

The New President of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Academician Jože Trontelj

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...noble, calming, dignified ..., Jože ...

Such was one of the first responses in the web portal of the Delo newspaper immediately after the announcement that Academician Jože Trontelj had become president of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SAZU). It will perhaps appear to some the least disrespectful to use as an introduction to the presentation of such an exceptionally distinguished personality precisely this flash of inspiration, worthy of a poet laureate and now almost part of the folk tradition, which for good measure is still casually ringing in our ears. Perhaps also in those of our subject, who is famous for not just providing exceptionally systematic and well argued substantiation for the things he wants to say. He always employs a nobility of language to provide patient assistance in seeking a path through the labyrinths of lawyers' formulations and in understanding (bio)medical ethics and fundamental ethical principles in everyday life.

Yet when you run through and arrange the impressions of the impenetrable mass of his original work, which has accumulated over the decades on bookshelves or nowadays on computers, as well as what has become stamped in your memory from his public appearances and personal meetings, there seems no need to worry about how such an approach will be understood. It is enough to glance at the current, real-life, vitally important issues of bioethics that are agitating Europeans, and of course also generating discomfort and concern for people elsewhere in the world. According to a survey conducted by the Steering Committee for Bioethics at the Council of Europe, decisions on the end of life are at the very peak of interest (and concern). Immediately following this are genetics and new biotechnology, protection of human embryos conceived outside the womb, and then research ethics, neuroethics and hybrid chimeras, i.e. human-animal crosses.

"If we link this to topics which in the same way signify ethics in biomedical science, in other words with new biotechnology and nanotechnology, it seems that biomedical research is the main bioethical concern in Europe," mused Prof. Trontelj at a recent consultation on the topic of Ethics: the wisdom of cognisance, judgement and good advice. And he admitted that in seeking an answer to the question, can ethics offer sage advice, people are sometimes in a quandary. For if the advice is taken, the person may be frustrated, since it will seem as if he has missed a good opportunity. If the advice is not taken, the good opportunity might turn out for the bad. One



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thing is clear, of that he is certain.

"It will be easier to live with the first frustration than with the second." With his characteristic restraint, this former pupil of a classical grammar school, whose teachers were able to instil in their pupils a feeling for the beauty of art and what is "right and proper", later a student of medicine and then for a number of years a teacher, a clinician and world-renowned researcher in the field of neurophysiology, takes the view that the word wisdom, which has been accorded to him in broad fields of medicine and law by experts and the general public alike, is "excessive". After all he "gained merely a few impressions of law in countless hours of discussion with excellent lawyers in the Council of Europe Steering Committee and in the Medical Ethics Committee".

Regarding the latter, he frequently recalls with pleasure how important foundations for it were laid down decades ago, indeed among the first in the world, by his predecessors, and today there is a prevalent impression that it "enjoys considerable standing and trust". Of course the committee is occasionally marked by a certain sarcasm at his expense, and as its long-serving president he is accused of being conservative, because he restricts the freedom of researchers.

But where this involves ethics, which in the same sweep as life itself, stretches and interweaves from its earliest beginnings - from a "bundle of cells" - to the period when a person might find himself in the position of an incapable "semi-being", "well you can't make everyone happy", for instance unrestricted research on embryonic stem cells, flirting with or actually accepting euthanasia and so forth...

Thus he must recall countless times the bad examples from the past and the abuse of ethics and unethical practices, which in ethics is called walking the slippery slope. And also explain that only through patient dialogue between different thinking people adhering to the fundamental ethical principles and protecting human dignity is it possible to try to contribute to a safe and agreeable future. And in this role of advocate for development with careful consideration, with a critical distance towards any kind of uncleanness in science, the majority acknowledge that his mild conservatism in this field is in fact appropriate. The majority will also say that he has a calming and civilising effect on those he talks to.

People value his advice and recommendations where they involve the support of science in Slovenia, since he is firmly convinced that greater attention should be devoted to it and its achievements should be appreciated, while there should also be better provision of financing and the status of universities.

In response to the question on plans and goals for SAZU under the new leadership, Academician Trontelj has a ready answer: "The Academy is of course just people. But the members," he adds, "are intellectuals worthy of respect, independent scholars, people with great scientific and artistic talent, and also tireless workers who avoid the fluid and often insufficiently transparent daily politics." They regard it as their place and duty to draw attention to the value aspects of certain important issues of our society and its development. These questions include education, management of limited natural resources, protecting the natural and cultural heritage, the culture of the Slovenian language, protection and development of the humanist tradition and current sociological problems.

When the argument of power prevails, there is time only for a statement for history. For the records and archives. Discussion requires tolerance and empathy, and a respect of the other person. Positions come closer if people talk for a sufficiently long time.

He has a calming and civilising effect on those he talks to, and he radiates a balance and critical distance towards the fleeting fashions in science.

It is torture when an ageing person waits with dread to become a surplus burden to himself and others. It is even worse to see a young person who believes he will be successful only if he is sufficiently selfish and unscrupulous. We should also therefore be thinking seriously about social and political goals. Open to the public, drawing attention to values

"In my work as president of SAZU I intend to continue the excellent tradition of my predecessors. I also wish to continue developing the trend of change, especially towards the Academy opening up increasingly to the public.

I am thinking of our views regarding events in public and in the country, from those in science to those in the economy or administration of the



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natural wealth, natural and human resources and the cultural heritage. SAZU should draw attention to values, especially when we believe that they are being held down in favour of capital, the interests of individuals or merely insufficient awareness and negligence," said Academician Jože Trontelj upon his election as president. He added that SAZU is in fact already doing this, and here he recalled the negative stance of the Academy regarding the construction of wind farms in an area of high environmental value, the view of two classes regarding the megacasino project in the Gorica area, which would have bad consequences for numerous individuals, on the senseless rejection of immunisations, and on the poor organisation of the medical sector. "Right in front of us there is a debate on the Triglav National Park Act and on the protection of the Ljubljana architectural heritage. SAZU does not wish to force its views, but it intends as far as it is able to respond to requests for an opinion, and we will of course also formulate opinions on our own initiative," added the new president of SAZU, Jože Trontelj.