



SCHWEIZERISCHE HELSINKI VEREINIGUNG FÜR DEMOKRATIE, RECHTSSTAAT UND MENSCHENRECHTE
SWISS HELSINKI COMMITTEE FOR DEMOCRACY, RULE OF LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Kappel Declaration

Swiss Helsinki Committee Youth Seminar
“Human Rights – Democracy’s Foundation and Ceiling”
1–5 July 2008
Kappel am Albis, Switzerland

Forty-five young men and women from Serbia and Switzerland participated at a seminar organised in Kappel by the Swiss Helsinki Committee (SHC) on the theme “Human Rights – Democracy’s Foundation and Ceiling”.

The seminar in Kappel this July sought to build on the success of the first SHC Youth Seminar held in Palic (Serbia) in June 2007. Many of last year’s participants met again, and they were joined this year by participants from Switzerland. The majority of participants were university students. They and the organisers came to Kappel to further a dialogue among and with young people from Serbia on human rights and democracy. The country is at a critical moment in its history and its youth in their lives: unstable political, economic and social conditions prevailing there seem to offer the youth few prospects for the future. The seminar was intended to help them lead their lives in a peaceful and prosperous Serbia by promoting their initiative through information, discussion and insights.

Goals

In particular, the goals of the seminar were to:

- examine the relationship between human rights and democracy in general and in the societies of Serbia and Switzerland;
- demonstrate how human rights and democracy are issues that are conceptually and practically accessible to all of us, how efforts to realize them are possible by anyone so concerned and finally how the coming generation’s engagement – or lack thereof – for human rights and democracy will largely determine society in future;
- support and encourage young people from Serbia in realising security and well-being within their country through democracy and respect for human rights;
- stimulate young people’s interest in and engagement for international co-operation; and
- bring young people from Serbia and Switzerland together so that they can exchange ideas about human rights and democracy, share positive and negative experiences, speak about issues of mutual interest and make proposals for their future.

The Kappel seminar was opened on 1 July 2008 with a keynote speech by Andreas Gross, Member of the National Council of Switzerland and of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Councillor Gross spoke on “Human Rights and Democracy: An ongoing and never ending individual and collective learning process”. Thereafter participants addressed the theme “Human Rights – Democracy’s Foundation and Ceiling” in plenaries and workshops. The dialogue from Palic was broadened and deepened. The Kappel seminar concluded with the adoption of this declaration on 4 July.

Findings

The seminar proved to be as lively and productive as the organisers had hoped, with the young people from Serbia and Switzerland showing themselves to be interested and reliable interlocutors. The seminar’s key findings relate to the importance of – but the incomplete realization of – human rights and democracy in contemporary Switzerland and Serbia. The starting point of the analysis was that peace and prosperity in society hinges largely on how problems and conflicts are dealt with publicly. Disrespect for human rights and democracy, including through media, heightens social tensions and can lead to acts of barbarism, whereas respect for the dignity and the rights of all members of a society is the basis of freedom, justice and peace. The violent history of the twentieth century offers tragic confir-

mation. It was also agreed at the outset that realising human rights and democracy is an unending effort, a work in progress, everywhere; no country should be complacent about human rights and democracy.

The central question before the seminar then was how to promote human rights and democracy in society. As this question has many facets, the participants and organisers chose to focus on the relationship between human rights and democracy. This relationship was seen as close: the right to political participation in decision-making and the right to be informed was considered a pre-condition for the enjoyment of civil and political rights. The young people from Serbia and Switzerland recognised, however, that democratic institutions and processes (e.g. voting, legislation, public debate or professional media) can also diametrically oppose human rights ideals when, for example, they serve to propagate discriminatory ideas. The role of populism and ethnic nationalism as well as of myths, prejudices and stereotypes in tensions between groups in society was accordingly a topic of particular interest. On the basis of their common experience, the youth agreed that these forces must be as widely understood as possible and if necessary, be confronted in order to ensure a pluralist society based on compromise, negotiation and the rule of law.

The relationship between human rights and democracy was addressed in greater detail in three workshops according to different sub-themes. The approach to the sub-themes was nonetheless the same in each workshop, being based on theory and practice, drawn from contemporary and historical experience, and derived from Serbia as well as the wider world. Individually, the workshops found that:

- Workshop 1 „Conflict Prevention and Conflict Settlement“
Discussions revolved around the government form and the fundamental rights on which a multi-ethnic State should be based in order to facilitate peaceful and non-violent conflict transformation. The issue of legal guarantees for minorities was considered as being of crucial importance. Also, the focus was put on instruments of conflict transformation such as international criminal law, conflict analysis, dealing with the past, early warning tools etc. The practice of other European countries and of European integration since 1945 offers reason to hope that the legacy of civil and interstate war may be overcome and a harmonious co-existence of peoples achieved. Negative experiences and lack of information can cause prejudices that can again lead to conflict. To transform existing conflicts and to prevent conflicts in the future, civic education is important as is intercultural discourse and exchange on all levels (locally, nationally and internationally).
- Workshop 2 „Human Rights and Democracy“
The young people from Serbia and Switzerland saw the relevance and applicability of human rights and democracy in their lives; indeed, these issues are an important and pressing concern for them. Human rights and democracy are like football, participants agreed; they need to be practiced every day. Although the situation today in Serbia and Switzerland may differ, the fundamental challenges are the same and unchanging in a rule-of-law state. Foremost among them is attempting to fully realize human rights and democracy at the same time. Participants from both countries saw dangers as well as opportunities in direct democracy; direct democracy requires a high level of education, responsible politicians and real dialogue to ensure that it does not lead to human rights violations. In a free and democratic society, people have the right to realise and express themselves, but they must at the same time respect the equal rights of others.
- Workshop 3 „The Role of Media in a Democracy“
It was agreed that media have enormous influence on society and individuals. Therefore, media are also under influence and pressure from politicians and lobbies, as well as various commercial interests. Disregarding professional standards and codes leads to violation of the universal rights of free access to information. Failure derives in particular from an intoxication with myths that simplify history and perpetuate prejudices. Nevertheless, participants agreed that media should always be engaged for the freedom of speech, and facilitate democratic debate and mutual understanding in the public sphere.

Recommendations

Following on these findings, the Kappel Declaration expresses participants' needs, desires and suggestions for the future. Participants:

- believe that the meeting of young people from Serbia and Switzerland can contribute to the strengthening of human rights and democracy in their respective countries and can promote international understanding and co-operation. Indeed, such grassroots activism may be the most effective way of realizing human rights and democracy around the world;
- think that the principle of mutual and intercultural respect is crucial as a basis for further deliberations on the implementation of human rights, rule of law and democracy.
- recognise that setbacks and slow progress towards common goals are inevitable, but that the participants must remain confident about making a difference. It is certain that without the positive engagement of the coming generation, divisions in society will not be overcome;
- see that their efforts must focus on encouraging awareness. The limited understanding that many people in Serbia and Switzerland, including public officials, have of human rights and democracy must be broadened, e.g. through workshops for young people, peer communication, school and university exchanges;
- are convinced that in order to maximise human rights and democracy simultaneously, a holistic view of and approach to human rights and democracy must be taken. Treating them as separable issues is not true to their conception or to reality. Worse, it can give rise to exactly the divisions in society that their realisation is supposed to mitigate against. Accordingly, true democracy requires more than the holding of 'periodic, free and fair elections', it also requires a result that recognises the equality and worth of every member of society;
- encourage people to do active research, to use different sources of information as well as reliable historical facts and to consider all points of view in order to understand all sides better;
- seek support from abroad for the promotion of human rights and democracy in Serbia, not in the form of specific advice or policy prescriptions, but in the form of options meeting international standards and good practices from other countries. Society-wide debate may thereby be provoked so that an informed consensus can be reached locally;
- urge each other to take full advantage of the website set up by the SHC after the Palic seminar as an online forum for discussion of human rights, democracy and the role of the media in Serbia (see www.futurenowforum.org). The website offers a promising means of immediate and ongoing trans-border communication;
- ask that the SHC continue to promote the dialogue on human rights and democracy among and with young people from Serbia. They are grateful that the SHC has extended its efforts beyond Switzerland and thank all those who have made this possible, financially, logistically or otherwise; and
- call on other young men and women from Serbia and Switzerland to set an example of open-mindedness and willingness to learn or better, to be 'active citizens' and to undertake similar work for the benefit of human rights and democracy in their countries.

The seminar served as a platform for seeking solutions and exchanging multiethnic experiences, goals and ideas regarding human rights, democracy, conflicts and media. This declaration, adopted by the seminar participants and organisers, is to guide their further activities. Participants intend to use the declaration as a reference for the implementation of the seminar's recommendations in national and international, governmental and non-governmental contexts. It should help them to formulate and raise their concerns before the authorities. The organisers are encouraged by the declaration to begin to plan for subsequent seminars and to identify additional complementary projects in each country. They wish thereby to sustain the commitment of these young people and to make further progress towards common goals.

Adopted by the seminar participants and the seminar organisers on 4 July 2008.

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The original version of this declaration is in English. A translation is available in Serbian.