

Freedom Must Unfold Again

By Rotger Kindermann, Neuss.

"Freedom" is the title of Angela Merkel's political memoirs. It is the most fundamental human right, the core element of any democracy. Merkel knows its significance very well, having personally experienced what life in both freedom and unfreedom means. This makes it all the more surprising that, in the second half of her long chancellorship, she failed to recognize the growing threats to freedom. Neither the danger posed by Putin to our freedom nor the internal threat of the AfD's increasing influence after the first refugee crisis caught her attention.

Merkel's most politically consequential misjudgment took place at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest. The United States wanted to start the accession process for Ukraine, but Merkel (alongside Sarkozy) refused. Had Ukraine become a NATO member at the time, Putin would never have dared to annex Crimea, let alone attack his neighboring country. Here, Germany bears a heavy responsibility.

In the 1980s, under Helmut Kohl, our unequivocal goal was to promote freedom and democracy wherever there was a peaceful opportunity to do so. This applied particularly to East Germany, not only with the aim of reunification but also to achieve liberation "from the Soviet yoke." Ronald Reagan's famous 1987 call at the Berlin Wall ("Tear down this wall, Mr. G.!") symbolized this aspiration.

Today, however, this ambition has all but vanished, as was clearly buried in Bucharest. And this despite the fact that Putin had already shown his true colors: Vera Politkovskaya was murdered in 2006. Cheap gas was deemed more important, and the preference was for an appeasement strategy (Minsk agreements, etc.).

Since then, freedom and democracy have been in retreat. They are no longer carried forth into the world by Europe as a shining beacon. After the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, we failed to ensure that a geopolitical security belt of democratic states was established around Europe. We neglected to actively, sustainably, and economically support movements like the "Arab Spring" or other liberation efforts.

Instead, new autocracies arose in our immediate neighborhood, including Russia and Turkey. But states that suppress their citizens generate refugee flows—just in the first half of 2022, half a million Russians left their country. For such regimes, war is also a legitimate means of maintaining power. As a result, Europe is now surrounded by ruins and devastated landscapes. Cities like Mariupol, Aleppo, and Gaza, now unrecognizable, stand as tragic symbols of this failure. The consequence? Ever-growing waves of refugees. People are drawn to free, secure, and socially stable Europe.

It is only a matter of time before they set out from Lebanon, Gaza, and possibly Georgia or Moldova. The anti-democratic destabilization has now reached Southeastern Europe. Hungary is not an isolated case—these forces are gaining ground in Slovakia, Serbia, and even Romania. They are already undermining the European Union from within.

In Germany, the current election campaign is heavily focused on the migration issue. Yet we are still far from discussing the real causes of the problem or tackling the root of the issue. The triggers are regimes that force people to flee persecution and oppression. This must be our focus; this is where the course must change. Only by forcing corrupt or religious

dictatorships that encircle Europe into retreat can we break the vicious cycle of uncontrolled refugee flows and political radicalization on our continent.

Meanwhile, many people now see democracy merely as a repair mechanism for solving problems—a limited tool for crisis mitigation. The essential meaning of democracy—that people live in freedom—is being forgotten. The value of freedom is dangerously slipping into the background, and its significance is rarely addressed in the media.

All the more reason why we should see the start of Trump's second presidency as a wake-up call. He challenges us economically and in terms of security, just as the global rise of autocratic regimes and dictatorships—from Azerbaijan to Venezuela—should alarm us.

The conclusion is clear: We must once again set high standards for ourselves and resolutely draw red lines against the enemies of freedom—not the other way around! And we need politicians who can explain these connections.

(Rotger Kindermann, January 23, 2025)