

Sehr geehrter Herr Minister Josef Ostermayer,  
cher Monsieur le president Pierre Dutilleul,  
liebe Frau Sektionschefin Andrea Ecker,  
dear friends!

You can't imagine how pleased I am to welcome you here tonight in the name of the Austrian Publishers' Association. First of all, I would like to thank Minister Josef Ostermayer for inviting us to meet here in this hall that has played and still plays such an important role, both historically and politically. I would also like to give my thanks to Andrea Ecker, the Head of the Department for Art and Culture in the Ministry – and, of course, to Charlotte Sucher who was responsible for the organization of this evening.

When the General Assembly of the FEP took place first and until now last time in Vienna – in May 1997 – I had just been elected Vice President of the Austrian PA, much to its president's annoyance. I only became aware of the existence of the FEP and our membership on the day of my election when the President of the PA informed me that I should attend the meeting because he was going on a pilgrimage on the Kailash.

I still have strong memories of that meeting: I was immediately taken by its collegial and competent atmosphere. For some reason or other, my President obviously didn't think that I was really presentable, so, at the same time, he told me how sorry he was that I wasn't expected to attend the gala dinner. In other words, although I am now something of an association's veteran, like most of you I very much enjoy participating tonight in my first FEP gala dinner in Vienna.

Dear friends, the setting of this evening's event is an indication of the high regard the Republic and its representatives have for us publishers and other book people – not only when guests from abroad are present, by the way.

We are well aware that this cannot be taken for granted and it became even clearer when lately books – in contrast to cinema and theatre tickets – were not included when the lower VAT rate was increased as part of the Austrian taxation reform.

It is certainly no exaggeration to describe the conditions of publishing today as challenging. Sales of books are continuously decreasing in almost all countries in Europe. As a result of this and the shift of a considerable share of sales to online trading, local booksellers are coming under pressure everywhere – large, medium-size and small bookshops are literally

disappearing. For publishers, this not only means losing customers and visibility in shop windows. At the same time, it increases their dependence on the international online dealer that is notorious for its excellent tax management and its bad manners when it comes to dealing with suppliers.

The digitization of the book market has made this confrontation even more acute. Just recently, for example, this almost-monopolist sent German-language audiobook publishers the – let’s call it – invitation to switch to new supply contracts: guess to whose benefit.

Probably any European publisher who gave an interview in the past ten to fifteen years was asked whether they were aware that the printed book was in danger of just disappearing. Instead of succumbing to these prophecies of doom, European publishers implemented the digital transition skilfully and efficiently – along with continuing the traditional production of printed books. They provide a user-friendly offer of e-books under legally clean conditions and have quite clearly arrived in the new age. Treating e-books and printed books equally when it comes to the VAT should now be politics’ contribution to this change.

Strangely enough, the digital change, which has made spreading contents so much easier, has simultaneously lead to an erosion of understanding about the value of intellectual property, of copyright protection. No, I am not talking about the users of illegal download platforms – although the problem of piracy represents a social challenge and we have our hands full trying to put a stop to the fence activities.

The tendencies that can be observed with the traditional partners and allies of writers and publishers – universities, libraries and educational institutions, to mention just a few – are much more irritating. In their enthusiasm for the new technical possibilities and the neo-liberal pressure on costs and performance, they seem to have lost all of their understanding for “cause and effect” and are trying to skim off intellectual property without paying a fair fee to ensure that it can continue to be produced.

And then, there are those European libraries that – as accomplices of another tax evader – contribute public cultural assets to the unlimited commercial exploitation of a US company. And, of course, especially in Austria, the lobby of IT-importers who have withheld the fair

remuneration for copies on hard disks from the right holders for more than ten years and – for strange reasons – seem to be politically unconquerable.

The fact that the book trade and publishers are following the TTIP negotiations with great concern – to put it mildly – must be added for the sake of completeness.

To be clear: Our aim is not protecting the past but ensuring the future.

Dear Minister Ostermayer, I am telling all of this first of all because you are the main political partner for our concern here in Austria and in Brussels to and I know how great your emotional understanding of our context is. We know, that you are a passionate reader and that we don't have to bring arguments for the importance of publishing to you. But I am also addressing it because it shows that, although our markets might be national or language bound, our concerns and their solutions are European. That is why an organization like the FEP is so essential and so valuable.

These days, some others are selecting a European contest winner and 39 losers here in Vienna; we European publishers are used to winning together – united and in all our diversity.

Alexander Potyka, 21.5.15, Gala Dinner of FEP at Bundeskanzleramt