

Central European leaders meet for UPF Roundtable on Family Issues

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Vienna, Austria -- Politicians, experts and NGO representatives from five Central European nations met at a UPF roundtable on family issues.

The July 8, 2016, event was convened at Vienna's Hotel Regina by Hon. Nina Nováková, a member of Parliament of the Czech Republic, and Mr. Jacques Marion, regional secretary general of UPF-Europe. The theme of the Central European Initiative was "Family Values, Family Policies, European Culture: Challenges and Opportunities in Central Europe Today."

Most of the approximately 25 participants came from Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, and Austria. As family matters are a source of great debate in Central Europe, the purpose of the meeting was threefold:

- to review some of the trends and policies currently shaping European societies based on controversial views of the family;
- to address the challenge of preserving traditional European values in today's global society;
- and to initiate a platform of people and organizations dedicated to ensure the stability of the natural family.

The initiative aims to support and develop cooperation among civil society, political leaders, NGOs and faith-based organizations. A particular intention of the meeting was to bring together representatives from the "Visegrád Four" group of nations (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and build on the momentum of their shared, post-communist history.

After hearing a number of presentations and discussions, the participants approved a memorandum aiming at developing a platform in Central Europe in order to protect and strengthen the family as a base for a prosperous and harmonious society, and to support policies and strategies to this effect. The next roundtable is planned for September 2016 with politicians and experts, leading to a conference at the Parliament of the Czech Republic in Prague this coming autumn.

The meeting was divided into three sessions:

- "Current Threats and Controversies Regarding the Family"
- "Family Values, Human Rights and the Judeo-Christian Legacy in Modern-Day Europe"
- "Family Policies and Strategies in the Group of Visegrád Nations and Central Europe"

The first session was "Current Threats and Controversies Regarding the Family." In her welcoming speech Hon. Nováková remarked that although the current meeting focused on the "Visegrád Four," eventually all Central European nations should be included. The family should be discussed not as an independent entity but in the context of its influence and impact on society, she said. Speaking about the need to reaffirm the nature of European identity, she quoted the late Otto Habsburg, the last crown prince of Austria-Hungary and a proponent of European integration. Habsburg said that if Europe were only an

economic project without values, it would not survive. Having a family means that even if a family member is doing something wrong, we still need to love him or her, she concluded.

Dr. Walter Baar, president of the Institute for Trends Research in Austria, gave the first presentation on current family trends in Europe: The world population is rising in general, but birthrates are falling worldwide. As a result, several demographic changes are happening throughout the world:

- Aging of the population;
- Globalization of the world economy, causing a disintegration of the extended family;
- Growing economic independence of women, who, as they are better educated, get married later, bear children later, and bear fewer children;
- Growing individualism meaning a growing acceptance of divorce, fewer marriages and more divorces worldwide;
- A devaluation of the family in society, decreasing the incentive for young people to have children (thus reflecting a failure of family policy);
- Sustainability means that the European welfare state reduces society to a giant insurance plan. Europe invests in the values of its welfare state. Religious societies invest in large families. Thus, ethnic minorities with more children eventually will gain the upper hand in Europe and the United States.

Thus, Dr. Baar concluded, current European values conflict with European survival. We need to give more responsibility to people, he said. Children issued from migrations, he warned, will not willingly pay for the debts of an aging, childless population.



Hon. Jozef Mikloško, former member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, explained that according to the Slovak Constitution, the family means father, mother and child. He admitted, however, that there are challenges to this concept in his country, which should not be neglected, coming from such factors as hedonism, materialism, rising divorce, sex outside marriage, and efforts to redefine traditional views of sexual morality, marriage and family. Young people, he said, often are not prepared for marriage. Their first goal is to have a flat or a car, and many live only to pay debts. He also raised issues of bioethics leading to the question of euthanasia or genetic engineering.

The next speaker, Dr. Gudrun Kugler, a member of the Vienna Provincial Parliament, emphasized that we should focus on a general model of the family (i.e., mother, father and children) rather than search for a definition. We need to look for meaning, she said, not only give demographic reasons for having children. The previous week in the Vienna Provincial Parliament she had proposed the Family Impact Assessment, according to which every new law would be checked and measured by its impact on the family. (Although she knew her proposal would be rejected, she wanted it on record, she said.)

There are five controversial issues that ought to be a focus of the debate on the family, Dr. Kugler said:

- The State knows better, and the State is the one that educates children;

- The family is seen as oppressive, particularly for women (on the contrary, marriage and family can be proven to be a way to happiness);
- The nature of marriage: current trends (supported by efforts to redefine traditional views of sexual morality, marriage and family) affirm that marriage means two people supporting and loving each other. Why, then, not three people, Dr. Kugler asked? There are many forms of love, but only one that creates a child. Recently the European Court of Human Rights declared that it is not a violation of human rights for a state not to allow same-sex marriage;
- People are afraid of differentiation, because they think that difference leads to devaluation. A result of this is the gender theory, according to which male and female identities are nothing more than a social construct;
- The need for improvement of current sexual education. Does love play a role, or is it just pleasure and technique?

She suggested that in Central Europe some of these debates could be won. We should support the family and motivate young people to do so; thereby a new generation of strong, young politicians will emerge who can become a creative minority, she concluded. To do that, we need more data; we need to convey both facts and meaning.

The second panel, on “Family Values, Human Rights and the Judeo-Christian Legacy in Modern-Day Europe,” was moderated by Mr. Peter Zoehrer, the secretary general of FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom) Europe. Hon. Nováková was the first speaker in this session. She explained her proposal to renew the education law in the Czech Republic. She pleaded for two changes in the preamble of the education law, aiming at strengthening the awareness of European cultural legacy:

- The first concerns education of civil and social roles. In the current education law, educational goals are defined as educating to understand and implement the principles of democracy, the legal state, and fundamental human rights and liberties. Hon. Nováková suggested that these goals should be expanded to include education and implementation toward fulfilling civil and social roles. Just as there cannot be freedom without responsibility, there cannot be rights without duties, she claimed in her proposal. Children should be educated to accept positively their future civil and social roles as their challenge and task.
- The second proposal deals with understanding, maintaining and transmitting European culture. In the current education law, the goal of education is to “recognize,” i.e., gain information about something. Knowing the differences among world cultures and respecting them are important. But in the case of European culture, we also have the responsibility to maintain it. We therefore should understand and adopt European cultural values and traditions as a positive power and pass it on. In her amendment Hon. Nováková referred to sources of European culture such as antiquity, Christianity and humanism. Classical values from antiquity are trust in reason, moral principles, the aesthetic dimension of life, common responsibility, rights and justice. Christianity brought the Ten Commandments, social sensitivity, concern for the weak, the chance for rectification, the ability to forgive, and peaceful conflict resolution. Finally, humanism unites antiquity and Christianity and gives answers to three questions: how we are equal, how we preserve freedom, and where to express sympathy.

Next, Mr. Jacques Marion, regional secretary general of UPF-Europe, spoke about the core values of the family and their impact on society. Altruism is the root of values, he said. If democratic values such as freedom, equality, reciprocity, etc., are not rooted in altruism, their promotion and implementation in society tend to end up in conflict. Altruism is the expression of heart and the core of religious values such as benevolence, humaneness, love or mercy, which requires that one focuses on the needs of others over the self. Thus religion has a key role to play in democratic life. When the reference to transcendence is lost in democracy, as Pope Francis remarked at the European Parliament in November 2014, humans tend to become independent subjects fighting each other, focusing on rights more than responsibility. From the viewpoint of heart, human development means the progressive training of love in the family, from filial love, siblings’ love, conjugal love to parental love -- a gradual training toward altruism that culminates in parental love and forms the essence of healthy, sustainable family bonds. On this course, self-centered sexual love is the most destructive, bringing serious concern that the promotion of sexual rights without sexual responsibility within the greater frame of the family might be destructive to individuals and society. A challenge for democratic nations, Mr. Marion concluded, is to move, on the foundation of shared values of brotherhood and equality, toward a society in which parental love is considered a central value and the basis for healthy leadership.

Dr. Roman Joch, president of the Civic Institute in the Czech Republic, spoke on Judaism and Christianity, the Christian church and the natural family. He focused on the relationship between religion and politics based on the family. In Judaism there is a personal God, separate from creation. Nothing

created is divine, whether rock, animal or people. Pharaohs, kings and emperors are not God. If choosing between obedience to the king (state) or God, one must choose to obey God. Christianity universalized the Jewish worldview and created a new institution: the Church. The Christian Church is the only institution that challenged and overcame the state (Roman Empire). The state had power (*potestas*); the church had authority (*auctoritas*). The state is neither the source nor the creator of truth and/or right. The church interprets divine truth; the state needs to recognize and respect truth or right (as discovered by reason or revealed by faith).

All religions respect the institution of the family, Dr. Joch said. The family has its own rights, which are autonomous from the state. As members of a family are dependent on each other, they are less dependent on the state. If the family institution is weakened, its members become more dependent on the state and the state expands in scope, power, and activity. If the family is weak, husbands and wives depend less on each other and more on the state. If children depend less on parents, they depend more on social workers and the state administration. If children are not raised in natural families and adults want to adopt children, those adults (homosexual or not) depend more on government and its favors and benefits. The weakening of the family and of its autonomy leads to the (potentially unlimited) growth of the state.

The natural family, based on the marriage of a man and a woman caring for their children, is necessary for a free and democratic form of government, Dr. Joch said. This has to do with the principles of liberty, equality, and obedience to a just authority. Marriage is the result of a free decision by a man and a woman. Husband and wife are equal. Children are not equal to their parents, who are a natural and just authority to them, but siblings are equal to each other. In the monogamous family, one learns principles of equality between men and women, liberty under just and natural authority, and self-government.

Truth is older than the state (government), Dr. Joch said. The state is not the creator of natural rights. It recognizes moral truth and respects it. We should strengthen intermediary institutions between the individual and the state, especially the crucial institution of the natural, monogamous family, and resist its weakening. We should influence culture, the arts and all spheres of society dealing with human imagination. Just as politics guides economics, in the long term culture guides and controls politics.

The last panel, on “Family Policies and Strategies in the Visegrád Group of Nations and Central Europe,” was moderated by Dr. Juraj Lajda, secretary general of UPF-Czech Republic.

Mr. Stanislav Trnovec, chair of the Large Families Club in Slovakia, deplored the lack of family policy in many countries. Social policy is not family policy, he insisted. Whereas social policy focuses on solidarity, family policy means investing in the future. Although the world is in crisis, the family always remains an unchanging value and a symbol of independence and can be a stabilizing factor. Just like Martin Luther King Jr.’s call stopped racial violence, we can stop the decline of the family.

Mr. Joseph Gundacker, director of the Family Forum in Austria, spoke about the family in Europe. Family policy in European Union member states is concerned with the creation of a legal, social and economic framework, as well as instruments and measures that support family development and the well-being of family life. However, divorce is increasing and birthrates are decreasing.

In relationships, when one focuses on the self and on one’s own wishes, interests and desires, the relationship starts to disintegrate and eventually falls apart. So the core issue is not inequality or lack of freedom and opportunities but a problem of relationship and selfish attitudes, Mr. Gundacker said. Family researchers and politicians look at family members only from an individual perspective. Individual rights, interests and opportunities are important, but the solution to the problem is to consider and treat the family as one unit, as the cell of society. A healthy cell has close ties among its individual elements. We need to promote the mainstreaming of the family in family politics, whereby we look at the family as one unit, Mr. Gundacker concluded. We need a comprehensive view of the human being including its four dimensions: physical/economical, mental, social/emotional and spiritual. Only then will we find real solutions to the problems of broken families and youth. Among action steps, he suggested a large, yearly festival celebrating family values.

Each panel presentation was followed by discussions and insightful comments from other prominent participants including:

- Mr. Slawomir Redo, senior advisor to ACUNS (Academic Council on the United Nations System) Vienna
- Dr. Ismail Yasin, project member of the Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities
- Mr. Peter Haider, director, UPF-Austria
- Professor Dr. Harald Christian Scheu, a professor of law at Charles University in Prague

- Mrs. Marianna Kovacs, human rights mediator, Hungary
- Mr. Peter Meszaros, president, UPF-Hungary
- Mr. Peter Hetenyi, vice president of UPF-Hungary
- Mag. Maria Neuberger-Schmidt, founder of the NGO Elternwerkstatt (Parents' Workshop), Austria
- Mr. Milos Klas, secretary general, UPF-Slovakia
- Mrs. Elisabeth Cook, director of the Vienna chapter of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), an organization that is affiliated with UPF
- Mrs. Renate Amesbauer, director of the Austrian chapter of Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP) Austria, another organization that is affiliated with UPF.

The roundtable concluded with the proposal of a Memorandum, which was approved by participants, as follows:



Vienna Memorandum

We convened at the roundtable “Family Values, Family Policies, European Culture: Challenges and Opportunities in Central Europe Today” in Vienna on July 8, 2016.

We are a group of concerned citizens, educators, experts, opinion-makers and politicians from the Visegrád Four and other Central European countries.

We discussed issues related to the institution of the family, family policy, European culture and identity.

Several concerns were raised by our speakers and participants; however, there emerged a clear consensus among us, which can be summarized as follows:

(1) Judeo-Christian, antiquity and humanist values, which shaped European culture, have to be transmitted to younger generations, so that the above-mentioned values are known by young people and internalized by them.

(2) The institution of the family must be protected and its autonomy respected by states and governments.

(3) Freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and religious liberty are basic natural rights. They should be respected by all.

We want to defend, protect and strengthen those principles, we shall continue to do so in the future, and we welcome all who would join us in these efforts and endeavors.

Vienna, July 8, 2016