

Speech Participation Day

Dear Relkor Meyer,

Dear Mr. Konrad,

Dear friends and guests,

before I start my speech, I want to thank Andrassy University and Rector Meyer for hosting and co-developing this event: 4th Participation Day.

I also thank the Hungarian Government for supporting this format – as you may have heard, there has been some controversy about this participation day – which in the end however was overcome in a constructive manner.

Also, I thank Mr. Lütgenau and Mrs. Urschitz and the PA10 for their crucial input.

Gyorgi Konrad just moved and inspired us with his beautiful and critical thoughts on Europe, its citizens, its culture and politics. I speak to you as a representative of a government, thus as a politician – Dear Gyorgi Konrad, you have many justified reservations about politics and politicians, who indeed often cause much harm by misusing power, undermining trust and individual rights, who increasingly promote authoritarian and divisive practices in many parts of the world. However, politics must play a decisive role for the future of Europe, its shape, its ultimate size, its distribution of power within multilevel governance. But politics do need to be connected to the issues voters feel strongly about- without manipulating public opinion or suppressing it. Otherwise they lose electoral support. Our current government in Baden-Wuerttemberg – a green and conservative coalition – originated from civic unrest, from dissatisfaction and protest against the former state government due to a lack of transparency, responsiveness and disproportionate use of police violence against peaceful demonstrators.

This led to the election of new government in 2011. At that time my specific role as a minister for civic participation and civil society was created by our prime minister in order improve cooperation of the executive with the many actors of civil society– from environmental activists to the Red Cross or the huge popular engagement for the integration of refugees. This latter phenomenon was called “Willkommenskultur” and remains very strong in our state, be it in small villages or in the large cities. We have created many instruments to support volunteer work and to connect it with the administration. My job, by the way, is also a volunteer one, unpaid - but with full voting rights within the cabinet. In this sense I am also an engaged citizen.

“Bürgerbeteiligung” is a core value of our policies in all political areas, a kind of core brand of Baden-Württemberg. We created new guidelines and laws for more transparency and participation

regarding planning procedures, building, the energy sector and the creation of a national park in the Black Forest. This meant a profound process of cultural change within the administration. It meant recognizing the potential value of the ideas of critical opponents, of individuals or groups.

The EU also, it seems to me, would need this kind of cultural change for its programs and strategies. Dialogue and participation as a universal approach need to be learnt and recognized by the administration and by citizens. We have achieved a lot in Baden-Württemberg – but of course we have not completed this job.

Currently there is a big debate in Baden-Württemberg about the upcoming transformation of our industrial base: Our wealth originates mostly from our automobile industry. We know that the era of fossil fuel industry is coming to an end. How to transform our industries, mobility, cities without too much disruption? The government is currently organizing a long term strategic dialogue with the automobile industry, engineers, researchers, politics and also with civil society in order to define ways for a smooth transition. This subject, by the way will affect the Danube region as well, because there are a lot of production sites tied to the West-European automotive sector in Hungary and other Eastern European states.

Open discussion, critical thought, experimentation on the regional and local level will be crucial for future success. Our Danube Regional Strategy is based on this concept. Baden-Württemberg is very aware of the grand cultural heritage within the Danube area. We have long standing ties with the region: the “Donauschwaben” from Ulm with their one-way-boats came in the 17th century, but ultimately lost their homes centuries later due to the destructive effects of German nationalism and aggression.

Being aware of the past and the needs of the future we invest a lot of energy in developing this Participation Day. For the third time, after Ulm and Bratislava, we are trying to strengthen the role of citizens on the local level by supporting small programs which can be more easily handled, as a necessary complement to the large technocratic EU programs.

We also create transnational opportunities for activists and local actors and we aim to strengthen universities, research, knowledge-based innovation in transnational networks. As a state government we want to contribute to the future cohesion of Europe through our involvement in the Macro-Regional-Strategies and push the commission towards more inclusion of citizens and local actors in the design of the labor markets as well as education, urban planning, minority policies.

For us, all this is linked to the essential values of a pluralistic democracy, which we continue to call an open society. We are observing, of course, that the idea of the nation- state recently does play an increasingly important role within the EU – not only in Hungary or Poland, but also in France, the Netherlands, in Austria and Germany - let alone Great Britain.

But in Baden-Württemberg – like Angela Merkel and Macron – we remain firmly attached to the concept of a Europe which is more than an economic club, which should be based not just on economic free trade, but also on freedom of opinion, free press, division of power and the welfare state. We continue to promote the idea of a liberal democracy, based on the above values.

During the cold war Hungary for us was a model of democratic visions and openness. People in Germany admired the courage of the uprising in 1956. Many Hungarian refugees were welcomed and successfully integrated. Three Hungarian children came into my class at school and became very successful German citizens. By the way, without the millions of German refugees, Turkish and Italian workers, our economic miracle during the 60'ies would not have been possible.

We do know that Europe needs to protect its citizens, including a strict border management at the external borders. But it also needs to remain firmly attached to the discourse of human dignity and respect.

In order to overcome discontent Europe needs to empower its citizens by adding new elements to the democratic process. In Baden-Württemberg on the one side we are strengthening new deliberative methods: Round tables, citizen forums (mini publics) via random selection, actively including more women, more migrants ,more young and less privileged people in the discussion process.

On the other hand we have also strengthened the role of direct democracy by lowering the hurdles for local referenda, for example concerning planning and building. But we do give priority to deliberation, and the fact based discussion among citizens, administration and elected political decision makers

We have great reservations against plebiscites, organized by governments, where often the opposition does not have sufficient opportunity to present their view and opinion can be manipulated. We learnt from Switzerland that before a referendum, it is essential to distribute fact based, well balanced information to all voters. Only then a referendum can be called democratic.

One last word: Europe, I agree, will take many decades to find its form – if ever. But this process needs active citizens and empowered local and regional actors, not just national governments. It needs this in order to reach what we all strive for: a good life for our citizens in freedom, security and democracy.