

Cohesion in diversity

Fifteen theses on cultural integration and cohesion

Berlin, 16 May 2017 *In view of the current debates, we, the members of the Cultural Integration Initiative (Initiative kulturelle Integration), submit the following fifteen theses to promote social cohesion and cultural integration. We represent a broad range of institutions and organizations, various political levels and interests. The fact that many citizens are engaged in clubs, initiatives, associations, cultural and educational institutions, churches and religious communities, with the social partners, the media, the political parties, cities, counties, municipalities and neighbourhoods shows how social cohesion works in daily life and how each and everyone of us can contribute. The members of the Cultural Integration Initiative stand up for this broad-based commitment and social cohesion. We call upon other stakeholders to subscribe to these theses.*

Preamble

Integration concerns everyone in Germany. Social cohesion can neither be imposed from above nor is it the sole responsibility of policy-makers. Instead, everyone living in Germany can make a contribution. Germany is a country of great diversity. For centuries, people from many different countries have come to live here. The majority of those who came to Germany from abroad feel at home here and many of them have meanwhile acquired German citizenship. Our society and policy-makers responded with solidarity to the arrival of large numbers of refugees. Solidarity is one of the fundamental principles of our society. It is reflected in our understanding for each other and in the attention we give to the needs of others – we stand up for a society that is based on solidarity.

Apart from social integration and labour market integration it is culture that contributes substantially to social cohesion. Cultural institutions provide information about Germany's past and present and put us in a position to critically examine the values of our society – we rely on culture as a mediator.

Immigration brings about changes for the receiving society and requires openness, respect and tolerance on all sides. This is a lengthy process which necessarily involves struggling for positions. Fanning fears and hostility is not the right approach – we stand up for a cosmopolitan society.

The process of European integration is not only a guarantor for peace in Europe and a key prerequisite for prosperity and employment, it also stands for cultural rapprochement and shared European values – we strive for a united Europe. The following theses are based on the concept of culture¹ that was defined by the international UNESCO community at the 1982 UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico.

¹ UNESCO's concept of culture is based on the idea that "in its widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs."

Thesis 1:

The Basic Law which forms the basis for the way we live together in Germany, must be lived.

In particular in its first 20 articles, the Basic Law describes some unalterable principles which govern the way we live together in Germany. For decades, it has ensured peaceful coexistence in Germany. Respect for and the protection of human dignity are fundamental principles of Germany's legal system. The Basic Law first and foremost governs the relations between government and citizens and provides protection against arbitrary rule. At the same time, it is of key importance for the way in which citizens live together, which is why it must be accepted and respected by everyone living in Germany.

Thesis 2:

The way we live together every day is based on cultural habits.

Apart from values such as solidarity and humanity, social manners and customs play an important role in our daily lives. They facilitate communication and create a sense of familiarity and courtesy in the way we deal with each other. Manners of behaviour, cultural habits and traditional customs are, however, not set in stone; instead, they are subject to change. They must stand the test in social discourse or evolve in order to remain valid.

Thesis 3:

Gender equality is a cornerstone of the way we live together.

Gender equality is one of the fundamental principles of the way we live together and requires consideration and respect for women and men. The constitutional requirement for equality of men and women is enshrined in the Basic Law. Nevertheless, realizing gender equality continues to be a task for government and society.

Thesis 4:

Religion also belongs in the public sphere.

Religions can contribute significantly to cultural integration. In Germany, state and religion are clearly separated but at the same time related to one another. Different religions have the opportunity to visibly present themselves in public and play an active role in society. At the same time, however, they are subject to the rule of law and a public discourse. This relationship between state and religion has stood the test in Germany. It would be desirable to strengthen ecumenical understanding, inter-religious dialogue and the peace-making role of religion in order to identify common ground which would provide a basis for dealing constructively with existing differences.

Thesis 5:

The arts are free.

The arts enable us to critically address fundamental philosophical, social and political issues. They reach beyond our immediate experience and open new horizons of meaning. As UNESCO has stated, with their ability to create and interpret art, humans transcend their limitations. The freedom of the arts enshrined in the Basic Law ensures their free expression. Every free society must tolerate artistic freedom. Art can be disconcerting. Works of art may be disliked. They have to be questioned and interpreted again and again.

Thesis 6:

A democratic culture of debate and dispute strengthens the opinion-forming process in a pluralistic society.

A democratic culture of debate and dispute helps develop individual positions and social consensus. Controversies characterized by careful listening and a constructive discourse can help us get along with each other. Constructive negotiating processes require the ability to compromise. They are the exact opposite of populism, whose proponents refuse to accept any views but their own.

Regardless of their distribution channels, journalistic and editorial content adds in its own way to the social discourse. By providing information and entertainment, by stimulating debate, offering background and promoting values, they are essential to the opinion-forming process. Freedom of the press, broadcasting and expression is an indispensable principle in Germany.

As a result of digital transformation, the channels for distributing journalistic and editorial content have multiplied. This offers opportunities for communicating diversity and enhancing its visibility.

Thesis 7:

Immigration and integration are part of our history.

Integration is a process which challenges both immigrants and the host society. This means among other things that immigrants must be regarded as a natural part of German society. Germany is a country of immigration.

Successful integration processes throughout history are part of our cultural heritage and our identity. These experiences are encouraging even if they involved a lot of effort. Throughout its history, Germany has repeatedly experienced periods of immigration. Germany was and is characterized by people who came here for religious, political or economic reasons. We owe our cultural richness also to the input and influences of immigrants.

Thesis 8:

Liberal democracy requires tolerance and respect.

Any liberal democracy requires not just respect for the law but also tolerance for views, lifestyles or forms of expression that are not shared by everyone. This includes dialogue, the willingness to engage in a discourse on diverging opinions and positions, and the ability to compromise. An open society requires mutual respect and the acceptance of diversity. In a democracy, the rules which govern our daily lives and interactions have to be negotiated over and over and in compliance with the law. Society must not meet hatred with hatred. Those who attack the fundamental principles of our liberal democracy must not expect any leniency.

Thesis 9:

Parliamentary democracy relies on individual commitment.

A stable parliamentary democracy is not a given thing. It depends on the commitment of each and every one of us and on the esteem it enjoys in our society at large. The democratic parties are called upon to ensure that the diversity of our society is also reflected in their memberships. Parliamentary democracy thrives on competition for the best ideas and policies for shaping the society of the future. Here, each of us can play an active part.

Thesis 10:

Civic engagement makes for a living democracy.

Civic engagement makes for a living democracy and is crucial to social cohesion. Many citizens are actively engaged as volunteers in clubs and associations. In this way, they take responsibility for others and for society as a whole. They are engaged in nature conservation and environmental protection, sports, welfare organizations, trade unions, culture, the churches and religious communities, immigrant organizations, communities and in many other fields. This civic engagement is an integral part of a subsidiary understanding of government which empowers first of all the smallest societal units to take the initiative. Civic engagement has an integrating effect, because many immigrants are also actively engaged in clubs and associations. However, civic engagement cannot replace public services and benefits.

Thesis 11:

Education opens the door to social interaction.

Education is a key prerequisite for the development of one's personality and participation in our society and in the world of work. Education takes place in formal settings such as schools, enterprises and universities, but also in non-formal settings such as families, clubs, churches and communities, the media and in other contexts. Both, formal and non-formal education are indispensable for the formation of one's personality and for preparing the transition to working life.

Cultural education is a key factor of integration; it opens the door to the world of art and culture and to social life in general. Cultural education must be provided by the schools and has its place also in many other settings such as social work. Efforts to achieve cultural integration are basically also aimed at improving the perspectives for cultural education.

Thesis 12:

The German language is the key to participation.

Our common German language is the key to social participation for everyone living in Germany. It is the indispensable tool that enables us to communicate with each other as equals and is therefore a fundamental prerequisite for integration and social cohesion. Language, however, is not just a means of communication but also a cultural asset which finds its expression in poetry and literature and opens the door to culture and society.

Thesis 13:

The critical examination of Germany's history will never be concluded.

Like other nations, Germany can look back on positive and negative aspects of its history. These include outstanding achievements in literature and music which originated in our country, as well as philosophic insights and scientific findings which helped shape our world.

The Shoah is the darkest chapter of German history. For that reason it has a special place in Germany's culture of remembrance. Keeping the memory of the Shoah alive and passing it on to future generations is an ongoing commitment for those who were born in Germany and those who immigrated into our country. This also means that all forms of anti-Semitism must be firmly rejected.

The culture of remembrance which has developed in Germany, is part of the way we actively reflect on our history. This culture of remembrance refers to historic events and to the historic heritage, artefacts, the architectural heritage, the written, auditory, audio-visual and visual cultural property and many other things. It is a living culture. In this way, the memories of immigrants will soon become part of the German culture of remembrance, while the German culture of remembrance should also become part of the identity of those who come to Germany.

Thesis 14:

Gainful employment is an important factor for participation, identification and social cohesion.

Gainful employment is a powerful integration factor. It brings together society and its individual members. It is a source of pride and identification with the results achieved by dint of one's own work. It provides a structure for daily life and an opportunity for communication, thereby fostering social cohesion in a decisive way. Given the significance of gainful employment, it is especially important to ensure that all those

who are able to work have access to the labour market, whether they are newly arrived in Germany or have been living here for a long time, whether they have a disability or not. Our society must be measured also in terms of whether it provides adequate access to the labour market.

Our culture of cooperation in the social market economy is not a free play of forces; instead, it is based on cooperation between employers and employees. It is this social partnership which makes the social market economy strong. In our society, people should have the opportunity to develop their talents regardless of their sex, nationality, ethnic origin, religion or ideology, disability, age, sexual orientation or identity.

Societal change must be reflected in the structure of our workforce. This applies to both the public and private sector.

Thesis 15:

Cultural diversity is a boon.

Due to Germany's history, the cultural diversity of our towns, counties, communities and federal states is of eminent importance. This applies to the language and to special cultural forms of expression, an extremely broad range of cultural offerings and a very rich cultural heritage.

Societal changes may leave some people in Germany feeling uprooted. They may feel that their work and life experiences and achievements are not appreciated. As their cultural identity is called into question, they may perceive others as a threat. We must take these concerns seriously without being paralysed by fears. Cultural integration can help transform fear into curiosity.

Culture helps foster a sense of identity and encourages integration. It creates the conditions for integration into the social, economic and cultural fabric of our society. At the same time, immigrants are expected to engage with the cultural traditions, customs and values of their host country in a constructive spirit and not just tolerate but respect them.

Afterword

We, the initiators and members of the Cultural Integration Initiative, support the theses listed above. As representatives of the Initiative, we share them in our associations and organizations, in the world of politics, in the churches and religious communities and in the media, where they meet with broad-based support. We invite you to support these theses, to share them and to bring them to life. We want to canvass support for these positions, discuss them, organise encounters and reduce existing reservations.