

Manfred Nowak

Graduation and Inauguration Speech
Vienna Master of Arts in Human Rights
University of Vienna, 4 October 2019

Dear Vice Rector Hirtzenberger, dear Secretary General Greminger, dear Christoph Liebscher, dear Ms. Schmid, dear Mr. Altmann, dear graduating and inaugurating students, families, colleagues and friends,

“May you live in interesting times” is the motto of this year’s art biennale in Venice. Art is such a powerful medium, and most exhibitions deal with human rights topics. We are indeed living in interesting times. It depends on our point of view whether we experience these times primarily as threats, as challenges or as opportunities and driving forces for positive change. During recent years, I got used to the fact that human rights conferences were opened with speeches which claimed that human rights, democracy and the rule of law were under attack, that the space of civil society was shrinking and that the era of human rights, which had influenced world politics since the end of World War II to a considerable extent, was slowly coming to an end. If one looks at the current state of political affairs in some of the oldest democracies on our planet, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, or in other powerful States, including the Russian Federation, China, India, Nigeria or Brazil, one can easily get the impression that right wing populism, new authoritarianism and irrationality has replaced politics which at least had claimed to be based on common values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

There are, however, also a number of **recent developments that give hope**. In the old democracies, checks and balances are still working to control politicians who openly break constitutional rules and principles. Some of the most inhuman decisions of President Trump, such as separating and detaining infants from their parents at the US-Mexican border for the purpose of deterring irregular migration or imposing an absolute ban of immigration to citizens of a number of so-called “rogue States” were simply declared null and void by independent courts on the basis of public interest human rights litigation. Even an impeachment procedure

seems no longer impossible. In a recent landmark judgment of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was told that he has to respect the sovereignty of the British Parliament, one of the oldest and most powerful principles of the unwritten British constitution. After years of hesitation, the European Union finally decided to take legal action against blatant violations of human rights and the rule of law in Poland and Hungary, where Prime Minister Victor Orban openly advocates the establishment of “illiberal democracies”. Right wing populist parties in Italy and Austria, who were proud to have imposed inhuman and degrading measures against immigrants and some of the most vulnerable groups in our societies, and who thought that nobody could stop their ruthless ambitions of unlimited power were ousted from governments by democratic procedures in which the Presidents of both republics played an influential role.

One of the most promising developments of recent months are the “**Fridays for Future**” strikes and demonstrations in a growing number of countries, in which children stand up for their own rights and for the rights of future generations to a decent survival on our planet which is seriously threatened by climate change and by the irresponsible attitude of our political and economic elites which either still deny the anthropogenic nature of global warming or who play down its devastating effects. It is simply shameful that the Heads of States and Governments at the recent climate summit of the United Nations in New York needed to be told by a 16 year old Swedish girl what needs to be done to save our planet! For her brave and non-compromising initiatives and actions, **Greta Thunberg** will soon receive the **Right Livelihood Award**, one of the most prestigious awards, better known as the “Alternative Nobel Prize”.

Next week I will present to the United Nations General Assembly a **Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty**, which I was requested to lead on behalf of the Secretary General. On the basis of a huge amount of data collected for this Global UN Study and scientific methods of statistical extrapolation, I will explain to the international community that more than **7 million children are currently detained** per year in all kinds of institutions, prisons, immigration and other detention facilities contrary to the clear language of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which permits deprivation of liberty only as a truly exceptional “measure of last resort”. This Global Study is the result of a joint research by many different stakeholders, including the Global Campus of Human Rights in Venice and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights. Two of my closest collaborators at

the University of Vienna, **Georges Younes, your program manager** and **Manu Krishan, graduate of the very first generation of the Vienna Master**, who are both present today, were decisive for the success of the Study. Without their help, enthusiasm and dedication, I would have given up this enormous task, because States were not willing to provide the necessary funds and support despite the fact that the United Nations General Assembly had unanimously invited the Secretary General to commission this Global Study. It was only thanks to the generous funding by the **Right Livelihood Foundation** and another private foundation that we were able to continue our work, to finalise the Study and to disseminate its findings and recommendations in all world regions with the aim of starting a process of follow up which will hopefully lead to drastically reducing the number of children behind bars. The Global Study is the beginning of a long term cooperation with the Right Livelihood Foundation with the aim of putting the **rights of children and of future generations** at the centre of our teaching and research activities. In times of global threats, challenges and opportunities, from climate change to digitalization, social media, artificial intelligence and new labour, the support and empowerment of children, who are experts in their own rights and are willing to take an active part in political decision making, is the decisive game changer which can lead to a more positive vision for the 21st century.

Many of the **graduates of the 6th generation of students in the Vienna Master of Arts in Human Rights** have selected highly interesting and innovative topics for their Master thesis relating to the rights of children, environmental rights and other future oriented topics, challenges and opportunities. I was fascinated by many discussions we had last week when you with great self-assurance defended your theses. I most warmly congratulate you to your outstanding achievements and welcome you as our human rights ambassadors in our growing alumni network of Vienna educated human rights defenders. You will start working in interesting times, full of challenges and opportunities. We are proud of you and sure that you will meet these challenges with innovative ideas and will take advantage of new opportunities with enthusiasm.

Dear **students of the 8th generation**, I warmly welcome you to the fascinating world of human rights in the Vienna Master. I had the pleasure of teaching you from early morning until late in the afternoon during the last two days and enjoyed to discuss with you some of the most challenging topics related to human rights in the 21st century. Although you are coming from many different countries

and regions, with diverse professional backgrounds, and have met each other only very recently, I already got the impression that you are engaged in a highly promising team building process that will lead to a strong team of future human rights defenders. I wish you much fun, joy and inspiration for the coming two years!

Finally, I would like to express my **gratitude to all my colleagues** from different faculties of **Vienna University**, from the **Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights** and from various international organizations who are teaching in our programme for your dedication to our common enterprise. I also thank the **Hermann and Marianne Straniak Stiftung** and the **Austrian Control Bank** for their financial support to our scholarship programme. Most importantly, I once again wish to thank our **wonderful Vienna Master Team** for your enthusiasm, professionalism, dedication and hard work, which makes the Vienna Master of Arts in Human Rights a truly unique experience. We are all proud to be different from other Master programmes through the multiple services, assistance and guidance we provide to you, thanks to Marijana Grandits, Georges Younes, Sabine Mann, Tijana Tesanovic and Leon Cuscoleca. The work of this core Vienna Master Team was supported during the last two years by a growing number of excellent interns from different world regions: Hugo Bittencourt (Brazil), Nadia Khan (United Kingdom), Petros Tsopanakis (Greece), Laura Ruohonen (Finland), Mayra Quispe (Peru), Yu Wang (Finland), Alexander Sauco Merikaetxebarria (Spain), Mehdi Aissaoui (Morocco) and Tijana Tesanovic (Serbia), who today is your Assistant Coordinator. Most recently, we were joined by Fruzsina Toth (Hungary) and Amir Niknejad (Iran). Welcome to our team!

Whether you graduate or start our programme, enjoy this unforgettable day with your friends and families in Vienna and join us for dinner tonight! Be conscious that **you may live in interesting times!**

I thank you for your attention.