

UPF Prague, Czech Republic's Europe and the Future of Human Rights Meeting

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Prague, Czech Republic -- On the occasion of Human Rights Day and the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Czech UPF chapter, together with the Civic Institute think tank, convened a one-day conference titled "Europe and the Future of Human Rights."

The conference took place on December 17, 2018, in the atrium of the CEVRO Institute, a prestigious private university for law, politics, economy and security.

Two panels of distinguished speakers accentuated the importance of human rights in promoting world peace.



In his opening remarks, Dr. Juraj Lajda, president of the Czech chapter of UPF, pointed out the importance of human rights, especially in today's changing world. At the time of its founding in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a big step forward in cultivating and improving relations among people and nations, Dr. Lajda said.

The declaration was founded at a special historical time, shortly after the end of World War II, when people were still shaken by the nightmares of the war. During the Cold War the West and the East each had a different understanding of human rights. Since the fall of communism the situation has changed, Dr. Lajda said. In the present time there is a growing awareness among scholars, human rights activists, and some politicians that human rights need to be reformed. There is a need to clarify what are universal or

natural human rights and to distinguish them from social laws, the speaker concluded.

Stating that human rights are good, Dr. Roman Joch, director of the Civic Institute, immediately raised the question: If we have more human rights, will we have a better society? We cannot create human rights, he continued. Human rights can only be understood, respected and recognized. True human rights are not an act of human creativity but an act of awareness, Dr. Joch said. The problem is that people think that we can create human rights. If that were so, he said, we also could withdraw them at any time.



People are spiritual beings, Dr. Joch said. We have the right to freedom, to conscience, to think and to tell children what is good and what is not. There are natural laws inherent within all human beings. In addition, we have rights based on the social consensus -- for example, concerning the lengths of holidays. Those who speak mostly about human rights usually do not believe in them, Dr. Joch said. They think that human rights are granted by the state.

The next speaker was Professor Martin Palouš, a politician, diplomat, and former vice minister for foreign affairs. Professor Palouš, currently a senior fellow at Florida International University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) and the director of the university's Václav Havel Center for Human Rights and Diplomacy, said it is important if we are believers or agnostics, as far as human rights are concerned. Human rights are not only a legal category but they relate to people as human beings. As a signatory of the Charter 77 document, Professor Palouš spoke about the existentialist aspect of human rights. Human rights relate to our internal integrity. We have also to defend the rights of others. We should not distinguish liberals and conservatives, but we should try to understand the essence of human rights.

Hon. Pavel Bratinka, a former member of the Czech Parliament and a former minister without portfolio, spoke about the human life in human society. Human rights make sense in a community with other people, he said. Human rights should guarantee freedom of speech and conscience. Marxists used to say that if somebody is hungry, freedom has no meaning for him. We should speak also about one's duty toward other people. True human rights give people the opportunity to cooperate, he said.

Dr. Aaron Rhodes, the former executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and president of the Forum for Religious Freedom (FOREF), was the last speaker on the first panel. We love what we do not have, he said. In the United States there has not been the threat of absence of human rights. The post-communist countries can appreciate human rights more because of their absence, Dr. Rhodes said.

Nowadays, however, human rights are in danger globally, Dr. Rhodes said. There is confusion as to what true human rights are. Marxism claimed that we cannot apply freedom without a materialistic foundation. Laws should not violate natural human rights, Dr. Rhodes said. The European Commission says that human rights are limited by the law. The European Union forces member states to adopt the hate speech law. It would be a tragedy if human rights became an instrument to restrict others, Dr. Rhodes said.

Hon. Marek Benda, a member of the Czech Parliament, opened the second panel. In his speech he tried to explain what the basic human rights are. In his opinion, the concept of human rights is controversial from the very beginning because it is recognized only by the Christian civilization. According to him, the only absolute right is the right to life. But nowadays we are witnessing that in some countries laws enable abortion or euthanasia. Another basic human right, he said, should be the right to have two parents, but in some countries there is a practice of surrogacy. In his opinion, this is a modern slavery. The final human right, he said, is for freedom for speech and conscience. Unfortunately, these basic human rights are being violated, he said.

Professor Harald Scheu from the Faculty of Law of Charles University in Prague said the existence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been very positive. The protection of the individual became a collective responsibility of the whole international community, he said. Based on this declaration, many other declarations are derived.

The common understanding of human rights is important for their correct implementation. International norms must be explained unanimously. The universality of understanding human rights and keeping human rights is not always in line with regional relativism. There is no single model for interpretation of human rights, he said, because human rights are always interpreted in some concrete cultural, historical, religious and civic context of the civilization.

Peter Zoehrer, the director of the Forum for Religious Freedom (FOREF), quoted the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, who said that "contrary to what certain governments say, human rights are universal." If we take religious freedom seriously, there should also exist the freedom to leave a religion, Mr. Zoehrer said. Freedom of religion is the mother of all freedoms, he said.



The problem with religious freedom is the different interpretations of human rights. Besides the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there is also the Cairo Declaration signed by many Islamic states. The Cairo Declaration recognizes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights insofar as it does not contradict the law of sharia and is interpreted in consensus with the law of sharia.

The most persecuted group in the world nowadays are Christians, Mr. Zoehrer said. More than 120 million Christians in 50 countries are persecuted. In Europe, if one religion is dominant, it usually subjugates smaller religions.

The final speaker was Jana Jochová, the president of the Alliance for the Family. She spoke about her experience with the petition to incorporate into the Czech constitution the definition of marriage as a bond of one man and one woman. Another petition wants to legalize marriage as a bond of any two persons. One year ago an initiative, called We Are Fair, claimed that marriage is for everybody, even more than two persons living together. By July 2018 this initiative had collected 70,000 signatures. Mrs. Jochová initiated her own campaign and very soon reached over 65,000 signatures. The first group had very good media coverage, whereas her group had almost no coverage in the media.

Marketing influences public understanding, and gradually an opinion is legalized as something normal, she said. Finally Mrs. Jochová, the mother of three children, stated her belief that children should have the right to know their parents.

After each panel there was a discussion involving the more than 30 people in the audience. The conference was very important and successful. The people in the audience appreciated the high quality of the speakers and the relevant discussion after each panel.