

UPF Strasbourg, France's Conference: Europe and the Future of Human Rights

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Strasbourg, France -- To commemorate the 70th anniversary of the historic Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), together with partnering organizations, convened in the European Parliament on December 12, 2018, two panels of eminent scholars, human rights activists and practitioners to consider the theme "Europe and the Future of Human Rights."

Hosted by Hon. Patricia Lalonde, a member of the European Parliament, the event was attended by several members of the European Parliament and their assistants and by representatives from Strasbourg-based consulates. Czech Republic Eurodeputy Tomáš Zdechovský was one of the speakers. The Paris Academy of Geopolitics, Human Rights without Frontiers, Women's Federation for World Peace International, and the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace co-sponsored the conference.

The day before the event, a terrorist attack on Strasbourg's Christmas Market had shaken the whole nation, and the conference was held during the ensuing manhunt for the terrorist. This did not prevent about 100 participants from several European countries from attending the event.

Dr. Dieter Schmidt, the UPF representative for Central Europe, began the proceedings by asking for a minute of silence for those who had died or been injured in the attack. He then invited Dr. Katsumi Otsuka, the UPF regional president for Europe and the Middle East, to offer welcoming remarks. Dr. Otsuka said the UPF founders hold human rights in high regard because of their experience of suffering as refugees in their war-torn homeland of Korea.



The first panel, on the theme "Europe and Fundamental Freedoms," was moderated by Dr. Ali Rastbeen, president of the Paris Academy of Geopolitics. He read a message from Hon. Patricia Lalonde, who was unable to attend the event, expressing her concern that the commemoration of the UDHR's 70th anniversary should be an occasion to recall human rights violations going on around the world, notably in Yemen.

Because Europe is a key player in the promotion of human rights internationally, Dr. Rastbeen said, we should call attention to human rights violations in Yemen and other nations, but also expose possible

contradictions between major powers' stand on human rights and their international diplomacy.

As the first speaker, Willy Fautré, director and co-founder of the Brussels-based Human Rights without Frontiers, spoke about the threat of Islamism, both to the application of human rights and to the integration of historical Islamic communities in multicultural Europe. He emphasized the danger of "salafization," first to other Muslims, then to the wider society. He pointed to research showing that the image of historical Muslim communities in European Union nations is being damaged and their children are being alienated from the values that their parents have held.

Hon. Tomáš Zdechovský, MEP for the Czech Republic, testified that his commitment to human rights was rooted in the experience of his family's persecution under the Nazi and communist regimes. He recalled his grandfather's words: "If you sleep in a democracy, you will wake up in a dictatorship." He expressed his determination as a Eurodeputy to denounce human rights violations and defend the rights of minorities without compromise, despite relative indifference from a number of parliamentarians on this issue.



Diana Constantinide, a London-based barrister specializing in human rights, called the UDHR "humanity's Magna Carta," but noted that human rights violations have not decreased during the transition to modernity, but only changed character. From her experience working with human rights cases, she came to understand that we need to be good listeners to gather evidence and protect people's rights, and she concluded that "the cornerstone of human rights is placed in how we educate our children."

Dr. Farida Valiullina, a Berlin-based lawyer specializing in public international law and human rights law, noted the original idealism and purpose of the UDHR but detailed the weaknesses in its legal implementation. Based on lessons learned from World War II, the system of human rights protection in Europe is the strongest in the world, she said, but citizens and legal practitioners frequently are confronted with different binding texts, pointing to the need for better cooperation between the European Convention of Human Rights and national legal systems.



Jacques Marion, the UPF regional vice president for Europe and the Middle East, concluded the panel with a presentation on "Rights and Responsibilities." Quoting Pope Francis' 2014 speech on Europe at the Strasbourg Parliament, in which he spoke on the interdependence between the rights of individuals and their responsibility toward the greater good, he concluded by emphasizing the need to give spiritual values their proper place in society and restore a proper balance between the "mind" and "body" of

society – that is, between its spiritual dimension and its political dimension.

The second panel examined the theme "Philosophical Basis of Human Rights and Future Perspectives" and was moderated by Peter Zoehrer, executive director of the Forum for Religious Freedom (FOREF) Europe.

Dr. Aaron Rhodes, the former executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights and author of the recent book *The Debasement of Human Rights: How Politics Sabotage the Ideal of Freedom*, emphasized the significance of the UDHR but said that the foundational principles of Articles 1 and 2 had been contradicted by the list of human rights that followed, specifically by economic and social rights. Human rights are rooted in nature, he said; freedom and equality are not the invention of some political order, they are natural to all people. Today, however, 70 years after the Declaration, legal discrimination prevents millions of people from enjoying their freedom.



Dr. Antonio Stango, president of the Italian Federation for Human Rights, praised the 1948 text of UDHR as the self-evident basis of the concept of "universalism," justifying in some cases that other nations or international institutions intervene where a government is not fulfilling its obligations toward its citizens. However, he said, this universalist approach is under threat from regional approaches to human rights, citing "Asian values" and the "Cairo Declaration." Some tension is thus created between the call for universalism and the defense of "traditional values," leading to cultural relativism.

Dr. Adrian Holderegger, professor emeritus at the Department of Ethics and Theology of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, spoke on the theme "Human Rights or Citizen Rights? A New Stage in Interreligious Dialogue." He referred to a declaration adopted in June 2018 by high-ranking leaders of six major religions at the United Nations in Geneva, stating their commitment to recognize the concept of equality of citizen rights, which are rooted in human rights. After failing to find a common point of reference among religions for the promotion of human rights and recognizing that the quest for a "global ethics" is at a dead-end, he said, this declaration constitutes a breakthrough by building a "dynamic triangle" between citizen rights, human rights and universal values.

As the last speaker, Carolyn Handschin, director of the UN Offices of the Women's Federation for World Peace International, explained about the background of the UDHR preparation, under the guidance of former U.S. first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and the remarkable togetherness that the acceptance of the final draft engendered. She described the subsequent efforts by the InterAction Council of Former Heads of State and Government (1983-1997) to incorporate an accord on responsibilities, with the involvement of dignitaries of the stature of Nelson Mandela. She emphasized the transformation that gender equality would allow in governance at all levels as well as discourse in public affairs, and she brought attention to the role of the family in nurturing an early sense of human rights and responsibilities.

The conference on "Europe and the Future of Human Rights" was successfully held in the majestic setting of the European Parliament, fitting to the historical commemoration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The terrorist attack that preceded it on December 11, right in the heart of Strasbourg, underlines the relevance of the topics discussed, but also reminds us of the efforts needed to overcome political and religious prejudice in order to realize the European ideal of "unity in diversity."