

Welcome Address

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10th International Partnership Meeting of the Danube Networkers

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Editorial note: This version was corrected and edited on the basis of an automatically generated transcript. Obvious recognition errors were reconstructed from context; technical interruptions, repetitions and purely organisational remarks were removed. The substance of the contributions has been preserved.

Good morning and a very warm welcome to our conference centre, the Edwin Scharff House. It is wonderful that you have all made your way here. On behalf of the City of Neu-Ulm, I am delighted to welcome you, and I hope you will spend several inspiring and rewarding days with us.

I am sure that some of you are returning participants who already know what to expect and have therefore been happy to come back. It is remarkable that this networking meeting of the Danube Networkers is taking place for the tenth time. That continuity alone demonstrates the event's success and importance.

This year's meeting has chosen an excellent motto: "Democracy needs all of us." That is exactly right. Democracy cannot be taken for granted. Democracy is work. It does not emerge or sustain itself automatically. All of us are responsible for defending and strengthening it, even when doing so can be difficult and demanding.

This makes it all the more important to build networks, explore examples of good practice and learn how other countries uphold and defend democracy. In some places, the challenge may even be to win back democratic space. This is a current concern in every European country and, in all probability, throughout the world.

In the early 1990s, some believed that democracy had prevailed worldwide. Yet history did not end. In the years that followed, we had to learn, sometimes painfully, that democracy must never be taken for granted. We must continue to stand up for it again and again.

Democratic participation is central to this task. We need to create spaces and meeting places where everyone can take part. Voting in democratic elections is the minimum. Yet much happens before an election: in discussions, workshops and exchanges, and through the free expression of different opinions.

It is equally important to practise cross-border cooperation in everyday life. That is precisely what is happening here. Thank you for being part of this important network.

I am especially pleased to see so many young people involved. At the International Danube Festival's youth camp, 80 young people from 14 nations are coming together. They experience community, form new friendships, create something together and stand up for democracy. Many young people are also participating in this meeting of the Danube Networkers.

I was particularly impressed to hear about the project in which young people from Ukraine, Moldova and Romania connect online with German senior citizens and are meeting one another in person for the first time at this event. I am certain that these encounters are creating emotional moments and valuable experiences.

My message of solidarity goes especially to those who have travelled here from Ukraine despite the extremely difficult situation in their country. I hope they can enjoy a few more carefree days here. Their

continued commitment, their willingness to make this journey and their contribution to democracy deserve my deepest respect.

I also welcome the teachers of German from throughout the Danube region and the representatives of many organisations, including those from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Serbia. They contribute new voices and perspectives, including those of countries aspiring to join the European Union.

Last but not least, I thank all the civil-society organisations from the fields of education, culture, social affairs and the environment that have come to share their experience. This meeting offers workshops, professional exchanges, discussions, encounters and cultural events. Providing such a wide range of networking opportunities requires a great deal of work. Its purpose is to promote dialogue, strengthen partnerships and initiate new forms of cooperation.

None of this happens automatically. It is the result of the invaluable work of many helping hands. My special thanks go to you, dear Ms Stadelhofer, and to your entire team. Your commitment makes this platform possible – a place where people from the Danube countries can connect, meet, exchange ideas and form friendships.

I wish you successful and enriching days, many wonderful experiences and, above all, great enjoyment during this conference, which forms the heart of these days of encounter. I also wish you a safe journey home and hope you will take many valuable experiences and new ideas back to your countries.

Thank you very much.