

FUEN Annual Congress 18-22.05.2016

Opening Speech, Breslau 19.05.2016

Hans Heinrich Hansen, President

The spoken word takes precedence.

Address

Thank you for the invitation to Wroclaw, Breslau! We are well aware of the great and eventful history of what is this year's European Capital of Culture.

We are pleased to come to you here in Wroclaw, and we are forward to everything we will see and experience here. We bring with us our experience as minorities that stand in changing relationships to their states. We thank the VDG, the Association of German Socio-Cultural Societies in Poland, and especially their president Bernhard Gaida for all the work he and his team have done to prepare for all this.

Let me begin with a quotation from Lao Tzu, the wise Chinese philosopher whose words are still valid today:

“In the whole world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water.
Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it.
This is because there is nothing that can take its place.
That the weak overcomes the strong,
And the submissive overcomes the hard,
Everyone in the world knows
yet no one can put this knowledge into practice”

We minorities often feel like water, submissive and weak.

And yet it is this apparent weakness that helps us to get to the core of things, to understand them, things that others, due to their position of presumed strength, do not understand.

That is our strength.

When Bernhard Gaida, as the senior representative of the German minority in Poland in 2013 invited FUEN to hold its annual congress here in Wroclaw/Breslau, the situation in Europe and in Poland was very different. We were all of the opinion that Europe was on the way to overcoming its crisis. The problem with Greece still existed, youth unemployment in the southern states, Italy and Spain was on the increase, but by German standards that seemed to be the price for stability in Europe. The war in Syria escalated and the number of refugees in the neighbouring states was increasing, as were the number of dead in the Mediterranean. We all remember what happened on Lampedusa. There was not yet a European refugee problem, or if there was it seemed far off. Today all the European states have to deal with it. There is no unanimous position on this, and if we know one thing in this state of uncertainty it is that there are no simple solutions. The European Community has struggled with this for years, and all attempts at achieving a fair distribution of the refugees have failed so far.

Today it looks as though Hungary's example of protecting its borders with barbed wire is setting a precedent. Border controls everywhere. Schengen is in a coma. The EU is in disagreement about essential

issues and far from any consensus. Poland has symbolically removed the European flag from important locations and replaced it with the Polish flag.

This has been widely accepted by its population, as has their refusal to accept an adequate number of refugees. In our opinion that is not a good development, because it gives a boost to the nationalism that we thought we had almost left behind. BUT Poland is not alone in this. Nationalism is spreading in many countries. In the west in the old EU states like Holland, France, Denmark, Austria and Germany, in the shape of a new right-wing nationalist party. In the east the idea of an illiberal democracy seems to be attractive for the governments of Hungary, Poland, Croatia and Serbia.

In our opinion, nationalism cannot be the solution, because we live in a globalised world, in which communication media like television, Facebook, Twitter and the like, as well as some NGOs like Greenpeace and others react to events within seconds and publish them all over the world. In such a situation you cannot simply close borders.

There have always been streams of refugees and migrations everywhere. People have always been forced to leave their homeland. And it's the same today.

And I repeat: there are no simple solutions. Nobody has the solution.

And then there is one irrevocable truth: the greatest danger for us as a species is that we forget our humanity and not just look at our own plates to see if we actually have to surrender anything.

Address

This year Germany has the chair of the OSCE.

There was a conference in The Hague a few weeks ago hosted by the High Commissioner for Minorities in the OSCE, Astrid Thors. The occasion was the 20th anniversary of The Hague Recommendations regarding the Educational Rights of National Minorities.

In his opening speech, Gernot Erler, the special representative of the German chairmanship of the OSCE, said "Today it should be increasingly clear in everyone's mind how crucial the correct treatment of minorities is in securing equality, tolerance and cross-border dialogue for the prevention of conflicts." And that "We should also look to the unique and enriching contribution that national minorities can make to the society in which they live, and also for their mother state."

This perspective inspired the German chairmanship to choose national minorities as one of their priorities for 2016 as a reaction to the current challenges in the OSCE countries. German foreign minister Frank Walter Steinmeier explicitly emphasised that they want to take advantage of the positive experiences made in the German-Danish border country, with the inclusion of ECMI and FUEN in the OSCE 2016.

In his 2015 Berlin speech marking the 60th anniversary of the Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations, foreign minister Frank Walter Steinmeier pointed out that FUEN and its many different member organisations in all the different countries has a contact area that can react very quickly and very early.

I will go further and say that FUEN is also so important because it works on a level at which politicians and ambassadors do not generally operate. In other words we are on the level of the people this is all about, and our knowledge of minorities also means that we have an inner ability to compromise.

Tomorrow we will be dealing with the situation in Europe and the position of the national minorities within the framework of the German chairmanship of the OSCE. What we want is that not just the very important experts make their contribution, but also the minorities themselves. That involves an exchange

of experiences and at the same time an opportunity for the minorities to emphasise their function in the European context.

Minorities need certain basic conditions if they are to survive effectively. In short:

Minorities need educational autonomy in order to preserve their own language and culture. Generally speaking one can say that when our languages are endangered, our culture is also endangered. Our self-confidence, our identity, our integrity and our rights are consequently also endangered.

From this we can conclude that:

- Minorities need political participation if they are to gain funding for their own work with democratic means, and if they are to share responsibility for their homeland.
- Minorities often live in border regions and with their bilingualism and their life in two cultures are therefore the born bridge builders between the states.

And this is why the prerequisites for a good minority policy are:

- Good relations between the kin states.
- Dialogue at eye level between majority and minority.
- Positive special treatment of minorities. Because if you want equality you cannot treat inequality equally.

I will once again quote the special representative for the German OSCE chairmanship, Gernot Erler: “As Germans we can consider ourselves lucky that we have had such positive experiences with national minorities as bridge builders, for example between Germany and Denmark in recent decades. And this is my maxim: we all need recognition, and we want to be treated equally and have equal rights. Once this feeling is properly anchored it nourishes trust on the other side. It is easier to negotiate with a self-confident partner. And this is also the way to master big problems.

One can say that these are also basic prerequisites for a functioning democracy.

We want one Europe, in which we feel at home and in which we minorities are heard.

Within FUEN we have four solutions for minorities that have contributed to mutual satisfaction and consequently to the peaceful settlement of minority regulation.

1. The federal solution that exists in Belgium and which guarantees the German-speaking community a great degree of autonomy within the state.
2. The language region solution in Switzerland from which the Romansch people profit.
3. Territorial autonomy as applied in South Tyrol
4. Cultural autonomy as we experience it in the German-Danish border country.

We can bring this experience into conflict situations and into preventing conflicts.

Address

There are many serious conflicts in Europe that threaten to destabilise the existing order, but the crisis also offers the opportunity for fresh thinking. Part of this fresh thinking is that one remembers to focus on the people. The future cannot be an entanglement of barbed wire between the countries.

It will be necessary to develop new economic models that are both highly inclusive and also just. A new culture of dialogue must be developed, or at least that is what the Pope said recently at the awarding Charlemagne Prize. And from our side I would add:

- One in seven citizens in Europe is a member of an autochthonous minority
- And that a progressive minority policy is based on a lack of discrimination, and that the members of these communities have the same rights as the other citizens,
- That they are protected by the constitution
- That the freedom of articulation alone or in groups is not restricted,
- And that the question of whether or not an individual sees themselves as a member of a minority is up to each and every individual, and must not be investigated.

These prerequisites were created for Germany and Denmark in 1955 by means of the Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations.

It is my wish that every country in which minorities live should adopt these basic rules so that the spirit of trust and recognition can grow. It creates the basis for minorities and majorities to live together and flourish.

For the old and new minorities, I wish that we can overcome the fear of diversity.

Dear High Commissioner, Astrid Thors, your care about Europe's minorities, and because we are both Scandinavians, I would like to continue in the usual singular. With us this is not just normal normal, but increases esteem.

I am very glad that you accepted our invitation and that you have agreed to give the keynote speech at this my last congress as president of FUEN. Thank you.