

# OpenForum Prague 2008



citizens of europe

# OpenForum Prague



OpenForum Prague:

## Values in Europe – Ideals and Realities.

19-21 September 2008

*Yuliy Emilov Stoyanov: We all have multiple identities, like Matrioshkas. I like finding out what's inside.*

*Ulf Göpfert: Unity tends towards repressions, dictatorships even favour monoculturalisation. In open societies diversity is one of the major social driving forces we can never have enough of.*

*Frank Burgdörfer: History does not automatically lead somewhere, but of course we have to deal with it. History happens with us, it's no excuse for anything in the present or the future.*

*Rabea Brok: In a democracy the majority exercises the right to define and refine values and norms.*

Values are a difficult matter to talk about as they touch upon intimate personal beliefs and conversation about such issues can both build trust and create tensions. Values are a matter of personal conviction, which needs to be respected unconditionally as a form of human integrity. Nevertheless, any society is based on a rather firm set of norms and values which guarantees social cohesion and political stability and allows for a certain scope of individual differentiation. Disregarding recent debates among historians, politicians and journalists, many doubt that there really exists a European set of values that goes beyond the Western concept of personal freedom and responsibility, human dignity and solidarity, active civil society and market economy, democracy and the rule of law. This has led some to insist that for the future of European integration the creation of a community of values has to be considered a priority issue.

The future of a preserved “European way of life”, based on a set of values, is in any case not certain, neither is its importance and – this question must be permitted too – the need for it. With ever increasing global responsibilities it might happen that the economic club called Europe turns into a political community active abroad, but passive at home. In response to this worrying trend, as engaged citizens living all over Europe we encourage clashes on personal convictions, in order to create and recreate diversity and respect. The aim of OpenForum Prague was to understand the appropriate purpose of the value debate. Should it figure as a guideline for Europe’s global activities for example, but also as a firm grounding for a fully-developed democratic political community, or – more

modestly – as a matter of personal identity.

To understand the importance of a phenomenon it helps to have a closer look at social practices and the normative importance ascribed to it by the actors, however what is usually more intricate is the attempt to identify agents for change. The debate was opened with individual presentations about an item of European value. Each and every participant introduced his or her idea of what normative orientations they conceptualize and experience as genuinely European. With 22 people from ten European countries (Austria, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Serbia and Ukraine) the group was quite varied with regard to geographic origin, personal background, profession and age, so we were eager to make this diversity visible. With the help of displaying various items like art reproductions, books, Euro coins, maps and even travel discount cards they described their personal value preferences with regard to Europe, which ranged from freedom of speech and expression, secularism, social security, mobility, humour and, yes, also doubt. There seemed to be a big potential for dispute and misunderstanding!

Conversation became tense when history entered stage. Previously, during Friday’s panel discussion, philosopher Alexander Tomský provoked passionate statements from the audience by claiming that the schism of 1054 had established a lasting division between Western and Eastern Europe, and only catholic Western Europe could be rightly seen as humanist Europe. Now some participants voiced a similar conviction, namely that a value loses its conciseness



*Alena Falatová: Tolerance towards minorities first and foremost means respect. We accept their differences, they have to accept our rules.*

when not traced back to, and preserved according to, its historical roots. Once this position is consolidated the question arises who can claim ownership of a certain set of values. Such thinking gave a risky spin to the debate. The fundamental question – “What are our values?” – may be understood in quite contrary terms: firstly, as an endeavour for understanding what values guide our behaviour, secondly, as a definition of property rights. “Whose are these rights?” This was the unvoiced question at this point of the conversation. Participants from the Balkans and Eastern Europe in particular, reminded their Western colleagues that identity discussion from a majority viewpoint is an effective but rather mean way to exclude newcomers and minorities, who will always read the message, “assimilate or abstain” between the lines. They called for mutual respect and joint actions as an appreciative way to integrate and show interest in people, no matter if it is newly arrived immigrants (“the Muslims”) or old minorities disrespecting majority lifestyle (for example Roma) that are concerned.

During the last round many realised more clearly that European values are in no way exclusively linked to the political process of the European Union (although its institutions claims to be a major promoter). They are at least equally influenced by the social and political cultures prevalent in all European societies as well. Heated controversies about the blend of European values cooled down for a while to allow for constructive discussions when a three-tiered model of basic/procedural/target values was introduced. Participants could largely agree on the need to preserve a common normative base of humanism, rationalism, secularism

and the rule of law. Individual pursuit of interest is possible by democratic formal procedures that work by majority decision. They guarantee minority rights as well as personal integrity and are open to revision. The tricolour target values of freedom, equality and solidarity refer to the ideal society to which many Europeans aspire. Although formulated back in the days of the French Revolution and never fully materialised, this value triangle still thrills hearts and minds on the continent. Let’s picture our societies as paintings; we might more clearly understand that their appearance is not only shaped by colours alone, but also by the latter’s arrangement. Any of the named values are more or less universal; yet it is the blend that may be called European.

When we finally discussed options for promoting the European set of values that were earlier identified, political differences arose again. While some called for a stronger defensive role of the state in enforcing liberties in times of increasing intermingling of cultures, others favoured activism and education. Still, these were productive dissensions, as everybody stressed how important it is to reach members of traditional value groups in Europe individually. Participants left Prague with the opinion that it is worth the effort to express differences and defend one’s own position as long as this is not used to deny the rights of others. Such an understanding corresponds with the mission of Citizens of Europe, to support the creation of a European public sphere open to everyone.

*Michaela Trakslová: Religion is a private matter. It should not determine political decisions. I see that there is a risk that “alternative cultures” will supersede European values by cohabitation.*

*Jürgen Tobisch: I do not think that other sets of values are necessarily completely different from European values. There might be controversial points, but there is also always a common base.*

*Barbara Lubich: A lot of people would agree that increased mobility belongs to the positive things European integration brought about. If we accept that, than we also have to grant others the right to stay in places different from their origins.*

*Gert Röhrborn: What happened to activism? Why do people call for the state to intervene when their neighbourhood changes? Democracy starts in the backyard! The cleverest give in and complain, that’s the lazy bourgeois nonsense.*

*Viktoria Zaharova: Language may divide us, arts unite us. Art at its best reflects social processes and can show us more answers than we expected.*



*Nikoletta Incze: Humour is an important European value for me. It is always practiced and it addresses people directly. This is my way of questioning social systems, normative orientations, religions and so on.*



*Aleksandar Ribac: I refuse to picture Europe only in terms of Christian unity. We cannot put a STOP sign to the global trends of migration and cross-border economy. Every society needs rules, of course, but they may change over time. Let’s be more integrative and welcoming!*

## Inside OpenForum Prague: Bohemian or bohemian style?

By Michaela Trakslová (European Values).



OpenForum in Prague was the first opportunity for me to meet the Citizens of Europe and participate in this specific project – OpenForum. I was invited as a local coordinator in Prague where I was responsible for the organisation of the event.

I didn't have any expectations regarding the main part of the event – the debate. However when I met the 22 different participants from all over Europe and the discussion began I was surprised and immediately I was drawn into the event and, of course, into the discussion itself. The topic was: Values in Europe – Ideals and Realities. There were many different explanations of “values in Europe”. Every participant discussed, what are values to them, and which is most important and which is the least – liberty, freedom of speech, diversity, safeness, religion. What was really interesting (in the end) is not that the group agreed on the aforementioned terms and their importance, as these values are important for everybody, but each individual's explanations about how they feel about these values and their meaning. People from eastern Europe may feel freedom and liberty is more important to them than to others – for example, it may be more important for the people in Belarus, than in Czech Republic or than, let's say, in France.

The atmosphere of this meeting was informal. People who had never met each other before held a lively discussion and the debate continued long after the meeting had finished during the walk through Prague and during dinner. An interesting manifestation of the importance of "European values" for each of the participants was the association with their chosen subject; everyone brought with them a subject to discuss and explained how the subject conveys European values. As I mentioned previously – each person had a different interpretation of the same subject and so expressed another meaning of the value.

All in All, nice and intelligent people, beautiful city and interesting topics - that was OpenForum in Prague.

• • • ROUND 1 • • •

Individuality, Uniqueness  
Freedom of speech & expression  
Security: Physical & Material  
Freedom, Equality, Solidarity  
Mobility Diversity  
Secularism Unity  
Humour } Humanism  
Doubt } CRITICISM  
Integration, Hospitality  
Change Tolerance



Ulf Göpfert:

## Obligation is a misnomer.

Questions and translation by Gert Röhrborn.



Ulf Göpfert (born in 1943), furniture restorer and painter. His preoccupation with small graphics, large-size canvasses and large-scale decorations of architecture account for the multidimensionality of his oeuvre. During the politically meaningful years directly after German reunification (1990-1994) he was head of the department of culture and tourism of the city of Dresden.

[www.goepfert-art.de](http://www.goepfert-art.de)

**Since time immemorial artists accessed and quoted the cultural heritage of a given society, or they tried to follow up and prolong certain traditions. Do you think there is something like a European cultural memory which all of us draw upon?**

There is nothing like a common base of European culture. The European characteristic of occidental culture only manifests itself in the expression of explicit individuality. The process of cultural unification by simplification, a matter of tremendous losses already on the national level, is bound to fail completely on the European level. This holds true for further steps and reflections in the institutional unification process, too. Historically Europe has always been shaped by the interrelation between Western, Central and Eastern Europe. Every one may define features of European culture in different ways; yet every single one is just an autarchic component which manifests itself in varying individual and cultural forms.

**During the collapse of the GDR you were politically active. Would you say that back then your artistic convictions influenced your public activities? And do you see any emotional obligation to work for you as an artist?**

Obligation is a misnomer. You will find creative and subordinate sorts of people in all strata and sectors of society. A creative individual has to be active all the time, that's a matter of fact. This person needs to realize its creativity. At the end of the day I took the decision to accept office because of my creative

personality and my will to devote myself to an inspiring task. It turned out to be a short but very intense period of my life. Regardless of all practical difficulties I had to face I understood it as a fantastic chance to reach another intellectual dimension. Being forced to deal with certain areas in respect to financial, strategic and political necessities was a great blessing for me. I still reflect local politics as an external observer today. Yet there are only a few exceptions to the rule that politics did not impact on my artistic creativity.

**During the debate in Prague you made it clear that you interpret the guiding principle "unity in diversity" as assignment to maximize diversity. In your paintings you put the diversity of colours and forms under a unifying principle. Can we learn something from your artistic methods for our dealings with social processes?**

First of all I have consideration for what is in front of me. If I take a canvas I cannot expect to work in three dimensions. The only way to do that would be to cut into it, as was the habit of Louis Fontana. A plane stays a plane, and so I have to bow to its principles. I can blow them away, of course, but why should I



choose it then, for God's sake? Second I need to realize who I am and what I want. Do I seek to develop a certain order, or am I bound for chaos? These are individual dispositions of personality which never and in no way should be harmonized. We may allow unity only if diversity is not at stake. Hence only a limited number of areas may be designated for unity. The European principle of subsidiary was put into the treaties to protect diversity. I can imagine quite a few spheres of life which are and should always be realms of the individual. I strongly depreciate the ban on public smoking for example. These regulations affect human communication and deny our right of self-determination. This is clearly a case where unity destroys diversity. We need to compound with each other what we want to understand as uniform procedures. Unity means to sustain a permanent process of unification, a shared vision or idea. People on the European level should concentrate themselves on finding answers to common challenges like ecology. "Unity in diversity" is a grand phrase and a dangerous one indeed. It blurs our vital sense for differences and it belies a lot of the well-meaning statements poured out on us by politics and media every day.

**I suppose you know the Latin proverb "in vino veritas". If it comes to values: do they carry the wisdom we need for living together peacefully?**

Surely. Values reflect wisdom. There is a grading of values, according to quality, intensity and durability. Among artists we distinguish these of regional value from those with national or even international value. International value is hard to gain, but wisdom is also reflected in the regional one. Values tell us about appropriate ways to direct processes. We are all not free of negative experiences in this respect. Yet the latter are also expressed in values, namely such which call upon us not to do certain things. All this notwithstanding I would like to stress that values need to correspond with visions. Without distant aims you will never be able to make a difference today. The present is an intersection of past and future. We carry both of them in our body, mind and soul. In interesting times like 1989 some actions are inevitable and of utmost importance for the time being. Other processes take much longer, and we need to think twice how to keep them going. The wise man never asks for too much and keeps his senses open for the gear that fits his current task.

The full length version of this interview was published on [www.point-e.com](http://www.point-e.com).

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OpenForum Prague (September 19-21, 2008)

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## Phase 1 - Opening discussion:

Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education  
of Charles University (CERGE-EI), Politických veznu 7, 111 21 Praha 1  
Friday, 19 September 2008

18:00	Latest Arrival of Participants
19:00 - 19:10	Opening of "OpenForum 5 (Prague)" Welcome by project partners
19:10 - 20:30	Panel discussion on the topic: "Defending values for a European 21st century?" Speakers: Alexander Tomský (Publicist), Frank Burgdörfer (Chairman of Citizens of Europe e. V.), Jan Vaska (Charles University); Moderation: Eva Palatová (European Values)
20:30 - 21:30	Reception
21:10 - 23:00	Prescreening from "My Europe 2008" short film festival

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## Phase 2 - Workshop:

Hotel Prokopka, Prokopova 9, 130 00 Praha 3  
Saturday, 20 September 2008

09:00 - 11:00	Round 1: "What could be the normative bricks of 'European identity'?"
11:00 - 11:15	Coffee Break
11:15 - 13:15	Round 2: "What relevance do values have for life in Europe?"
13:15 - 14:15	Lunch
14:15 - 16:45	Individual free time (incl. option for exploring the city)
16:45 - 17:00	Coffee Break
17:00 - 19:00	Round 3: "Political Implications of a community of values in Europe"
20:00	Dinner

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## Phase 3 - Special closing event:

Sunday, 21 September 2008

09:00 - 13:00	Special closing event: Activities at an exhibition in the Hradčany castle district
13:00	Departure

## Participants:

Rabea Brok, London  
Frank Burgdörfer, Berlin  
Alena Falatová, Prague  
Olivier Genkin, Frankfurt/Main  
Ulf Göpfert, Dresden  
Malak Guliyeva, Thessaloniki  
Othmar Hofmeister, Vienna  
Nikoletta Incze, Budapest  
András Kontsek, Budapest  
Barbara Lubich, Dresden  
Rui Montez, Lissabon/Berlin  
Vitalii Moroz, Kyiv  
Anton Pototschnik, Graz  
Thomas Pototschnik, Graz  
Aleksandar Ribac, Belgrade  
Gert Röhrborn, Dresden  
Jan Schubert, Prague  
Georgi Spasov, Blagoevgrad  
Yuliy Emilov Stoyanov, Sofia  
Mariia Sydorovych, Kyiv  
Chryssa Thanella, Berlin/Athens  
Jürgen Tobisch, Berlin  
Michaela Trakslová, Prague  
Viktoria Zaharova, Minsk

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## Project Team:

- Frank Burgdörfer (Moderator round 3)
- Alena Falathová (organizer, moderator round 2)
- Gert Röhrborn (team leader, moderator round 1)
- Chryssa Thanella (EVS volunteer)
- Michaela Trakslová (local coordinator)

## Worth taking a look at:

- Photo gallery and personal video statements ([www.openfora.eu](http://www.openfora.eu))
- Full length interview with Ulf Göpfert ([www.point-e.com](http://www.point-e.com))
- Website of painter Ulf Göpfert ([www.goepfert-art.de](http://www.goepfert-art.de))
- Kristina Kaiserova/Gert Röhrborn (eds.): Present tensions. European writers on overcoming dictatorships, CEU Press: Budapest, 2009

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Education and Culture DG

'Europe for Citizens' Programme

