

Welcome address to International University Week Jena 2026

Prof. Dr.iur. Thomas Trenczek, M.A.

Dear students and colleagues,

As one of the founding fathers of SocNet98 (ninety-eight), the Socrates University Network of European Schools of Social Work, I am delighted that the tradition of the International University Week once again is taking place in Jena. The exchange of students and lecturers between the partner universities was the original and essential core of our international cooperation within SocNet98.¹

The topic of this year's International University Week in Jena "Democracy and Human rights" could not be better chosen - and not only because in recent years the rule of law has come under pressure both internationally and in national discourse.

Human rights and thus human dignity represent a central point of reference and a key value for the practice of social work. The reference to human rights and the rule of law is not a question of arbitrariness, "whateverism" or "vogueism". Social work must always act in accordance with the essence of the universally acknowledged human rights as defined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of 1948 and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Therefore, social Work professionals have the obligation to support their clients in living a dignified, self-determined and socially competent life.

However, the maxim sentence of social work as a "human rights profession", which was introduced for example by the Swiss social work professional Sylvia Staub Bernasconi² is often misunderstood, especially when the notion of a "double" or a so-called "triple mandate" of social work is used within professional discourse. It is true that the diversity of tasks in social work, especially within the spectrum of assistance, service and protection sometimes results in different expectations, which often lead to professional dilemmas between the poles of help and social control, which are sometimes reinforced by the structural paradoxes of state organized social work. However, it should be clear and particularly emphasized within the professional discourse that in a democratic society and (constitutional) state of law there is no independent or even "autonomous" mandate for social work or any other profession. The legal provisions established by the rule of law in a democratic process set a binding framework and at the same time minimum professional standards for social pedagogical as well as administrative action in social work. The law cannot only offer a secure framework for the development of social work professionalism especially through the standardization of professional standards and legal entitlements of our citizens). Beyond that, social work has a political mandate to act as a "social advocate" (not lawyer) for the benefit of young people and their families (which for example is statutorily regulated in the German Youth welfare law, § 2 SGB VIII).

With this in mind, I wish all participating students and lecturers to enjoy not only interesting presentations and discussions, but also to attain the positive energy which is required within the course of study as well in the practice of social work to strengthen the commitment to democracy, the rule of law and human rights. I wish you all the best!

¹ <https://www.socnet98.eu/about-us/our-history/>

² Staub-Bernasconi, S: Soziale Arbeit als Menschenrechtsprofession; in Stimmer, F. (Hrsg.), Lexikon der Sozialpädagogik und der Sozialarbeit, 4. Aufl. München und Wien 2000, 626–632; diess. Soziale Arbeit als (eine) „Menschenrechtsprofession“; in: Sorg, Richard (Hrsg.): Soziale Arbeit zwischen Politik und Wissenschaft. Münster. 2003, 17-54; diess.: Menschenrechte in ihrer Relevanz für die Soziale Arbeit als Theorie und Praxis, oder: Was haben Menschenrechte überhaupt in der Sozialen Arbeit zu suchen? In: *Widersprüche*. Heft 107. Jg. 28 (2008). 9-32. See also Spatscheck, C./Steckelberg, C. (Hrsg.): Menschenrechte und Soziale Arbeit. Konzeptionelle Grundlagen, Gestaltungsfelder und Umsetzung einer Realutopie. Opladen u.a. 2018; Scherr, A.: Menschenrecht: ein kontroverses Diskursfeld, SozialExtra vol 44, 2020, 328-323; Trenczek, T.: Recht und Soziale Arbeit, RdJB 1/2026.