



Deutschland 2016

OSCE Conference on Tolerance and Diversity

Speech by Ms. Renan Demirkan

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Federal Minister,
Excellencies,
ladies and gentlemen,

I am overwhelmed and particularly moved to have the honour of speaking to you today.

However, since I only have ten minutes, I would like to start offering you food for thought right away and without any further ado. This is what I was invited here to do, and this is what is on your agenda for today – but please also forgive me for this somewhat abridged presentation.

Respect

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by three things: **what unites us, understanding and respect**. To this day, this continues to be my holy trinity, a lens through which I seek to comprehend the world.

This is a characteristic that I, with small variations, surely share with millions of migrants. As the child of Circassian parents with a Turkish passport, who grew up with a devout mother and a philosophising father, Immanuel Kant and the Koran were my seminal points of reference. In both worlds, the “Golden Rule” and the “categorical imperative” were the highest purpose of human action:

Do as you would be done by.

This sentiment is as old as the human race. Act out of consideration for your neighbour, have empathy with them and take responsibility for your actions. That is the definition of respect.

(Respicere: to think of, look back, be considerate, look after)

I’m talking about respect. Not about tolerance.

And the fact that this is more than a semantic difference is something I discuss in more detail in my book, “Respekt: Heimweh nach Menschlichkeit” (Respect: longing for humanity).

Why not tolerance? Allow me to offer you a brief definition.

One synonym for tolerance is “forbearance”. Philosophical dictionaries define tolerance as a sign of self-confidence and of the secureness of one’s own position.

This is therefore an act of charity vouchsafed by the secure to the insecure, or by the majority to the minority, the rich to the poor, native population to refugees.

A transitory mode of thought that simulates understanding, but which imputes distance.

As the German-American philosopher Herbert Marcuse wrote in a 1965 essay, this shameful tolerance is merely “an end in itself” and the compulsive behaviour of the political class, which “reduces suppression only to the extent required for protecting man and animals from cruelty and aggression”.

Perhaps this is the reason why scarcely anyone is incensed when the united international right almost instinctively cloaks itself with a “tolerant” world view, all the while screaming, as a “cultural necessity”, a message of racist hate and attacks to the world.

I cannot and will not reprise their arguments.

Even the avowed “tolerant” leftwingers apparently see no discrepancy between human rights and an “upper limit” for refugees.

It is therefore apparent that those who use the word “tolerance” do not have a unifying concept in mind. On the contrary, they reinforce inequality and constantly produce new authoritarian ideas.

History books are full of wars that broke out owing to such ideas. And those who are allegedly “secure” are dropping bombs to defend their desired status at the cost of millions of dead and refugees. I refer only to Syria here, which stands for the two dozen wars around the world (as of 2015/Frieden-fragen.de) that constantly lead to fresh suffering.

We must change the way we think, and as clearly and consistently as possible.

For we have long since ceased to be “children of a technological revolution that we do not understand”, as the French essayist Viviane Forrester described the digital transformation twenty years ago.

Today, we are captivated by, at times even at the mercy of, a sea change whose networked threat potential has become entirely unfathomable and, what is more, barely possible to control as it now affects every area of our lives. From the darknet of racists and paedophiles to government espionage to the disaster that was the Fukushima nuclear accident.

Never before have individuals been so transparent, so closely connected and so anonymous at the same time.

However, what makes this threat many times more explosive is the fact that wealth has never been as unevenly distributed as it is today.

One per cent of the global population, around 70 million people, have more wealth than the whole of the remaining 99 per cent, around seven billion people! (Der Spiegel, 18 January 2016)

This is why the next stage of development in human history must be the story of a new togetherness that is much more than the story of *tolerated* coexistence to date.

“No man is an island”, wrote the English poet and catholic cleric John Donne in the 16th century.

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were:

any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind,

and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

“Respect me so that I can respect myself” is the desire of all who call for respect.

The Muslim calls for respect from the Christian.

Just as the old from the young.

Or black from white.

Those with disabilities call for respect from those who are able-bodied.

The powerless from the powerful.

And the poor from the rich.

Respect is an anthropological principle

and the epigraph of humanity.

Let us talk about how we want to live. How we work.

How we can improve the way we live, heal the sick, eat and learn.

How we can improve our control over stock exchanges and banks.

How we can protect our environment.

How we can distribute income and resources more fairly.

Let us talk about all the things that unite people, instead of focusing on what divides us and increasing inequality.

Our objective for the new century must be **a capitalism** that benefits the common good, that does not measure productivity in terms of growth, as was the past mindset of the industrial age, **but which rather defines itself in terms of sustainability and quality of life.**

We need a caring form of market economy that has the potential to close each and every poverty trap with a global basic income.

We must leave the comfort zone of toleration and **work on understanding.**

We must **learn** to walk in others' shoes and **learn** to see the world through their eyes.

I firmly believe that – if we want to understand each other, truly understand each other, which is about more than just talking and listening,

but is a question of **empathy** and **mutual knowledge about one other, a home and an extension of our own personal cosmos!**

that if we understand **who** each and every one of us is;

and **why** they turned out the way they did;

and **why** they have their own interests and needs;

and **what** unites us beyond all borders –

if all of the representatives of the 57 nations here today were to boil world politics down to the level of their country's individual citizens, or down to themselves,

then we could scrap all weapons and tear down all borders and walls tomorrow.

If we understood as **Hannah Arendt did** – "... I want to understand. And if others understand – in the same sense that I have understood – that gives me a feeling of satisfaction, like feeling at home."

Perhaps you consider my pitch to be too utopian, and you're wondering right now how this woman can be such a daydreamer in times like these?

Allow me to respond by taking a leaf out of Shakespeare's book:

We – each and every human being – are such stuff as dreams are made on. Even though we are not always able to choose whether it will turn out to be a good dream or a nightmare, each of us is able, when all is said and done, to decide how to shape our own destiny.

Do you know what a newborn's first reflex is – after breathing, that is?

They make a fist! And this reflex is the same the world over: the newborn stretches out their arms, flails and makes a little fist!

That is a reflex from our prehistory – from when we were still apes. Newborns essentially grab their mother's fur – to find succour and to feel that they belong.

This means that humans are social beings thanks to their DNA. And yet, time and again, we behave like self-important egomaniacs, and often like brainless cannibals.

We allow ourselves, as if hypnotised and without any resistance at all, to be driven further and further apart by a lucid technology whose velocity leaves us breathless and powerless to begin to comprehend the floods of words and images, let alone to respond with the same speed.

According to a survey that has just been published, over sixty percent of all Internet users spend their time online with their smartphones in their hands.

This means that millions of people spend hours looking neither to the right nor to the left, but just silently and straight in front of them, at a tiny little screen, and usually with earbuds in their ears – countless isolated little egos in search of succour from the fur of an app.

It is not far-fetched, but even understandable that the narrow world in front of their eyes gives rise to a narrow world in their heads.

And yet political closed-mindedness is not acceptable.

Understanding does not mean the absence of conflicts, of course. On the contrary, comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, as Arendt once wrote. A criminal knows that they are a criminal. Even an IS terrorist knows that they are a murderer!

Understanding a crime, that is to say appreciating its causes, does not simply dismiss it as the will of God, but is about taking responsibility for human existence.

This takes work and is certainly not something that we can achieve overnight. But if this is what we want to do, then it is possible to overcome what divides us and for us to agree to the unifying principle.

We need the insight, the will and the patience in order to bequeath to our children a better world than the one that we inherited from our forebears.

And no one is more keenly aware about how much work this involves than you, ladies and gentlemen, who work for the OSCE, an organisation that stands for a unifying concept of international peace and stability.

And you also know that none of this is possible in totalitarian systems.

This is impossible with nation-state dogmas and with nationalist hate speech against other cultures.

Democracy can only be preserved by protecting the humanist texture of our civilization.

Democracy is about discourse and freedom; it is a process and is about doubt, co-determination and solidarity.

It is only dictatorships that are complete and sealed off.

Isolationism and racism are not feasible options – neither for Germany, nor for any other country. There is no peaceful alternative to open borders and the freedom of cultures. Those who claim the opposite are not an alternative, but are the old warmongers in new clothing.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my address, I cannot think differently as I learned to reconcile differences from a very early age.

I was informed by the love of Muslims, the deeds of Christians and the dialectical thought of the Jews.

And now I would like to close with the most important sentences that have had a formative influence on my life:

My grandmother used to say:

“If someone reaches out their hand to you, then stop walking”.

Priests and rabbis used to tell me:

“Get as close to me as you can; I’ll go the rest of the way.”

And the third fundamental thought came from Nietzsche:

“What do you regard as most humane? To spare someone shame.”

I implore all of you here today to talk until we understand each other.

“You cannot change the past”, wrote Hans Fallada almost one hundred years ago in Wolf among Wolves “but you can change yourself, for the future”.

Thank you for listening.