

Grußwort zur Eröffnung der europäischen Konferenz »Revealing European Values in Volunteer Events«

(14.09.2021, Europäisches Haus Berlin)

Dear Mrs. Lejla Šehić Relić and Mrs. Gabriella Civico,

Dear CEV members,

Dear Mr. Niccolò Gennaro,

Dear Mrs. Monika Chabior,

Dear friends and members of the EVC Community and from our candidate cities for the EVC 2023,

Dear Mr. Wojan,

I would like to welcome you today – also on behalf of the Governing Mayor of Berlin, Michael Müller – to the conference of the Center for European Volunteering.

For those of you, who participated in the study visit in Berlin, I hope that you got many new and exciting insights into our city's volunteering landscape and inspiring exchanges with each other. Moreover, I hope that you enjoyed the boat tour of the city last night and took advantage to further network.

The topic of today's conference, »connections between civic engagement and European values« is of high importance and certainly will need further reflection well beyond today's meeting. Taking the topic up, I hope that the study visit in Berlin and the CEV conference will give you many new ideas and fresh inspiration and will result in a lasting positive impact on volunteer work in your cities.

That would strengthen one of the greatest assets we have in Europe – our democratic community, based on unconditional respect for human dignity. Over the last few years, we have seen that volunteers are often the fiercest advocates for Europe's soul – and values! The rescue mission in the Mediterranean Sea or helping the new arrived people in »welcome initiatives« are examples that come to mind.

I said it already yesterday at the opening of the study visit, and I would like to stress again today at this larger audience: Being chosen as the 2021 European Volunteering Capital is a great tribute to the impressive commitment of the 1.1 million volunteers in our city. They are the ones who keep our society together and make our democracy stronger. They are absolutely essential to our society, and civic engagement is essential work. We knew that

before the pandemic, but dealing with the coronavirus has made it especially clear. I'm sure you've seen that in your own cities too.

That's why our 2021 EVC year has a theme: »Entdecke das Wir in Dir«. The theme underscores the togetherness that volunteers experience, the solidarity, the empathy with those in need. This is what we have to work on in the EU: solidarity, togetherness, inclusiveness, less national interests and more common European interests.

Because we all feel it: European values are at risk. Attacks not only come from within the EU but also from outside of it.

And we can only survive these attacks and protect our values if we work hand in hand.

We are currently discussing about the future of Europe in a participatory process in every European country. And I'm especially glad that we're doing this in European citizen forums. This is a completely new approach, based on the active participation of citizens, and its inspiration comes directly from the input it gets from civil society.

More than 5,700 ideas have already been collected on the multilingual digital platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe. More than 900 of these ideas address the topic of »European democracy«.

Around 20.000 people have registered on the platform, and a lively, cross-border discussion with more than 11.000 comments is already taking place.

I am delighted that so many Berliners are getting actively involved in this conference on Europe's future. The federal state of Berlin, represented by the Senate Department for Culture and Europe, has set up a central platform that collects all of the events, initiatives, and proposals from Berlin.

I would especially like to call your attention to the Berlin Initiative on the Conference on the Future, initiated by the organizer of this study visit, the European Academy Berlin. This is the only initiative of its kind in Germany, and it brings Berlin stakeholders from very different sectors together in regular meetings. They are in sports, the cultural sector, the business community, the administration, and politics. Along with exchanging ideas, discussing formats, coordinating their work, and cooperating, this initiative views itself as a center of competence on the EU and a first stop for groups interested in participating in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

At the same time, the initiative has put together a questionnaire on the topics the EU identified for the conference. This questionnaire allows Berliners to exchange ideas and tell the EU what they want and what they are concerned about. It can be used alone – for instance, as a survey done online or on the street – or in connection with events.

Since our focus today is on volunteering and European values, my hope is that this CEV conference will send a strong message that will resonate in the discussion of the future of Europe as well.

And as I said yesterday: civil society and its hard work and commitment are not just something to praise on sundays. Rather, they're a pillar of our European democracy, and they are vital to successfully communicating and reinforcing our European values.

That's why we need European institutions that make a clear political commitment to serious dialogue with civil society. We need to improve the structures and foster the participation of civil society not only on the national level, but throughout Europe.

We spoke about the engagement strategy for Berlin for the years 2021 to 2025 that we drafted together with civil society, academia, the business community, the administration, and the political sector. It contains clear recommendations for action and provides a strategic framework for shaping the general conditions for civic engagement in the future.

Why wouldn't this process work on the European level, too? Maybe the discussion on the future of Europe can be the start of something new. That also applies to including groups that otherwise feel they're not being heard.

Its high time to put more effort in bringing the topic of active citizenship on the European agenda. With: good general conditions and support for volunteers, structures in place on all levels – local, regional, state, and federal – that promote volunteer work and recognition of how important volunteers are when it comes to strengthening democracy and solidarity in Europe.

The EU »Rights and Values« program, which is vital to civil society, is aimed at protecting and promoting the rights and values anchored in the EU treaties by providing support to civil society organizations. We must ensure that these funds are accessible to all organizations.

And if we want the Conference on the Future of Europe to succeed, we need to ensure continued widespread participation by European citizens and civil society stakeholders. That also applies to the decisions on implementing the results of the conference.

As the 2021 European Volunteering Capital, we would like to keep supporting this process. It's in our interest in Berlin to build on this EVC year and to stay on the path we've taken. Europe means a lot to us. There is no peace without a strong and democratic EU. And it is on all of us to engage in this existential path.

On that note, I wish you a productive and successful conference.

Thank you for your attention.

Autorin

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