

Citizen courage saves future

Laudation on the occasion of giving the EuroNatur Award 2020 to the municipality of Mals on 8 October 2020 on the island of Mainau

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Dear guests, dear laureates from Mals,

“The fact that a community is taking the lead for pesticide-free agriculture is truly exemplary and particularly worthy of an award.”

This statement by EuroNatur President Prof. Dr. Potthast sums it up perfectly. Today, for only the second time in our history, we at EuroNatur are honouring a community for its exemplary civil society achievement which has sent a signal throughout Europe, namely that we finally must, in our own interest as a society, get out of pesticide-reliant farming, which is the trailblazer of industrialised and thus often life-destroying agriculture worldwide.

The Mals Way shows in concrete terms how resistance can be overcome, how setbacks can be coped with, and how people manage not to give up in spite of many political and economic repressions, but to commit themselves to their goals with commitment and dedication. As always, this has a lot to do with individual, particularly courageous and outstanding people. Some of these particularly essential women and men are here with us today and will receive the award later on. But let me first say a few words about this journey and this achievement.

The municipality of Mals, spanning an area of 24 000 hectares, is the second largest in South Tyrol and the principal town of the Upper Vinschgau. It is situated in the extreme west of South Tyrol. This region at an altitude of around 1000 metres at the foot of the so-called “Malser Haide” – an alluvial fan on the upper reaches of the Adige River – is characterised by a diverse and impressive cultural landscape. The settlements are framed by the 3000-meter peaks of the Ötztal Alps. In this region, characterised by a diverse agricultural use, some of which is still small-scale today, an important citizens’ movement has developed against the massive use of pesticides, which mainly takes place in the apple plantations. Today, South Tyrol is one of the largest fruit growing areas in Europe, characterised above all by intensive apple monocultures. One out of ten apples produced in Europe comes from South Tyrol. The apple plantations are literally befogged with pesticides up to 20 times a year. This puts South Tyrol, for many of us the epitome of unspoilt nature, among the top users of pesticide in Europe. However, as we know from numerous scientific studies, the pesticides do not remain at the place where they are directly applied, but rather drift far into the surroundings. Indeed, the thermal winds in this region make them reach even the highest mountain regions and lead to drastic declines in numerous insect species throughout the area, as has now been scientifically documented in zygaenids, for example. In other words, the idyllic world is no longer idyllic, but massively contaminated by agrochemicals. This is why there were organic

farmers in Mals, such as Günther Wallnöfer, who will also speak to us afterwards, already more than ten years ago, who took the initiative to oppose the massive spread of apple plantations. Fortunately, he was not alone. The hairdresser Beatrice Raas, the working group Hollawint – today represented by Margit Gasser and Martina Hellrigl –, the pharmacist and chairman of the promoters' committee Johannes Fragner-Unterpertinger, the former mayor Ulrich Veith and many others joined and supported the movement. In the words of mayor Veith: "We never had anyone destroy the land and soil with poison, this was unknown to us." Despite massive counter-propaganda such as the establishment of a 'platform for the rural future of plantation farmers', various actions – not only by the powerful South Tyrolean Farmers' Association, but also by the government of South Tyrol dominated by the South Tyrol People's Party, despite personal hostility and public attacks, the decision came on the 5th of September 2014: In a referendum, a majority of 75.68% – at almost 70% (69.22%) turnout of the 4800 voters of Mals – decided that from 2018 on the use of pesticides will be prohibited in the municipal areas.

But the joy didn't last long, because there was massive resistance in the local council against implementing this result. Elections in April 2015 ended this refusal, so that in July 2015 a three-quarter majority passed the contents of the referendum. In 2016, however, in order to prevent this development, the parliament of South Tyrol passed a law stipulating that only the province is responsible for regulating the use of pesticides. On the basis of this law and because of the question of the legality of the referendum, 130 farmers filed a lawsuit against the pesticide ban in 2016 and in October 2019 the Administrative Court of Bozen ruled against Mals because a municipality is not responsible for a pesticide regulation. The municipality appealed to the Council of State in Rome.

Conclusion: The courageous resistance of the majority of the people of Mals against the use of pesticides has been legally blocked in many ways and has not been implemented. Supporters who are also well-known in Germany, such as the journalist Alexander Schiebl, the Munich Environmental Institute represented by Karl Bär, and the publisher of the Oekom publishing house Jakob Radloff, are now being sued for libel. Obviously, the main aim is to spare South Tyrol from a negative image caused by the use of pesticides, as South Tyrol's main export country is Germany.

The Mals case thus exemplifies how closely pesticide use and agribusiness are linked, how state action in many cases does not guarantee the public good but supports vested economic interests, how insufficient the state approvals of pesticides are, and that it is imperative to finally involve independent research institutes prior to approval and to actually carry out holistic studies of active ingredients.

The cumulative effects and the reciprocal effects of the individual substances must in future be factored into the risk assessments differently than in the past. For example, in 2018 the German research institute Leopoldina (National Academy of Sciences) issued a statement on the necessity of environmentally safe crop protection: "It should be in everyone's interest to develop cultivation and crop protection strategies that guarantee sufficient yields in the long term without causing lasting damage to the environment. An essential basis for this is, inter alia, consistent integrated and organic crop production. This means using pesticides only as the 'ultima ratio', selecting crops and varieties appropriate to the location, breeding competitive and pest-resistant varieties, using as specific and degradable agrochemicals as

possible ... and that it is therefore urgently needed to deal with the pesticide issue as a systemic problem.” So far the words of the Leopoldina.

But the Mals Way has also shown how necessary local citizen engagement is to end environmental destruction, and how indispensable direct citizen participation is as an element of direct democracy in order to secure common interests such as health and biodiversity against economic power. And also how necessary it is to persevere and not give up, and to take small steps also to strengthen local citizenship and organic farming, as is currently happening in Mals by procuring organic school meals.

The citizens of Mals have set an example here and thus join the beginnings of the worldwide environmental movement, which are inseparably connected with Rachel Carlson’s book “Silent Spring”, and the successful Save the Bees petition and referendum in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg in 2018/2019, which have set a lot in motion there and whose central contents have meanwhile also been taken up by the European citizens’ initiative Save Bees and Farmers. The European Union, which now wants to halve pesticide use by 2030 as part of its biodiversity strategy, also offers hope.

Mals thus also represents a new quality of the European and regional democratic movement and has encouraged many regions to follow similar paths. In Germany, for example, over 550 municipalities have now declared themselves pesticide-free as part of a BUND campaign and are also breaking new ground in this area.

However, honouring the municipality of Mals is also an important political signal in view of the attempts to silence critics of pesticide use by means of lawsuits and possibly to silence them with huge claims for damages. These attacks on democracy and freedom of expression must be met with resolute resistance. That is why the award today is not only a recognition of your great work in Mals, but also a sign of gratitude from European civil society for civil courage and commitment in the common interest of us all.