

# What opportunities for a more open society will the European elections bring?

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Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends of Europe, fellow citizens,

This house is a space for meeting and exchange. The European house is our house. Here, we enjoy freedom, the freedom of assembly and association, the freedom of thought and speech. We enjoy democracy and the rule of law. However, we must be aware that this can no longer be taken for granted. Some of this European house's inhabitants already have lost their freedoms or are in great danger of losing them.

I am regularly meeting Europeans in Brussels and elsewhere who do not dare to be critical of their governments anymore unless they want to risk their existence. It may not yet be their physical existence, but fear is spreading. I have witnessed the discord this creates between these people in Hungary, in Poland or in Romania.

"She is close to them."

"He is playing a game."

"They are friendly with them."

Mutual suspicions, accusations, evasions and innuendos are there, where there should be fruitful and controversial open debates. The threat of being targeted is real.

Public funding on which many civil society organisations depend can be cut. This is what happens when civil servants lose their independence. Whom do they serve, once all checks and balances have been dismantled? Tax authorities could have a closer look at this or that non-governmental organisation? If you look deep enough into people's lives you are bound to find something. "Are you with us or are you against us?" Honestly, some years ago would we have thought it possible that this would be happening in some EU countries?

Governments and the people are becoming one. At least, that's what the governments of these countries pretend. This is a perfect democracy, - a perfect illiberal perversion of democracy. A democracy that despises minorities and their rights. Checks and balances, pluralism, and civil society are alien to this form of government that seemed to have been overcome in the past in Europe.

Right-wing populists and extremists are in particular calling into question the achievements of women's liberation by invoking a reactionary image of role models of family. They oppose gender equality and promote homophobia. They fail to deliver when it comes to concrete economic results but they find scapegoats, and xenophobia and racism are resurgent.

Europeans like us in this room who still enjoy their freedom find it more and more difficult to understand those who try to survive as best they can under such circumstances. We have forgotten what this fear is like, a fear that is spreading now in parts of central Eastern and in south Eastern Europe.

The current EU presidency, as far as the Romanian government is concerned, is a disgrace. This fear, it may soon spread elsewhere, too. In Italy, in Austria, in the Czech Republic. The enemies of an open society are at the gates, also in Western and Northern Europe, in France as well as in Germany, Denmark or Sweden. They have been a driving force in the Brexit

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referendum. Direct democracy anyway is a choice method for right-wing populists. They call for it. This sheds doubt on this concept of democracy which has been hailed for many years as a way to make our societies more democratic, also by left-wing parties.

Whatever the causes for the current development, and there are many:

Who would deny the following: There is a growing divide in Europe that is endangering the European project as well as our model of society. Some national governments do not accept democratic change anymore. They want to control their societies and they don't like Europe, because Europe stands for the absence of fear, but they need their citizens to be afraid in order to control them. And the political forces that share this concept of power have also been growing in strength in Western Europe. Populists and extremists are waiting in the wings.

Consequently, the European elections see us at a crossroads. Either these forces will be pushed back or they will hold their ground and gain even more strength. The latter would bring them closer to taking over in even more European countries. Then again, a roll-back of this populist wave could result in their defeat also in those countries where they have got into power.

The coming European elections may or may not be elections of destiny, a "Schicksalswahl" as some leading German politicians have put it. But they will definitely be a vital opportunity to prove the Europeans' resilience against authoritarianism and illiberal, nationalist thinking.

Once in power these illiberal forces start to change the rules so that – all the while maintaining seemingly democratic structures, they make sure that they stay in power. For them opposition is "treason" and those critical of the government are "traitors", traitors of the real people. When all this happens and it is happening in some European Union member states, not only styles of government, also societies begin to change, too.

People's behaviour begins to change, first in public, eventually also in private. Who can you still trust? Colleagues, friends, family? We are here at the hottest hotspot of the Cold War. But this is not just a reminiscence of the former GDR. Nor is it a keen imagination as in Orwell's Big Brother or Huxley's Brave New World. It's a reality in today's Hungary, a real threat tomorrow in Poland and in Romania, and if we don't resist, the day after tomorrow everywhere in Europe.

In other words, if the coming European elections are to be an opportunity for the open society, then this must mean that we have to fight for liberal, pro-European parties to win and push back the populist and authoritarian parties and movements, not only in our countries but also there where they already hold the power. For otherwise, civil society with an active citizenship, the open society as we know it, will also soon belong to the past.

The National Network for Civil Society "BBE" is an important pro-European actor in Germany. What I really appreciate about this network is that it doesn't treat the promotion of the European idea merely as an accompanying but rather as a key aspect, as an integral part of its mission. And you (*Ansgar, Frank etc.*) are completely right, for the European idea and citizens' empowerment - Europe and freedom - they do go hand in hand.

Europe and freedom are inextricably linked, which is precisely why populists and right-wing extremist parties and movements are trying to destroy the European Union. They are anti-European because they deny the idea of freedom that is inherent to the European idea. They hate and they fear liberal democracy and they fear the idea of an open society. For the open society is also a major barrier to the manipulation of reality. A diverse and active civil society which is the trademark of an open society holds governments accountable. It is an indispensable part of the system of checks and balances.

Therefore, it is evident that freedom of the press also cannot exist without an open society. Hence, the current fight is more than just between pro- and anti-European forces, it is between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. But Europe is an important, possibly the most important line of defence in this seminal struggle.

The death of the European idea would necessarily affect our liberal society's immune system and further bring down its defences. And there is no liberal democracy without an open society and no open society without liberal democracy.

So, this is the starting position of the run up to the European elections end of May 2019. Freedom or fear. Active citizenship or allegiance. Liberal democracy and an open pro-European society or authoritarianism and nationalism in an uncivil society.

Now, do we as active citizens and freedom-loving people need to be afraid? Will the European elections see Le Pen and Gauland, Salvini and Strache, Orbán and Kaczynski triumphant? Will these elections determine our destiny, or will they present us with a great opportunity?

The choice will be vital but it still lies in our power to bring about a turn of the tide. We do not have to be afraid. You have asked me: What opportunities for a more open society will the elections bring? The question is well chosen because it is optimistic and implies that freedom ultimately will prevail. However, we should not be overly assertive because there is a number of real problems that need to be tackled. So, what opportunities for a more open society will the elections bring?

Before I answer this question, I want to underline that these opportunities for a more open society can only come to light if this society - the European society, and its national sub-societies - finds a new balance and more justice.

If too many people are so annoyed with their elites, so desperate that they choose to follow selfish liars like Boris Johnson or outright fascists like Matteo Salvini, then we cannot pretend that nothing has happened.

If there is a widening gap between those who can enjoy the material opportunities of an open society and those who cannot afford to do so, then we have to find concrete answers to the eminent social question that divides our societies into haves and have-nots.

People can only be active citizens if their basic requirements are met, and, which is equally important, if they feel accepted and respected. In other words, active citizenship, a vivid civil society, has a number of prerequisites. Those are partly institutional, partly cultural, but to an important extent also social.

If the upcoming elections endanger the functioning of the European Union because an anti-European formal or informal alliance could win so many seats that Parliament will effectively be blocked, then the very future of the European Union as integral part and guarantor of freedom and liberal democracy is at stake.

Now, one important opportunity for a more open society brought about by these elections may be more awareness for the necessity to stop this widening social gap within our national societies as well as between the European Union member states.

Thus, the European Pillar of Social Rights can be a beginning. The same goes for the Strategic Investment Fund or the future programme InvestEU. But this is not enough. This is by far not good enough. The European Union needs a New Deal, a New Deal that also means some sacrifices but eventually secures this continent's unity, freedom and prosperity.

In actual fact, we can make Europe more social, a place of solidarity and cohesion and not just of competitiveness. We can make it happen by encouraging our leaders to take keener steps towards more social cohesion within the Union. What about a European reinsurance scheme to support the national unemployment insurance systems? What about more effective taxation of those who so easily evade their responsibilities towards our societies? Everybody wants the transnational companies to pay their due share of taxes. What about massive trans-European infrastructure projects making the Union a world champion in digitalisation but according to our understanding and values. The Europeans can make it happen if they use the full potential of their Union.

There is a huge opportunity there for more justice, for our societies, and for new sources of revenue for the European Union with which to finance for instance such a European unemployment reinsurance scheme and more investment in infrastructure and services of general interest.

Equal opportunities for the European citizens according to their skills and qualifications based on high quality education for all. We can make it happen if we only want to. A truly European labour market eventually can help tackle the challenge of demographic change. Making Europe happen and getting those back on board who feel disenchanting, that's one massive opportunity of these elections.

European identity cannot be built in an arena of national egotism in which everybody seeks to give as little as necessary for and take as much as possible out of this European Union. More solidarity does not mean socialism but the willingness to fully explore the potential of this Union's citizens. A new sense of purpose for this Union, that's another opportunity. The best driving forces for innovation and fair competition will be and have always been those of an open society.

Making Europe happen means that we need to present this choice between a vigorous civil society in a liberal democracy with a social market economy, and a seemingly uniform society in an illiberal democracy with an economy based on corruption. A functioning liberal democracy needs citizens who through their civic involvement contribute to a society based on tolerance, non-discrimination, justice and solidarity. It requires a vibrant civil society in which citizens voluntarily engage in civic activities and without fear of government reprisals.

However, civil society organisations and initiatives can only perform their stabilising functions if the political, legal and social framework allows. The European elections are the opportunity to reaffirm this Western model of civilisation and regain lost ground in some of the EU member states. There is an opportunity for an informal democratic alliance between civil society and the anti-authoritarian, anti-populist political parties. Populists benefit from social disharmony. As opposed to that, civil society's voluntary activities strengthen identity and social cohesion. They encourage freedom and independence. Finding more opportunities for an open society means strengthening liberal democracy's and civil society's resilience against authoritarian tendencies.

These European elections will show more clearly than ever that civil society and active citizenship play a key role in preserving liberal democracy in Europe. Only a strong and diverse civil society can defend liberal democracy and freedom and preserve Europe from the false promises of a guided, illiberal democracy.

It is our generations' responsibility to stop the advance of these forces of denial. We must not falter in the face of this challenge. We are still stronger than them. And we shall prevail. Let's make it happen.

Thank you.