

UPF-Czech Republic Examines Challenges of our Time in Parliament building

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Prague, Czech Republic—More than 50 participants attended a conference held in the Czech Parliament on “Challenges and Opportunities of Our Time.”

The conference was held under the auspices of Hon. Nina Nováková, a member of the Czech Parliament, on November 25, 2016. The participants included historians, lawyers, political scientists, social activists, and a number of students.

This Central European Initiative was the last of a series of programs that included two roundtable 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 Women's Union.

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; expanding the initiative to neighboring Central European countries. At the roundtable in Vienna, a memorandum was framed that specified three topics of concern for Europe: protecting the natural family, reaffirming European cultural identity, and upholding freedom of conscience, thought and conviction, with an emphasis on religious freedom. These three themes became the basis of the Prague event.

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. She described current factors contributing to family breakdown: unstable relationships, easy divorce, high employment among women, and an emphasis on individualism or growing wealth.

Dr. Ludmila Trapková, a clinical and family psychologist, spoke of the family as a psychosocial organism. The absence of complementarity between a masculine and a feminine pole causes problems for the child. Divorcing breaks a husband-wife partnership but not the parent-child relationship, she said.

Mr. Jan Gregor, vice president of the Young Christian Democrats, underlined the reproductive purpose of the family, saying it should be recognized as a biological construct, not just 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 “Mum, Dad and Kids” campaign. She spoke about parents’ rights and responsibilities in children’s education. The state cannot substitute for parents, she insisted, because the family is based on lineage.

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.

Hon. Jaromír Štětina, a Czech member of the European Parliament, spoke about security perils in Europe, mentioning, among others, the hybrid and disinformation war led by Russia in the region, the goal of which, he said, was to destabilize the European Union. He then showed participants a documentary film on the war in the Russian republic of Chechnya.

Dr. Alyn Ware, a global coordinator of the group Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, pointed out that the current conflict between Russia and the West raises the danger of war and nuclear conflict. He called on European institutions to do their utmost to stop it. Nuclear war is meaningless in reality, he concluded; since 1945 nuclear weapons have not been used.

Dr. Juraj Lajda, UPF secretary general in the Czech Republic, concluded the panel by introducing the new organization International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP), which was launched in Korea in February 2016 and in London in September 2016.

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 Four nations (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) deserved to be noted by Western European countries.

Dr. Jaroslav Šebek from the Czech Academy of Sciences spoke about current affairs in Europe, underlining the influence on the European continent of the United Kingdom’s vote in June 2016 to leave the European Union and the U.S. elections in November 2016.

Dr. Roman Joch, the 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, the regional 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. This leads people to focus on claiming rights and incites 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.

The last panel, on “The Role of Religious Freedom to Address Current Problems,” was moderated by Mr. Peter Zoehrer, secretary general of the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (FOREF).

Dr. Aaron Rhodes, the president of FOREF, began by quoting former Czech President Václav Havel’s words that terms such as “love,” “compassion” and “forgiveness” are losing their meaning in modern times. Religion should be independent from the state, he said, but the principle of Moses’ 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.

Dr. Harald Scheu from Charles University’s Faculty of Law in Prague concluded the panel, 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, he said. Good and evil become a mere matter of political choice, he said, and choosing a political party makes you a good or bad person.

Each panel provided ample time for questions and comments from the audience. The conference was reported on the TV evening news, as well as by the Christian media.

