

In search of lost universalism

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Opening speech by Matjaz Gruden

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First of all I should like to thank Lena Nemirovskaya, her team and the Bosch Foundation for organising this conference and also for extending me the honour to speak at its opening.

I wish to convey the best regards from the Council of Europe Secretary General Thorbjorn Jagland, who unfortunately could not attend, but who is, as you know, a strong supporter of schools of political studies and follows their work very closely.

I look forward to our discussions over the next two days and also sincerely hope that it will have, in an early future, its follow up in Moscow, in the city and in the country in which Lena and her colleagues have done so much to promote civic education and the values which underpin the common undertakings and cooperation of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe.

I am a lifelong international civil servant. I almost said bureaucrat, but that always annoys Lena. For some reason she has developed a vivid frustration with bureaucracy.

But there it is, and you know that bureaucrats are not known for extravagantly broad horizons or excessive depth of knowledge on complicated philosophical notions. So I admit I was caught slightly off guard by the title of the conference.

But we civil servants can be practical. So I googled universalism and got this bit sorted out rather quickly, hopefully also accurately,

Universalism, according to Wikipedia, is a meta-ethical principle according to which there is an universal ethics which applies to us all, regardless of our race, origin, religion and so on.

Incidentally, I now also know what is a meta-ethical principle, but if you wish to know as well, you can google it yourself.

And when it comes to human rights – finally I got on a more familiar terrain – universalism simply means that there are universal rights and freedoms which apply to all.

What confused me was the « lost » part.

Did we really once have universalism and then lost it? When did we lose it, where, and where was I when all this was happening?

But seriously, while I look forward to understanding that part from listening to people far more knowledgeable as myself over the next two days, I wish to congratulate the organisers for the choice of discussions.

Regardless of the question whether universalism has been lost or it simply has not yet been found at all, the fact is that right now, it is not there, and we are, collectively, in a desperate need of it.

And if we all agree universalism is not there, the question is, what is there.

What meta-ethical, or meta-not-so-ethical concepts of social interaction are governing relations between people on this planet?

I think we all agree that universalism is not a geographic concept. It is a philosophical, social and political concept. It is not global vs regional or local. It is universal versus tribal.

Tribalism, which is in my view is still the dominant form of social and political interaction in the world, comes in many shapes and forms.

On one end you have seemingly benign populism, quick to cater to prejudice and exploit fears in order to score a few quick political points.

You also have realpolitik which emanates from the belief that hypocrisy is both essential to our security and prosperity as well as invisible to everyone else in the world.

Tribalism is sometimes so ingrained and well-intentioned that we are completely unaware that we are practising it.

For example, a few years back when the Council of Europe have been setting up its neighbourhood policy with countries on the southern rim of the Mediterranean and in Central Asia, many governments, with best intentions, insisted we should ask these countries to commit themselves to European values. European. Values.

This is not merely semantic nit picking. If we perceive and present these values in such a narrow way, and especially if we combine this with some restrictive definitions of Europe on geographic, historic, religious or other grounds, we are facilitating the task of those who are peddling alternative, traditional, cultural, you-name-it sets of values.

At the other end of the tribal tribe- to avoid giving you the whole list - are openly authoritarian regimes which are fabricating internal and external threats in order to suppress dissent and consolidate its grip on power. And doing many other nasty things.

The bottom line is that tribalism is a notion which transcends the traditional division between democracies and authoritarian regimes. It appears everywhere, even if in different forms and with different degrees of toxicity and harmfulness.

Another characteristic of tribalism is that we usually possess a very keenly developed sense to recognise tribalism in others and are, as a rule, rather blind when it comes to our own tribal attitudes.

And even if we do, we will always have a tendency to apply less stringent judgments to our own behaviour than the one we apply on the acts of the other.

Because the other, in a tribal world, is always a threat. By default. This, in fact, is the essence of tribalism .

All this are not merely theoretical ruminations. These are not some vague philosophical concepts we are talking about.

Universalism and tribalism are very real political projects with very concrete political, social, economic and security implications.

The struggle for universalism is going on as we speak on many fronts across the world, but one is particularly topical and dramatic.

I just came from Slovenia, my country of origin. Slovenia, as you know, is the latest European country to be confronted by huge numbers of people who are fleeing unthinkable horrors of war and terror.

A universalist approach, if I may recall the definitions offered by Wikipedia, would dictate that these people are entitled to a full respect of their human dignity. That they are helped and treated humanely. This, mind you, does not stem only from Wikipedia definitions, but from our international obligations.

A tribalist approach would be different. It would deny these people the right to be helped by claiming their call for help is false and exaggerated. It would object to their religion, appearance, culture, use of mobile telephones, whatever. It would exaggerate or even fabricate concerns about the risks they represent for public safety, health and any other possible or impossible claim.

Tribalists, finally, will do their utmost to treat these people like numbers, things, a threat, everything but human beings in need.

What is happening in Slovenia, in Europe today, is of course affecting the wellbeing of the hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants.

But eventually, their numbers will drop, hopefully also because there will be some prospects of peace and stability in their countries of origin.

Those who are arriving today will stay, hopefully quickly and successfully integrate. Some will return, either voluntarily or because they will not qualify for the protection under international law.

But what will definitively stay and determine how Europe will look like tomorrow, is our attitude and degree of humanity we will demonstrate, or not demonstrate upon their arrival.

This is why I feel so much respect for Germany and what it is doing to help these people.

It is keeping up the hope that universalism, that humanism, will prevail when it counts the most. But Germany will not succeed if they do not receive help.

And if Germany fails, we will all fail, and a tribalist, dehumanised attitude towards people and between people will be legitimized, and will affect us all, individually and collectively for years, perhaps generations to come.

What do we do to prevent this from happening?

There are no miracle solutions. But we can try. By not being indifferent. By being engaged. By being critical. By being human. And by never giving up.

Universalism, again, is not some vague theoretical notion. It is a political project with clear and concrete features, methods and objectives.

What the Council of Europe is doing is a blueprint for a universalist society. The European Convention on Human Rights is a universalist constitution for Europe.

But even the best and the most progressive blueprints will fail if people are not behind them

If public opinion is not behind them.

If there is no sufficient political will to make them happen.

A few days ago in Ljubljana, a group of students in Ljubljana asked me what could be done to help making sure they happen.

I replied I wished there was a Council of Europe school of political studies in Slovenia. It would have been a start.