

Central European Initiative in the Parliament Building of the Czech Republic

Juraj Lajda
December 2016



Under the auspices of Nina Nováková, a member of the Czech Parliament, an international conference on the topic "Challenges and Opportunities of Our Time" convened at the Parliament of the Czech Republic on November 25. More than fifty people attended the event, including historians, lawyers, political scientists, social activist and several students. This was the final program of a series of that included two round table discussions in Vienna and Budapest, in July and October 2016, respectively.

The conference was supported by the Universal Peace Federation's Czech chapter, the Hanns Seidel Foundation and the European Union of Women. [The Hanns Seidel Foundation (www.hss.de/en) is a German NGO. "Political education, promoting research, policy advice and policy analysis, scholarship programs, development cooperation and international networking are what their work focuses on, in a nutshell."] [The European Union of Women (www.europeanunionofwomen.com) which has branches in seventeen countries and "works for the strengthening of peace on the basis of justice and the free cooperation of peoples... stands for the safeguarding of human dignity and freedom, the maintenance of Europe's outstanding cultural heritage, and for social and economic progress while protecting the rights of individuals. The EUW maintains that these aims will only be realized by increasing the influence of women."]

Some background

Several steps led up to the conference -- finding common ground between experts, politicians and civil society representatives; setting up a working group on issues of religious freedom in the Czech Parliament and expanding the initiative to neighboring Central European countries.

At the round table in Vienna, a memorandum was framed that specified three topics of concern for Europe: protecting the natural family, re-affirming European cultural identity, and upholding the freedom of conscience, thought and conviction, with an emphasis on religious freedom. These three themes became the basis of the Prague event.



The fate of families

The theme of the first panel was, The Family: Obvious foundation or a controversial issue? Professor Lenka Šulová from Charles University's Faculty of Philosophy in Prague said that we need to create a

society and policies that are supportive of the family, describing current factors contributing to family breakdown -- unstable relationships, easy divorce, the high employment among women and an emphasis on individualism or on increasing wealth.

Dr. Ludmila Trapková, a clinical and family psychologist, spoke of the family as a psychosocial organism. Absence of complementarity between a masculine and a feminine pole causes problems for children. Divorcing breaks a husband-wife partnership but not the parent-child relationship, she concluded. Mr. Jan Gregor, vice-president of Young Christian Democrats [the youth wing of the Christian and Democratic Union -- Czechoslovak People's Party] underlined the reproductive purpose of the family, saying that society should recognize the family as a biological construct, not just as a social one. The last speaker on the panel was Mrs. Jana Jochová, director of the Committee for the Defense of Parents' Rights and an active supporter of the "Mom, Dad and Kids" campaign, which Christian activists launched to prevent same-sex marriage in the EU. She spoke about parents' rights and responsibilities for their children's education. The state cannot be a substitute for parents, she insisted, because the family is based on bloodline.

Threats and developments

The second panel, on the theme "Living Safely, A Basic Human Necessity," was moderated by Mr. Radko Hokovský, executive director of a think tank on European values. Jaromír Štětina, a Czech member of the European Parliament, spoke about security perils in Europe, mentioning among others aspects the hybrid warfare with a disinformation component led by Russia in the region, the goal of which he said was to destabilize the European Union. He then showed participants a documentary on the war in Chechnya.

Dr. Alyn Ware, a global coordinator of the Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, pointed out that the current conflict between Russia and the West increases the danger of war becoming nuclear. He called on European institutions to do their utmost to stop it. Nuclear war is meaningless, he concluded; since 1945, no one has used nuclear weapons. Dr. Juraj Lajda, secretary-general of UPF in the Czech Republic, concluded the panel by introducing the launch of the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP) in Korea in February and in London in September 2016.



Cultural influences

The third panel focused on the theme, "European Culture: Hope for the Future?" Mr. Jiří Georgiew from Charles University's Faculty of Law gave a concise overview of Central European history, remarking that European cultural heritage in the Visegrad Group deserved to be noted by Western European countries. ["The Visegrad Group" (www.visegradgroup.eu), also known as the "Visegrad Four" or simply "V4") reflects the efforts of the countries of the Central European region to work together in a number of fields of common interest within the all-European integration. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have always been part of a single civilization sharing cultural and intellectual values and common roots in diverse religious traditions, which they wish to preserve and further strengthen.

All the V4 countries aspired to become members of the European Union, perceiving their integration in the EU as another step forward in the process of overcoming artificial dividing lines in Europe through mutual support. They reached this aim on May 1, 2004 when they all became members of the EU.] Dr. Jaroslav Šebek, from the Czech Academy of Sciences, spoke about current affairs in Europe, underlining the influence of Brexit and the American elections on the European continent.

Dr. Roman Joch, president of the Civic Institute in the Czech Republic, reviewed the five major influences that shaped European culture -- Judaism, Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, Christianity and the Enlightenment, underlining how each value system eventually shaped Europe as we know it today. Mr. Jacques Marion, secretary-general of UPF Europe, noted that the decline of Christianity in Western

democracy meant that equality before God was replaced by equality before the law, leading people to focus on claiming rights and inciting a tendency toward conflicts of interest. Europe needs a spiritual revival to build an ethical society in a multicultural context, he concluded, beginning with strengthening the family.



On moral decline

Mr. Peter Zoehrer, secretary-general of the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (FOREF) moderated the last panel, "the Role of Religious Freedom to Address Current Problems." Dr. Aaron Rhodes, president of FOREF, began by quoting Václav Havel (1936- 2011) president of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (1989-1992) regarding modern times. "The worst thing is that we live in a contaminated moral environment. We feel morally ill because we became used to saying something different from what we thought. Concepts such as love, friendship, compassion, humility or forgiveness lost their depth and dimension." Religion should be independent from the state, but the principle of Mosaic law is that all people come under one God. Human rights are derived from natural rights.

We should recognize the pre-eminence of religious freedom, he insisted. Gay marriage rights, for instance, should not interfere with the freedom of religion. Dr. Harald Scheu, from Charles University's Faculty of Law in Prague, concluded the panel by saying that religious freedom was not only an individual freedom, but was meant to guarantee the whole concept of human rights. Yet there is today a secular monopoly on the

interpretation of human rights. Good and evil merely become a matter of political choice; choosing a political party makes you a good or bad person, he deplored. Each panel gave ample time for questions and comments from the audience. Evening television news reported on the conference as did Christian media outlets.