

ENGAGE.EU and Liberal Democracy

Speech of Professor Thomas Puhl – Doctor Honoris Causa of UNWE

September 25, 2024

Esteemed guests,

Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply grateful and humbled to be here today. As Rector of the University of Mannheim, the coordinating university of the European University Alliance “ENGAGE.EU”, it is a privilege to celebrate the success of our remarkable partnership – the success of ENGAGE.EU and our partnership with the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) here in Sofia. Today, I am honoured to receive the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa from UNWE.

I perceive this honour as a reflection of our joint work. It highlights the strong and fruitful relationship we have built within the ENGAGE.EU family.

ENGAGE.EU exemplifies what we can achieve when we work together. Our alliance unites 9, soon 10 universities from all over Europe, creating a strong and closely connected research and educational alliance. UNWE, as one of our founding members, has been crucial in shaping the direction and objectives of ENGAGE.EU from the beginning.

Let me just mention a few of the early contributions of UNWE:

Since the establishment of ENGAGE.EU in 2020, UNWE has been a key player in managing our communication and dissemination efforts. The ENGAGE.EU website, designed by UNWE, is more than a digital portal; it is a vibrant hub that showcases our shared achievements, resources, and the collaborative spirit that defines our partnership.

Every time we visit Sofia, we are struck by the warm hospitality extended to us. Just the week before last, UNWE hosted another two-day conference in Sofia, gathering around 20 participants to focus on our “Work Package” that is dedicated to dissemination, communication and impact. As the coordinator of this work package, UNWE has taken on the crucial tasks of establishing the dissemination office.

For instance, it is thanks to UNWE's strong connections that Illiana Ivanova, the European Commissioner for Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture, will be addressing us with a video message at our conference in Vienna at the end of October.

ENGAGE.EU offers study courses across the alliance. UNWE put together our common Course Catalogue, a source of information which allows students and learners to filter courses by universities, languages, and whether they are available on-site or online. This ensures that potentially 125,000 students and roughly 17.000 researchers across our alliance have access to a flexible and inclusive education that meets their needs. In this way, all participating universities can expand the range of courses on offer for their own students.

In addition to fostering the exchange of our students, UNWE's commitment to supporting the next generation of researchers has been exemplary:

UNWE hosted the first ENGAGE.EU Conference for Early-Stage Researchers & Young Scholars in 2022, one year before we even started to fully focus on PhD programs. Participants from different disciplines were warmly welcomed in Sofia and were able to work in small groups on different research topics, such as “the Role of the EU Financial Sector in the Transition to a Green Economy” or “Leadership and Feedback in a Post-Covid Environment”.

In 2023, the university hosted another significant conference on 'Decent Work and Economic Growth: Current Issues and Advances Towards SDG 8.' and will continue this trajectory with an upcoming conference in November, on 'Responsible Production and Consumption: Current Issues and Advances Towards SDG12.'

These events further solidify UNWE's commitment to addressing the challenges of sustainable development and connecting Early-Stage Researchers.

This aligns perfectly with UNWE's broader engagement: As the host of the National Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in Bulgaria, UNWE brings together key players from academia, business, government, and civil society to collaborate on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. This commitment showcases UNWE's engagement to address global challenges at the national level and make a positive impact on the future.

A tangible example for an event specifically designed for ENGAGE.EU-students was the ENGAGE.EU “Expedition Week” at UNWE in October 2023. The event involved 30 students of different disciplines from seven partner universities. The students were divided into four

interdisciplinary teams and, under the guidance of several mentors, worked on real-life challenges related to Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities.

The topics included case studies provided by the National Association of Municipalities in Bulgaria and the Directorate for Sport and Youth Activities of Sofia Municipality. Challenges included the creation of models for hospitable cities for citizens, tourists, businesses and sport. The aim was to encourage students to reflect critically and creatively about concrete challenges of urban sustainability.

Such initiatives (or similar ones) take place at all partner universities at ENGAGE.EU.

For example, we have introduced lighthouse PhD Programs and labs of co-creation. These labs provide spaces for collaboration between students, researchers, and business professionals.

The Global Sustainable Development Pilot is another significant initiative, focusing on addressing global challenges and promoting sustainability. That is how we are developing into a pan-European campus where young European citizens are being molded - in terms of language, culture and on the foundation of shared European values.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While the ENGAGE.EU alliance exemplifies positive integration and offers collaboration opportunities all over Europe, our continent evidently is confronted with increasing challenges to its unity and democratic principles.

Talking about these challenges, I less refer to the external threat of military force, by the war on Ukraine, it's democratic development and freely chosen approach to the EU – war that the Russian attack has brought back to Europe on a scale that is unparalleled after 1945.

I rather refer to what many of us conceive as a weakening of democracy from within: a gradual process of “democratic deconsolidation” which takes place within some of Europe's member states – and beyond as well (a number of us, for example, look with concern at the outcome of November 5 in the US ...).

But first, let me clarify the kind of “democracy” that I am talking about. I don't mean authoritarian “People's Democracies” like North Korea, but “liberal democracies” in the Western tradition. In this type of constitutional system, political power isn't based on the leading role of a party; or hereditary within a family, but such political power is legitimized and limited by a constitution.

It's "government by laws", not by people. It effectively guarantees basic rights – such as human dignity, freedom of speech and mass media as well as free and equal elections. These values are protected by a system of checks and balances with effective access for all citizens to independent courts to monitor government. Separation of powers prevents that too much power is concentrated in the hands of few – for it is a common lecture that mankind has learned that concentration of political power in one or few hands leads to abuse and is a threat to freedom.

These principles of a liberal democracy are more and more under pressure. "Illiberal democracy" is openly advocated by an EU-member's prime minister. Authoritarian, populist, often nationalist movements are gaining support in many European states. In Germany, my own country, during the past weeks, in 3 states of the federation the extreme right party "Alternative for Germany" (AfD) for the first time assembled roughly 1/3 of the voters behind it. It has become the largest (or almost largest) party in those parts of Germany. And what troubles me most: even for young voters (between 18 and 29) the AfD was by far the most attractive choice. (Fortunately, the prognoses for most parts of Germany and at the national level are different.)

The reasons for the appeal of extremist parties are manifold: People are facing a complex set of problems – real or imagined:

- The Covid pandemic and the prospect of potential future pandemics
- climate change, extreme weather events (as recently in middle und Eastern Europe),
- war in Europe,
- economic turbulences,
- the hard-to-evaluate effects of globalization, digital transformation, artificial intelligence, immigration
- and accelerated, sometimes disruptive technical, economic and cultural change:

All of these phenomena are perceived not so much as challenges to be tackled, some even as chances to be used, but as threats to physical safety, job security, or social status. They create feelings of instability and anxiety about the future.

Disillusionment with traditional political institutions and political majorities, and the slow pace of political actions to address these issues contribute to a sense of urgency and frustration. Thus, voters seek salvation from those who offer simple, often radical solutions to complex problems. They follow populist rhetoric against the "political establishment" – rather than well balanced, fact-based and thought-out concepts.

Once such movements have succeeded in becoming part of the government, they often not only try to implement their political announcements (which is perfectly legitimate). Instead, they go on to increase and cement their political power permanently.

This authoritarian trait contrasts directly with the characteristic of democratic legitimacy that transfers political power for a limited timeslot and has to be renewed periodically. Authoritarian regimes try to petrify their power:

- by reducing the independence and competences of the courts (especially of the administrative and constitutional courts whose control they try to evade)
- by assigning their followers to the judiciary (court packing)
- by modifying the electoral system (e.g. by Gerrymandering),
- by constraining the political freedoms (of speech, of the press, of academia ...) or in general:
- by penetrating and dominating civil society (“synchronization” of societal players, like trade unions).

There is no “one size fits all” cure for these risks to the health of democracy.

Political leaders and institutions must, of course,

- do their job in order to convince their electorate again, e.g.:
- seek social, intergenerational and international justice, fair and appropriate solutions for pressing issues,
- listen to and communicate well with the people,
- establish sound educational institutions from kindergarten to university and media regulation that effectively combats the spread of fake news.

Most of the challenges mentioned only can be effectively tackled through multilateralism – in cooperation, especially among democracies – not in isolation and nationalism. But the crucial defenders of democracies, are their citizens. Each and every one of them. Because the modern secular state is based on conditions it can’t guarantee: Liberal Democracy depends on the responsible use of our basic rights, on the active participation of its citizens. Each of them is an “influencer” – not for cosmetics or fashionable sneakers, but for democracy. Democracy can’t survive if everybody makes use of their freedom in splendid isolation and retreats in their nutshell – as Diogenes is said to have done in his barrel.

So it's up to u to vote in elections, to communicate, to assemble for our causes, and to act responsibly in our roles in our universities, families or civil society in order to foster societal and political resilience against the foes of liberal democracy. Freedom and democracy are never "finally achieved", but a constant task, a never-ending mission – for all of us.

At the universities of ENGAGE.EU, we are doing exactly this. Together, we examine problems from multiple perspectives, learning from and listening to one another. Here, researchers & students of economics collaborate with architecture students or medical staff to tackle the major challenges of our time, such as Data Science and Climate Change. Through this collaboration, we help young people realize that democracy thrives when critical thinking and diverse voices engage in respectful and fact-based discourse and work together.

ENGAGE.EU stands as a powerful symbol of how education and dialogue can both enhance and renew our democratic ideals.

Together, we strive to build a Europe that is more connected and more democratic. In this vision, every idea contributes to the collective progress, and every voice has a place.

As I conclude, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all the dedicated staff and collaborators whose tireless efforts and passion drive ENGAGE.EU forward. Your commitment, your enthusiasm, and teamwork are the heart and soul of our mission.

In this context, I am especially honoured to receive the Doctor Honoris Causa from the University of National and World Economy here in Sofia – and I accept it on behalf of all who have contributed to our shared vision.

Let's keep the conversations going. Let's continue to ENGAGE.

Thank you very much!

Благодаря много!