

Thank you for having asked me to open this very important European film festival. Allow me to ponder as to why the organizers should have thought of me.

It was thirty years ago, in 1979, that I started to support the advocacy of human rights by granting scholarships to South African students the University of Cape Town University, and also could support Nelson Mandela, still in prison at that time, in his struggle against apartheid. I also had the opportunity to support Solidarity, the then illegal trade union in Poland as well as the Charta 77 movement in Czechoslovakia. The first Soros foundation was opened in Hungary in 1984, which, along with the rest of the Eastern European foundations, played a role in resisting the communist regimes of the region.

For twenty years now, these foundations have been working to alleviate the intolerable situation of the Roma, Europe's largest minority, to put an end to their segregation and ensure their right to equal human dignity. In 2005, in cooperation with World Bank, I initiated the Roma Decade in the hope of overcoming Roma exclusion and the educational segregation of Roma students by 2015. For the first time since the brutal attacks on the Roma in Hungary, I feel that the Hungarian government has finally realized that without taking firm measures in support of the Roma in Hungary, the stability, reputation and existence of the entire country will be jeopardized.

However, it may not only be my efforts made for human rights that now I stand before you. In 1996 the Soros Documentary Film Fund was founded, as well as over 4 million dollars were granted to support the documentary program of Sundance Film Festival founded by Robert Redford. In June this year I contributed five more million dollars to the documentary program of Sundance. Over the years, more than 450 films from 54 countries, many of them important award-winning documentaries, have been made with the help of the foundation.

Last week, in my lectures given at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, I spoke about the manipulative function eclipsing the cognitive one in social and political life. This is particularly true for the visual world, where the goal is to entertain and manipulate rather than to help understand. The goal of political agents is to grab and keep power with the help of the advertising and entertainment industry rather than to present reality, expose problems and serve the public good. Hence documentaries are so important. Of course, documentaries can manipulate too; still, the rules of the genre and the traditional moral commitment of creators make it more likely that the films exploit the cognitive function, and not the manipulative one. A documentary film maker is usually committed to presenting reality and not to a political end; Their solidarity lies with the weak, not with the powerful. A good documentary serves general moral values rather than short term particular interests.

While it is important to watch these films, we cannot stand idle in the face of humiliation inflicted on our fellow humans either. I open this festival hoping that the films screened here will help us learn about and understand the real stories and prompt us, as active citizens, to stand up against the violation of human rights.