

On behalf of the European Students' Union, I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak to you here today. My name is Iris and I am currently a member of the Executive Committee of the European Students' Union. The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 45 national student unions from 40 countries. We promote the interests of 20 million students from the European Higher Education Area towards all important European decision-making bodies, including the European Union, the Council of Europe, the UNESCO and the Bologna Follow-Up Group. As VSS-UNES-USU is a member of the European Students' Union, we also represent the interests of Swiss students.

There are many things I could tell you today. But I will limit myself to the topic of higher education governance and financing and how this relates to academic freedom.

For some years now, higher education democracy in Europe has been developing in an increasingly frightening direction. Experts agree – academic freedom is in danger, and we are in the midst of an ever-growing European crisis. 'Why so?', you might ask.

The crisis becomes obvious when we look at countries like Belarus, Russia, Turkey or Hungary. Students from Belarus are in prison or had to flee & university rectors are now put into place by Lukashenka, in Turkey, student LGBTI groups are effectively abolished, with the CEU, an entire Hungarian university went into exile to Austria. The list for Europe goes on.

But higher education democracy does not erode overnight. On the contrary, it is a creeping process that can also be observed in the so-called 'western' countries of Europe. The factors that favour this process are manifold but important to understand. On the one hand, the massive underfunding of higher education institutions leads them to follow more and more the logic of entrepreneurial institutions. The resulting dependence on private companies and state third-party funding programmes has made higher education institutions vulnerable to external influences. Additionally, market-based management principles conflict time and again with democratic approaches to higher education. The professionalisation of management levels and the elimination of higher education institutions committees in favour of quicker and more entrepreneurial decision-making processes are developments that are tied to the commodification and de-democratization of higher education institutions.

On the other hand political shifts have led to right-wing anti-scientific and anti-academic parties to gain control over governments and thus the higher education sector across Europe. Especially those right-wing parties, but unfortunately also in many cases parties of the so called "democratic middle", have been introducing higher education reforms in recent years all across Europe with the aim to restrict higher education institutions' democratic governance. Resulting from this, especially student but also staff participation in governance bodies and processes are being more and more restricted. The reason for this is simple: students and sometimes even the general academic community have always been on the forefront of fights for democracy, equity and social politics which often is a thorn in the side of those in power.

Higher education institutions as havens of knowledge and democracy bear public responsibility, and the academic community needs protection from any developments that restrict academic freedom, including student academic freedom. Defensible ("wehrhafte") democracies must ensure that democracy is lived at all levels - this includes higher education institutions. And this means that students, not only as the largest status group in higher education, but also as part of the academic community, need sufficient rights of participation at all levels of decision-

making. It also requires a balance between status groups, governance levels and other stakeholders to ensure that the democratic check-and-balances at higher education institutions work. Additionally, it needs a high degree of transparency and accountability structures within the higher education sector so that misconduct is visible and correctable. In Belarus, Turkey, Hungary and many other countries, we see that students have a special role to play in defending academic freedoms and democratic principles. Any restriction on the participation of students and student representatives on the part of higher education institutions and legislation also means a threat to academic freedom and thus democracy. Therefore, we must ensure that our rights to participate as full members of the academic community are not curtailed within higher education, because it has often been us students who have been the first to unveil and criticize dangerous developments within higher education, such as the increasing commodification and de-democratization, as well as in the broader society, such as the rise of anti-scientific and anti-democratic political streams.

Europe is currently in crisis mode. In addition to attacks on academic freedom and a steady erosion of higher education funding and democracy, the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic and the war of on the Ukraine have left higher education institutions and their members even more vulnerable than they had already been. In many student cities, there is not enough affordable housing due to policy neglect regarding the housing market and demographic change. In most European countries, there are no or inadequate systems of student grant systems, so that students from disadvantaged backgrounds and nowadays even from the middle class have difficulty financing their studies. In addition, students across Europe are suffering from the rising cost of living as a result of the crises of recent years and are left wondering whether to heat, eat or give up higher education altogether. At the same time, we must not forget that student poverty is not a new phenomenon, but a structural one that is well known and at the same time neglected by governments across Europe. According to the Human Rights Charter, poverty violates basic human rights, because everyone has a right to live in dignity. If we as a society take human rights seriously, we cannot accept that any group in society has to live in poverty, including students.

Together, as students in Europe, we must fight to turn the tide. Anti-scientific, anti-democratic and anti-student policies must be stopped in the name of human rights and fundamental democratic values. ESU has adopted a student rights charter and is advocating for student rights on the European and international level. Likewise, as VSS-UNES-USU and as representatives of your local unions, you make an important contribution to the fight for and defence of the rights of students and academics at national and local level.

But enough of the many words. I hope and am sure that you will have lively debates at this meeting and come to good decisions together to continue to represent the interests of Swiss students loudly and powerfully in the coming year. Thank you very much.