

European Youth Parliament (EYP) Switzerland
3. September 2021

Introduction of Rector Prof. Dr. Christian Leumann

The spoken word applies

Dear members of the European Youth Parliament Switzerland

As patron of this event and rector of the University of Bern it is a great honor for me to welcome you all to this opening ceremony of the national meeting of the European Youth Parliament Switzerland here in Bienne.

It is a pleasure to see 200 young citizens from all over Switzerland and even from abroad, gathering here to discuss and debate the topic "Innovation and Cooperation in the Next Decade". And it is particularly impressive that you are part of a network that is active in 40 countries across Europe, with about 35'000 active members.

More than ever it is crucial today that young people develop and express their opinions on European political and societal issues. More than ever it is important to maintain the intercultural dialogue and exchange ideas, and more than ever it is important to acquire the political knowledge and the skills for future leadership in tomorrow's economy, society and politics.

You can ask the question: what is the role of Universities in this respect? The University of Bern as a comprehensive university is not only delivering knowledge in all relevant areas but it is also our duty to encourage students to think critically and to deal dialectically with facts in order to obtain an informed opinion about pressing issues in today's world. Universities can provide scientific knowledge and facts also to policy makers because of their research activities. The best current example is the Covid Task Force, which provides advice to policymakers. But the role of Universities is not to make politics. By doing so they would lose their independence and with it their reputation as a provider of scientific facts.

The current global situation is complex, to say the least. We are facing climate change and its consequences. The political goal of having a net human CO₂ production of 0% by 2050 is in danger. The world's sustainability footprint is not conform to our use of the natural resources. This year's world overshoot day, the day on which all regenerating resources are consumed, was on July 29, the Swiss overshoot day, even worse, was on May 11.

Europe is undergoing political changes. We will have soon elections in Germany and France, the biggest players in the European community. In the public and political debates, conspiracy theories are challenging scientific facts and are thus shaking the fundamentals of modern Enlightenment. A good example of this is the current debate on Covid 19 vaccination, which splits our societies in two parts that have lost any common sense. Often these splits divide even families. Democracies are particularly vulnerable in such situations, because their fundamental values are called into question. In order to function properly, democracies need consensus or accepted compromises as a result of political negotiations through the society as a whole. But this takes time that often is not available, and is associated with uncertainty that everybody fears.

As I have seen you have a full agenda for your meeting. Nonetheless I take the liberty to raise some points that seem important to me.

First and foremost, I would like to address the relation of Switzerland with the EU. As you all know, earlier this year, the Swiss government has buried the bilateral framework contract with the European commission, leaving the future of the relation of Switzerland with the countries of the European Union uncertain. One of the prime arguments in the internal political debate has been that argument that Switzerland would compromise its sovereignty.

But how has Switzerland lived sovereignty in the past? The integration process of the cantons between 1798 and 1848 to the federal confederation, as we live it today was a revolutionary process. As André Holenstein and Thomas Cottier wrote in their recent book «Die Souveränität der Schweiz in Europa» the independence was a consequence of interdependences with the changing geopolitical situation of the surrounding world. Sovereignty, freedom and independence were thus not the contrary of interdependence and adaptation but the consequence of it. In other words, Switzerland does not move with its sovereignty in a vacuum, we depend on the economic and scientific exchange with our sovereign neighbors, and we have to take care of our relationship with them.

As a Swiss University, we are also directly concerned with the consequences of the failed framework contract. The open question for us is: what will happen to Switzerland's association with the European education, research and mobility programs?

Now that the association to Horizon Europe could not be achieved, we are threatened, as we were in 2014, with Switzerland's exclusion from the European research programs. This does not only affect research collaborations, but also the mobility of students. This has serious consequences, because to date we have not fully recovered from the turmoil of being excluded from Horizon 2020 following the adoption of the mass immigration initiative in 2014. Thus, it is now the task of politics to ensure that the framework conditions for Swiss universities in the internationally competitive research community are as good as possible.

As you can see there are plenty of challenges waiting for you. When assuming a political career, it is important that you ask the relevant societal and economic questions and that you act for the wellbeing of the whole and not only a part of the society. It is important that you understand and keep in mind the role of Switzerland as a small nation, as a sovereign state with strong economic power, as a neutral state with a direct democracy which entails its special political responsibilities, but also as a state that is integrated in and dependent on a worldwide network of sovereign states.