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**“Where Were You When Our Roots  
Were Uprooted?”**

**On the necessity of abandoning cherished  
habits and choosing effectiveness in times  
of crisis.**

*By Stefan Wallner*

We live in a time of upheaval. The foundations of our societies are eroding all around us. And now? It's up to us. When the ground becomes unstable, only agility, flexibility, and speed can help us stand firm.

**What were we founded for?**

For the protection of human rights, the great social questions, scientific enlightenment, justice and solidarity, environmental preservation, humanitarian aid in conflicts, equality, and more. Major causes and times of profound transformation were the cradle of non-profit organisations, social movements, and the champions of organised volunteerism.

We were founded because people felt: *Something must be done. We cannot stand idly by. We must organise.* With a powerful cause, great ambition, the will to bring change, and the determination to shape society. Many of our traditional organisations have already

celebrated their centennials, and even the younger ones have long since grown out of their organisational adolescence.

We changed the world – rolling up our sleeves and intervening in political and social developments. In our early days, we were organisations that provoked change. Today, many are consumed by internal growth and structural differentiation. We rarely allow ourselves to be challenged, and we seldom provoke anyone anymore. The daily work is demanding and exhausting enough.

Yet all around us, the foundations of our societies are eroding – or being *disrupted*, to borrow Silicon Valley's euphemism. The fact that liberal democracy has long been under threat is no longer an unintended side effect; for some, it has become the very objective. Where the rule of law, democratic checks and balances, independent journalism, a vigilant civil society, and free science are systematically weakened or dismantled, the loudest, shrillest, and most aggressive voices prevail in the algorithmic echo chambers of our smartphones. Monopoly is not the game – it is the goal. Monopolising perception and enforcing compliance through the (threatened) withdrawal of funding have become the methods of choice.



We were founded in times like these. The legitimacy we earned in the past now becomes our mission: to (re)build social cohesion, to strengthen democratic institutions, to defend the rule of law, to protect the vulnerable, and to fight for causes now being crushed by autocratic monopolists. People rely on us – especially now. The promises we made at our founding, and the values embodied in our brands, are being put to the test. We can no longer retreat into the comfort of being service providers or external consultants to the political process. It's up to us.

Are we prepared for this? Are we ready – willing to take risks? For without risk, our history, too, may come to an end.

### **Cumulative Crises: Here to Keep Us Out of Breath**

Let us take a small step back. What has characterised recent years? Epidemics, wars, natural disasters. It sounds almost medieval, yet it is our present. They were shocks to our society that triggered archaic fears – fears that provide fertile ground for political extremes, accelerate political change, shorten the terms of ministers and governments, encourage shifts in majorities, and often produce election results that make stable coalition-building difficult.

Crises are also times of scapegoats. The guilty are sought, saviors are adored – and quickly discarded again. From *Hosanna* to *Crucify him* is scarcely a week, not only in the biblical story.

One thing is clear: existential fears do not foster community spirit. Even in stable times it is exhausting to listen to others and to compromise. Yet crises actually demand *more* community spirit. Where are we to draw it from?

Added to this in our time is the social accelerator we carry in our pockets. Our mobile phones are *always on*, and the crises of the world are no longer confined to books, museums, or news broadcasts. They are constantly present – our trouser or handbag vibrates in rhythm with new catastrophe alerts and breathless updates.

What does this do to our society? The permanent strain wears us down – physically and emotionally. We are rushed, exhausted, irritable – an explosive combination. Many boil with anger at the crisis stove because a picture or a “news item” just spread on Telegram or WhatsApp identifies the supposedly sole culprits and puts them on the campaign pillory. The COVID crisis, too, has left deep marks. We still underestimate its long-term effects because we prefer to consider it overcome.

### **The Triple Loss of Trust**

In these overlapping crises, I identify three fundamental losses of trust in our societies:

1. Trust in one another:
  - The conviction that we are working in the same direction.
  - The feeling that there is a reliable “we.”
2. Trust in (democratic) institutions:
  - A long erosion process was accelerated during the pandemic.
  - Particularly affected are the institutions that mediate in society – the “machines of compromise” of our democracy.
3. Trust in the future:
  - The belief in progress, in greater opportunities ahead, in more prosperity for coming generations, is fading.

- “We can do it” is no longer perceived as a promise but as a naïve phrase.

But if no one believes in a solvable future anymore, what can we build on?

### **Emocracy in the Attention Economy**

Our perception is shaped by social media. Attention is the new currency, and nothing generates more attention than outrage. Anger and fury receive multiples more reach in algorithms than hope or factual reasoning. Politics follows this pattern: instead of strengthening common positions, the denigration of others dominates social-media channels. More than any compromise, what counts is the short-term victory – better yet, triumph over the other.

Even traditional media have not escaped this pull. The battle for clicks forces them to become more sensationalist: say what provokes; write what clicks. Our politics increasingly takes place in the digital space, where the potential for outrage dictates the agenda.

Under such conditions, governments today begin their terms with a trust deficit. The half-life of political stability is shrinking, as a glance around Europe shows. When little “survival time” remains, short-term, opportunistic “solutions” dominate, while the sustainable management of challenges – patiently drilling thick boards, as the famous phrase goes – falls by the wayside.

The more complex an issue, the less likely a political answer becomes. Climate protection, care, human rights, or social justice require long-term solutions – but traditional political actors think in ever shorter election cycles. Who can blame them? Social-media “instantism” measures itself by Instagram and TikTok suitability, in the form of mini- and micro-campaigns.

These dynamics will not disappear on their own. They are here to stay – and to spread. The good old days will not return “once the crises are over.” On the contrary: liberal democracies are under pressure worldwide.

Above all, right-wing populists (in Europe, less so left-wing populists) and certain opportunistic populists are reaching for irreversible power. The familiar mechanism of their playbook? First delegitimise institutions, then undermine them, and finally destroy them. The first targets of such attacks usually come in this order: the judiciary, the media, civil society, and science.

### **Turning Point for Non-Profit Organisations: From Untouchable Heroes to Targets of Populists**

If we take this seriously, we are at a turning point. NGOs are no longer automatically respected actors but are actively attacked and delegitimised. The existential framework conditions for our work are also eroding – or being attacked.

In Austria, we have already had several previews of what a power takeover (and that is indeed the more accurate term than “assuming government responsibility”) by a partly far-right party, accompanied by a historically hollowed-out conservative party, can mean. Those who wish to see it more clearly need only look to Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, and – most recently and most dramatically – to the United States: attacks on and weakening of courts and independent authorities, the takeover or exclusion of independent media, the dismantling of USAID and thereby of vital humanitarian aid and numerous democracy initiatives, the endangerment of the economic foundations of major scientific institutions and universities.

We may not be the prominent first targets, but our turn will come. What begins with over 500 questions can end in existential attacks on our foundations. We can no longer expect people to support us out of tradition. The days of inherited solidarity are over. We must justify ourselves. *Why do we exist?*

NGOs were founded to solve major social, ecological, and human-rights problems – not to manage them. Self-referential preoccupation with internal differentiation and slowing growth is no longer sufficient. We must ask ourselves: are we still scaling, or are we already (again) having an impact?

To achieve present-day effectiveness and relevance, we will probably have to give up some cherished habits.

### **The Zero-Sum Game as a Simple Calculation**

We live in an era where the loudest voices perceive politics as a zero-sum game: *I win, you lose*. A simplistic calculation, yet one increasingly fueled by social media mechanisms and following a dangerous three-step pattern: humiliation – submission – annihilation. *Your annihilation is my triumph*. This pattern has become deeply ingrained in political and social discourse, threatening to destroy our ability to engage constructively.

But now, more than ever, we need a different kind of politics – a politics of mutual engagement. What made Europe strong after the traumatic experiences and unimaginable cruelties of the early twentieth century was never the radical nature of its divisions, but rather the capacity to find viable compromises.

We must rediscover this attitude: a social co-existence not rooted in division and victory, but in the conviction that progress can only be achieved together. That we look to one another – and that, with all our differences, we

move forward together into a future greater than the sum of our individual interests.

We, too, must relearn how to be advocates of meaningful democratic compromise. It will be a difficult school of self – examination. And we must re-engage in politics – not necessarily in party politics, but in the practical work of shaping our shared future, even when it means getting our hands dirty.

### **Risking Ourselves or the Deceptive Security of Process**

The more uncertain the environment, the stronger our attachment to clear order. This is true for all organisations. Defined processes and established structures promise safety – and they have provided it for many years. If we cling to them, we can say with confidence, “We did nothing wrong,” even if the results remain largely ineffective in the face of today’s challenges. Amid growing complexity, we focus on what is measurable and controllable. That is human nature. Yet in times of uncontrollable crises, we must once again learn to risk ourselves. When the foundations are unstable, only agility, resilience, and speed will help – if we do not wish to break or be swept away.

### **New Ligatures Instead of the Fragmentation of Social Spheres**

The retreat of different social spheres (business, politics, non-profit organisations, media) into their own, supposedly manageable domains, each with its own logic, leads to a loss of understanding and connection between groups. Politics no longer understands business, business no longer understands politics, and civil society feels misunderstood or even opposed by both.

Social dialogue is being replaced by mutual complaint. Trust is eroding. We need resilient

bridges, shared perspectives, and collective successes to build a liveable future. No sector can achieve this alone.

For us, this means we must form alliances – especially with those we do not yet fully trust, and with those who think differently or prioritise other values. Trust is the soil from which functioning societies grow. Economic and political actors must help revitalise the social foundations they cannot reproduce alone – together with the millions of engaged citizens. It is up to us to cultivate this ground, to actively shape it where social ties are fraying and mistrust is spreading.

It is not enough merely to proclaim values. Trust is born of action. Charity is an act, not an attitude.

### **Leadership: Providing Guidance and Doing the Right Thing**

As leaders, we must provide direction and empower people to contribute. Change will never again be as slow as it is today. Decisions are required – even with incomplete information and in uncertain times. Our task is to find the courage to confront major challenges. Not only to allow organisational irritation, but to create it – so that we become more agile and more receptive to external demands.

We will not be loved for this. But if we shake a bit of managerialism out of our leadership bodies, effectiveness might even become enjoyable despite all the risks and dangers.

“Are we doing the right things – or are we doing things right?” Peter Drucker once asked. Strategic management must respond to the demands of the time and the potential of the organisation – or else we simply continue as before.

### **Trust as Our Strategic Resource**

NGOs enjoy a high level of public trust – more than most institutions. Yet this trust also makes us targets. Those who have lost their own credibility seek to destroy trust in others. Delegitimisation is a deliberate strategy to weaken social counterforces.

We must learn to defend ourselves – to identify and, yes, to confront those who oppose coexistence, democracy, and the very foundations of our society.

At the same time, our organisations are places where trust can grow. Those who act together, whether in an ambulance, a shelter, an environmental campaign, or a cultural project, experience solidarity. In such shared work, the supposedly irreconcilable often becomes less important. These social spaces are vital for a resilient society. We must actively enable and expand them.

### **Actively Shaping Political Frameworks and Processes**

If traditional political actors are trapped in short-term cycles, we must find new ways to exert influence. Position papers alone no longer suffice. We need long-term, strategic policymaking that spans legislative periods. Franklin D. Roosevelt once said: “I agree with what you said. Now go out and make me do it.” Roosevelt still listened. That, too, can no longer be taken for granted. We must stop waiting to be invited into the political process. Together with others, we must take responsibility – across legislative periods and party lines. Why us? Who else? And – because we can.

## Defending Public Spaces

Where media deserts arise, conspiracy theories, corruption, and extremism thrive. Independent journalism was a cornerstone of civil society's rise; its erosion threatens our democratic culture. We must actively work to protect quality journalism and to create new platforms for enlightening public discourse.

We largely missed the social media revolution. What about artificial intelligence? Will we again leave this arena to internationally networked right-wing populists and geopolitical autocrats? Our answers to these questions – and the resources we dedicate – will shape our future.

We are not born democrats; we must *become* democrats. We need diverse opinions to form our own. Fortunately, there are institutions that foster this – built at great cost in struggle and perseverance. Democracies depend on them and on their ability to shape the future.

## Solidarity Requires Strength

Franz Küberl, longtime President of Caritas Austria, often emphasised: “Solidarity requires strength; otherwise, it is poor solidarity.” In our context, this means that larger organisations and associations – those with financial security through diversified funding, strong memberships, and discretionary donations – bear a particularly great responsibility: for our sector as a whole, for the preservation of democracy, and for social cohesion.

In my first NGO experience as a child, I learned the Scout motto and promise: “As best as I can.” If we all act as we did on the best days in our history, we can once again become an effective force for change. As best as I can – and not a bit less, because less is not enough right now.

## Why us? Who else?

We were founded for times like these. It demands opposition to injustice and the courage to create alternatives. Algorithms create followers – our work creates companions. That difference must be defended, and it is a challenge. We should choose to accept this challenge and shape it with determination.

Perhaps the past few weeks have been a wake-up call for many institutions to finally awaken from their complacency because responsibility for our future cannot be delegated.

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