

**25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Promoting Tolerance Program**  
**“Confronting Bigotry and Intolerance in the Face of Rising Populism”**

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**Berlin, 15. Juni 2017**

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Alumni and current participants of the Promoting Tolerance Program,

Dear Rabbi Andrew Baker,

25 years ago, when the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and the American Jewish Committee initiated the Promoting Tolerance Program, there were revolutionary times, marked by the aftermath of the collapse of the communist regimes as well as by the establishment of the European Union, as we know it today. Back then, both our organizations saw the need to promote a climate of pluralism and respect for diversity – in order to improve the rights of minorities and to create an atmosphere of mutual acceptance.

Hence, over the course of these 25 years, it has always been the Program’s greatest mission to advocate for human rights, to foster pluralism, to improve the rights of minorities – in other words, to promote tolerance – the ambitious yet achievable goal of this program.

I think you all agree with me that fostering these values – these liberal values – and building strong societies was and still is crucial for enabling a functioning democracy – not only but particularly in the post-Soviet world.

Together with its partners, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom has supported this process from the very beginning, often operating under difficult conditions. In 1992, for example, the Foundation started its work in the Western Balkans, where the path of transition towards democracy and market economy was heavily challenged by the Bosnian war. This is just one example. Over the course of these 25 years, we have been facing a lot of obstacles and challenges but luckily we have always managed to overcome them.

Maybe in opposite to what we were hoping for when this program started in the early 90s – it has not yet become easier to promote tolerance. Nowadays, the Foundation still works in countries at war or under difficult political circumstances – countries that reject our values. Some challenges from the past are still there and new ones have emerged.

Among others, Europe has been facing a series of crises that obviously weakens Europe’s capacity to build, preserve and strengthen a society based on inclusion, tolerance and equality – a society that is united in diversity, which – fortunately – still remains one of the guiding principles of the European Union.

A few years back, the economic and financial crises laid the foundation for the constitution and rise of new and already existing xenophobic groups and parties all over Europe – an expression of pure dissatisfaction. The refugee crisis then increased this phenomenon.

Since then, bigotry and xenophobia – accompanied by the rise of populism – have been shaping the public discourse – not only in Germany but in several European countries as well as in the United States of America. Xenophobia, bigotry and populism are no new phenomena – no. However, lately their extent has reached a new level. In consequence, democratic governments are increasingly losing their bearings. Xenophobia has become a virus – and it is further spreading.

Both – bigotry and xenophobia – are enemies of tolerance, democracy and open societies. Both represent radical world views. And far more dangerous: Both represent rather closed world views that leave very little room for different arguments and opinions. And – both go hand in hand.

Closed groups – closed world views do not accept or even tolerate external input. Hence, people that belong to these groups are usually not very familiar with different cultures, ideas and ways of life. The problem is: Humans have always been afraid of the unknown. Subsequently, over time, this lack of interest and curiosity generates an even greater fear of everything unknown and everything that is labeled as „foreign“.

We can perfectly understand this tendency by analyzing the political situation and the recent election results in countries in the region of Central, East and Southeast Europe that usually have rather small percentages of migrant workers, refugees and foreigners in general. For example:

- In Poland, Jaroslaw Kaczynski and his Law and Justice Party (PISZ) have currently 57,2 percent of the seats in parliament.
- In Hungary, Victor Orban and his party FIDESZ have 52,1 percent of parliamentary seats. Also, FIDESZ is the only governing party in Hungary.

And in Germany? Unfortunately, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) has become popular in the whole country. The party is represented in 13 of the 16 regional parliaments of Germany – and, most likely, it will be part of the next German Bundestag. However, the Alternative for Germany is particularly popular in German Federal States that used to belong to the former GDR – for example in Lower Saxony or Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

Both are federal states that have a relatively low rate of migration. Again: Humans fear the unknown. Eventually, this creates a vicious circle of distrust and further isolation. Hence, xenophobia is more of a symptom than a cause – a symptom for insecurity and the lack of knowledge.

Nonetheless, let me underline that most certainly we can observe xenophobic tendencies in societies that have a long-standing history of migration as well.

Against this background, the question is (and please allow me to refer to the title of this event in this regard): How to confront bigotry and intolerance in the face of rising populism?

Often people tend to then modify the question themselves and ask: How should politics confront bigotry and intolerance in the face of rising populism? That is a natural reflex and it is very understandable.

As former German Federal Minister of Justice and long-standing politician let me make it very clear: Of course, politicians have the responsibility to do something! They must be vigilant to defend the model of enlightened societies inward and promote it onward. However, civil society – all of us – have the obligation to do something, too. Start by asking yourself: What can I do?

By this, I mean to challenge the arguments of those who are xenophobic and intolerant openly and robustly.

Unfortunately, we probably have to deal with populist parties and xenophobic movements for a while to come. They prove a momentum to the generally Eurosceptic, illiberal and authoritarian tendencies currently triumphing in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Fortunately not in France and the Netherlands.

Their success should serve as a warning bell to us Liberals in the whole of Europe and beyond. A growing number of people are becoming increasingly willing to tolerate xenophobic tendencies from parties that offer them a sense of community and security and advocate a policy of nationalism and isolationism.

Xenophobia and intolerance have many different faces. Both have roots in different social groups, different age groups, different environments. We have to be aware of this. Our responses have to be as different as their questions, their arguments and their fears.

Some people, however, have taken the opposite approach: not by challenging the arguments of those who are xenophobic but by appropriating them.

Why do they do so? Should not history teach us better?

I often experience that people tend to believe that conditions are much different than they used to be; that democracy is far more institutionalized and entrenched. But let me tell you, the opposite is true: The risk is that democracy, open societies, human rights and tolerance are taken for granted because they are institutionalized and well entrenched.

Conventional wisdom has always suggested that populists cannot come into power which – most recently – the US elections have proven wrong. We can stay in Europe and – again – look in the direction of Hungary and Poland to understand that this assumption is no longer valid.

Ignoring this reality will not make it go away. On the contrary, if we don't respond adequately to this dynamic, we might all soon wake up in a Europe and a world where parties similar to PiS, Fidesz and the Alternative for Germany have suddenly become the mainstream. That is why we have to defend our values.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Without saying, this call goes out to all democratic parties, movements and individuals. However, as Liberals, we have a particular responsibility in confronting bigotry and xenophobia in the face of rising populism.

The values that we Liberals represent – an open society, the defense of minority rights, the freedom of the individual and tolerance – are declared enemies of xenophobic, populist movements. Our values directly contradict xenophobia and intolerance. Xenophobic people feel strong as part of large group. Most certainly, Liberalism – that aims to empower the individual – is a very strong opponent. This makes me even prouder to call myself a Liberal.

Subsequently, this brings us to the important question: As Liberals, as Europeans, as defenders of democracy: What can we do to promote tolerance and stop the rising populism?

As you know, lately everyone speaks about the so called posttruth age. Hence, you have probably noticed that discussions about xenophobia and populism often result in a decline in rational discourse. What we are witnessing at the moment has a whole new quality.

Fake news have been used as a powerful tool during campaigns and after. This populist appeal has been reinforced by the dissatisfaction of the people and the increasing perception that governments are unable to overcome the challenges posed.

Hence, my best advice would be to repeatedly ask people that have xenophobic views. Ask them about their sources, about the background of the information they are sharing. This is the best way to expose rumors and fake news. Tell them about your own take of the situation. Engage in a discussion. Do not isolate them and make a powerful counterspeech.

In the face of all current threats such as terrorism, we have to stress the importance of the rule of law among others. Unfortunately, we have witnessed how leaders in Hungary and Poland, have been dismantling those civil liberties and have transformed their liberal democracies into illiberal democracies.

However, in most cases liberal democracies do not fail because of the strength of anti-democratic movement, but because the democratic government was not able to uphold its values against its enemies. Never underestimate the power of self-destruction.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am convinced that diversity can be and in most cases is a strength; a strength that helps societies to flourish. That is the reason why it is so important to combat xenophobia. Social mixing and interacting with people from different cultural and ethnic groups help to reduce the distrust. Intergroup contacts actually build trust – and, eventually, build a strong society.

In conclusion, what we – as citizens, activists and politicians – can do is to take stock of the situation and show zero tolerance to xenophobia. We cannot allow that xenophobia and intolerance puts our liberal democratic values at risk. We cannot allow that people who are narrow-minded become the mainstream. However, I would like to stress again that ignorance is not the right way to deal with the situation. Xenophobic, intolerant people are often ignorant – why should we respond in the same way?

In this respect, I would like to congratulate each and every one that has been participating in the Promoting Tolerance Program. You are doing the right thing. You are engaged in a dialogue, you will find the rights answers against xenophobia, bigotry and populism.

I know that many of you, that are present this evening, face democracy threatening realities at home. The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom as well as the American Jewish Committee admire your courage, your motivation and passion and support you in your efforts to promote freedom. We encourage you not to give up and we hope that the Promoting Tolerance Program can further facilitate the success of your efforts. I invite you to use this great opportunity to share your knowledge and experiences with your liberal minded fellows across Europe and the United States of America.

With this in mind, never hesitate to confront bigotry and promote tolerance!

Thank you very much for your attention!