dialogue between us.

FUEN's strength has always been its member organisations and that we have been able to establish a mutually supportive group. This is something we must preserve, because we are only strong if we are together.

When I look at your faces I see a piece of my own history. You have made my life richer.

I have worked on the profile of FUEN for 22 years now, and I am grateful for that.

Your faces remain engraved in my mind.

Thank you!