

**30th Anniversary
of the Czech Rectors' Conference**

Address

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Vice-President for International Affairs
of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK)

Solemn Assembly
Bethlehem Chapel, Prague

on

February 16, 2023

President Bareš
Rector Petráček
President Vystrčil
Prime Minister Fiala,
Minister Langšádlová,
Minister Balaš,
President Murphy,
President Kropil,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I.

I am delighted and honoured to convey to you – the members of the Czech Rectors' Conference – the cordial greetings and best wishes of the German Rectors' Conference, its President Alt and – of course – my own as well.

II.

It is a good tradition to talk about common bonds on birthdays and anniversaries. These can be shared experiences from the past, but also future plans.

I will gladly say something on both points. It seems more important to me that we talk about the challenges that are ahead of us.

Regarding the cooperation between the Czech Rectors' Conference and the German Rectors' Conference so far, I would like to note that it began even before the Czech Rectors' Conference was officially founded as an independent organisation and still functioned as the Czech Section of the then Czechoslovak Rectors' Club.

In October 1992, the HRK had the honour of receiving Dr Marie Fojtikova and Professor Martin Černohorsky at the office in Bonn for a so-called job shadowing. Ms Fojtikova was then the designated Secretary General of the future Czech Rectors' Conference and is still in office today. Colleague Černohorsky was the Chancellor-designate of the Czech Rectors' Conference at the time.

The job shadowing was a preparatory step towards the forthcoming independence, which took place in January 1993.

I was told that this visit was remembered vividly and, above all, fondly by the HRK staff involved as well as by Ms Fojtikova and Mr Černohorsky.

This job shadowing led to the subsequent close bilateral cooperation between the HRK and the CRC. This cooperation has since shifted more to the multilateral level of the European University Association and the Universities for Enlightenment network.

III.

At that time - in the 1990s - the so-called transformation of the former member states of the "Eastern Bloc" was prominently on the general political agenda as a challenge.

At the joint meetings of the rectors, the restructuring of the higher education systems and the tasks of the universities in democratic societies were the main topics.

IV.

Today we are discussing similar issues.

However, they relate to transnational political processes within the European Union and the important role that universities play in this.

This might be a good opportunity now to talk about the European University Networks. The University of Bremen, where I was Rector until August last year, is a member of the European

alliance Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE), together with seven other universities. It is one of the current 44 European networks. The networks are very ambitious projects and involve considerable challenges. I could elaborate a bit from my own experience. Nevertheless, I would like to address another topic in particular in my short greeting. This topic is at the same time a primary task area of our organisations - the Rectors' Conferences - and should be clearly addressed at an anniversary: It is the safeguarding of academic freedom. Academic freedom is the prerequisite for the successful functioning of universities and thus for their contribution to the development of liberal democracies.

V.

It is certainly a success story of the transformation of the 1990s that the universities in the former Eastern Bloc countries were able to free themselves from the political control and paternalism of the so-called socialist regime. After 30 years, however, we observe with great concern efforts to restrict this achieved academic freedom.

These restrictions are at the same time indicators of tendencies in society as a whole. They go hand in hand with efforts to restrict other fundamental democratic rights, including above all freedom of expression and freedom of the media.

We do not have to look far for some of the countries meant here. They are Belarus, the Russian Federation, Turkey, but also Hungary, to name a few, which are our immediate neighbours. Hungary is also a member of the European Union.

However, the academic freedom that is practised daily is constantly being put to the test in many countries. For Germany, for example, I would like to mention the so-called Cancel Culture and attacks on individual scientists in the social media.

VI.

I would like to highlight one event.

In spring 2017, the amendment of the Higher Education Act in Hungary – the so-called Lex CEU – was widely perceived as a restriction of academic freedom and triggered massive national and international protests.

In April and May 2017, tens of thousands of people took part in the protests in Hungary. The European University Association, the European representation of universities and rectors' conferences, has also taken a clear stand against the law, as have many other international organisations.

In December 2018, in response to the events in Hungary, the Rectors' Conferences of Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland adopted the Vienna Declaration.

The motto of the declaration is: **Academic freedom and scientific scrutiny as tools for democratic, peaceful and open societies.**

Since then, the network has been meeting regularly to discuss current developments in this regard.

The high value of academic freedom is reflected in the ruling of the European Court of Justice of 6 October 2020. With regard to academic freedom, the ruling considers the 2017 amendment to the Hungarian Higher Education Act to be a violation of the European Charter.

In retrospect, the impressive protests against the law are a clear commitment not only to the

preservation of academic freedom, but also to the fundamental democratic rights stated in the European Charter.

This closes the circle. Just as we struggled together for the best liberal order for universities in the 1990s, we are again standing side by side and defending jointly these values that are so important for our future.

VII.

The German Rectors' Conference and I personally wish you continuing success for the future – in your country as well as within the European Academic Community.

This wish also includes our desire for further close cooperation between our organisations and our European friends.

I thank you for your kind invitation to today's festivities and for your attention.