

European Youth Parliament (EYP) Switzerland
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Speech of Rector Prof. Dr. Christian Leumann

The spoken word applies

Dear members of the European Youth Parliament Switzerland,
good morning everyone,

I am very pleased to be with you. Those of you who were already in Biel last year have already had the opportunity to meet, and I am very pleased to be with you here in Bern on the occasion of today's regional meeting.

Those of you who were in Biel may remember that at that time I referred to the difficult situation of Swiss science as a consequence of the exclusion from the European framework program Horizon Europe. This was and is a problem for us because exchanges are made more difficult and research programs in areas where international cooperation is important are also hampered to a certain extent. At the same time, I mentioned to you that Switzerland has a political problem, that it really cannot find stable relations with the EU and that we probably have to work on that.

I also mentioned that Switzerland has a problem figuring out what sovereignty means as a country in an area where it is surrounded by other sovereign countries. What has happened since then until today? I note: not much. We are still discussing what the problem was, why we were excluded. We are still figuring out who is actually responsible for this situation. A lot of time has passed and not much really happened at the beginning of this year either. So at the beginning of February I was a little frustrated and bored with the situation, especially since it was exacerbated by the fact that we still had Covid and it wouldn't go away. So I started joking that I was waiting for the day when I would no longer hear the word Covid. Sure enough, that day came, and it was February 24, the day that changed the world, and I think we have to acknowledge that.

February 24 was the day when Soviet troops actually invaded Ukraine, and you all know what happened in those few weeks. Tens of thousands of people killed, civilians, soldiers, hundreds of towns completely destroyed. Look at Mariupol and you can compare it to Berlin in 1944/1945. And this is right on our doorstep in Europe. If you had asked me last September if this was possible, I probably would have said, "Are you crazy, how can this happen in Europe?" But it has happened and it will continue to happen for a while.

Now we have seen an unprecedented wave of refugees coming from Ukraine to Western Europe. There are more than four or five million these days, and in Switzerland we now have 20,000 and every day there are more. And we all have to help. We have also seen that all the Western European countries have taken in these people, and we all have to do our duty in this regard. We also have to deal with this at the university level. At the University of Bern, there are quite a number of Ukrainian students, and we have set up an emergency plan to figure out how we can help. There are very different measures that we have taken. You can imagine that the first ones were for those who were already working on their PhD here in Switzerland and couldn't return to their country from one day to the next. So we had to find solutions for them to stay for the time being. How long that will be, we will only find out in the future.

We have seen students who have fled Ukraine, sitting somewhere on the border, looking for where they can continue their studies. The most important question is the language. How can they be integrated in a university in Switzerland if they don't know German, French or English, and we are trying to help here. We have a great group working on this, and I think the most important factor is that we have included students from Ukraine in this working group because they know exactly where the needs are.

We are also going beyond that because we believe that we need to do something for those who don't come out of Ukraine. We are trying to set up virtual workshops and university courses in different areas that we can eventually offer them so that they can at least take courses in their area of interest, even if their universities are completely destroyed, like quite a number of universities in the east of Ukraine.

About three weeks ago we had a guest here in Bern, the former German President Joachim Gauck. He held a conference here in Bern on the question of tolerance and democracy. And, of course, he alluded to the Ukraine war and to a sentence he said on German television. I have to quote it in German because it's more authentic: "Wir dürfen auch einmal frieren für die Freiheit." Gauck is an authentic person who can talk about war and freedom because he was actually born and raised in the former German Democratic Republic, the DDR. When he was a teenager, his father was deported to the Soviet Union, to a gulag in Siberia. And the family left behind didn't know if he was still alive or if he would ever come back. So Joachim Gauck knows what he is talking about.

The first word that is important here is freedom. I think we have forgotten that freedom is not something that is given to us by natural law. We have lived all this time in such a way that it was completely normal for us to have our freedom, to have a civil society, to have a

democracy, to be able to vote and elect our presidents and our parliament. And now, in the face of war in Europe, we have to realize that freedom is not just something you get.

The second word that is important is "frieren", freeze. It means that we have to realize that we have to fight for this freedom, for this democracy that we have built over the years. It is not just there, it does not exist by itself, and it does not perpetuate itself. We have to work on it, we have to fight for it, we have to defend it, and we have to develop it. We have to think about how we can evolve, how we can get a system of tolerance and democracy. Not everybody has to have the same ideas, we have to be tolerant. That may cost something, and that may mean we have to sacrifice something in the future to achieve that goal. That's what I understood by that simple phrase: "We may also freeze once for freedom."

So what happened in between? In those first six weeks of the war, we saw in Europe and especially in the member states that they stuck together. We all know that even in the European Union there are states that are a bit different from others, and there were difficulties in between. But now these differences are no longer important. There is something that holds Europe together.

What does that mean for Switzerland now? What does sovereignty mean? It does not mean what do I get from you, especially in a situation where our basic democratic values are threatened. This leads to the question, what does neutrality mean? Switzerland has accepted all sanctions as an act of solidarity, that has never happened before, at least not in this century. We are a small country, if we are attacked in our fundamental rights, can we stand as a single state, or are we ready to accept the help of the countries surrounding us?

We don't know when the war in Ukraine will end, whether next week, next month or in a few years. But it is a war that will change a whole generation that will grow up in Ukraine. Your generation will have to find solutions. You are all interested in politics, you are all interested

in European politics. My generation is only staying for a few more years, then your generation will take over and find solutions on how to preserve democracy in our world, how to understand that there are other countries that work very differently, how to find coexistence. That is the most important thing that we have to do and that you have to do. And I am very glad that you are all interested in politics, because without politics nothing works, and politics must be made by those who understand it.

I understand you have some work ahead of you today and tomorrow. And I wish you the best of luck for that.