

30 years Helsinki Comité Nederland

Caroline de Gruyter

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for having me here. It's a great pleasure to speak here after Thomas Greminger. I have only recently moved out of Vienna, where I spent four years. Of course I was not an OSCE insider like him. Still, from relatively close by, I followed the travails of this organization during a rapid deterioration of relations between several of their member states. And we are all aware that within the EU, too, there is now tension on many fronts.

Last week I was in Warsaw, at a conference, listening to a Polish man working for ODIHR, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. His speech was called: 'From Communism to Populism – How did we get there?' Very chilling. He gave us a grim report indeed. There is not much good news coming from his office these days. No progress any more - rather a process of slow erosion. The lives of human rights defenders is getting harder. NGOs are hampered in their work almost everywhere.

The setting of that conference was almost as interesting as his speech. It was a meeting for Young European Leaders, organized by a

thinktank. It turned out to be an energetic bunch of young, determined people. A Romanian concert pianist. The first German woman ever to command a navy battle ship. A Belgian in New York who had designed an app for charities. Also attending was the Polish woman who organized protest marches, last year, against the abortion law; and the deputy mayor of Helsinki, who was born in an Afghan village.

The Pole and me were asked to speak to this group. Unfortunately the city of Warsaw had put us up in the Palace of Culture and Science. This building, donated by Stalin and constructed in the 1950s, is impressive. It's also huge and cold. Every word is echoed by the floor and the ceiling and the stone walls, like a squash ball. Each word bounces back amplified, drowning out the next word.

So there they were: an bubbling crowd of doers and achievers, full of good ideas and intentions, listening to the OSCE man who did not manage to make himself understood. I only know what he said because afterwards I read the text. His speech was inaudible. We experimented with microphones and without. Everyone moved as close to the podium as possible. But it was all to no avail. We never got his message. Then it struck me that this was somehow a metaphor for our world today – here we were, discussing the rule of law and morality with a receptive audience. But because of the bigger setting the message was lost.

Question: do we, as some say, need to change the message?

Thomas Greminger has talked about the role of the OSCE while big tectonic plates are moving. This is *our* bigger setting, in Europe. The West seems to be in shambles. Chemical warfare is back on the continent. Big power politics is sidelining and diminishing international institutions. We seem unable to do much about it - however much we try, however many resolutions we signed. Agreements, rulebooks and treaties are rendered worthless.

What now?

Some say: the UN, the EU and the OSCE and other institutions that are suffering from this to a certain extent, are becoming useless. "Let's do away with them. Good riddance."

That seemed to be, some years ago, the fate of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons here in The Hague. Or almost. Some member states were busy dismantling the OPCW. Then, during the war in Syria, President Assad used chemical weapons. None of the big powers wanted to go in and stop him. Letting this pass, on the other hand, would be politically too cynical. They needed a face-saver. Soon, the same countries that had been instrumental in dismantling the organization, propped it up again. They took the OPCW almost out of the waste bin, and said: "We need you!" Suddenly there was

political will. Suddenly there was money. Suddenly it was possible to hire back the experts that had steadily been fired over several years. I like this story.

Sometimes this happens against all odds. The Helsinki Committees themselves were set up in the seventies to monitor the Helsinki Accords. Some countries had signed the Accords, betting they would never be implemented anyway. For Moscow, for example, this was the first recognition of the Soviet block since the war. It was important. It made them eager to sign. The price they paid was to agree to certain human rights conditions. They thought these conditions would be toothless. But the NGOs monitoring the Accords had more teeth than anyone suspected. They were totally serious. To the surprise of many their work got momentum. The rest, as they say, is history. I like this story, too.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For a long time Europeans have taken democracy and high human rights standards for granted. After the second world war, the Americans 'did' geopolitics for us. We licked our wounds, and built up our economies and welfare states. We also tried to learn from the horrors of the past, to become better citizens and human beings. Under the American umbrella we safely experimented with this.

This sounds a bit naive - and it *was* naive. It was also great. It enabled us to become the most exemplary peoples that probably ever existed on the planet - for a while at least. We had the luxury to view the world through a unique prism of rights, principles and values. We prescribed to ourselves, and to everybody else, the rule of law, freedom of the press, respect for minorities, and so on. We had the highest disdain for those who still invested in weapons systems and armies. When the Americans complained they had to foot 75 percent of the NATO bill, we lectured them about pacifism.

Then, the wall came down. The Americans slowly withdrew from Europe. We were left to fend for ourselves. Back then, we did not properly understand the implication of this. How could we? The word 'war' had been scrapped from our dictionary. War?! We were beyond that. We, the pacifists, had moved up the ladder of civilisation. We had values, not armies. Now the major conflict was over. The rest of the world would slowly become like us.

Well.

Enter geopolitics. Our whole neighbourhood is now becoming unfriendly to us, or even on fire. And we're pretty defenceless. It's hard to tackle illegal immigration, fight cybercrime and combat terrorism with just good intentions. Now Europe has to think of its interests, and try to balance them with the values we spent finetuning for

decades. This is hard. And it doesn't always look pretty - look at the refugee deal with Turkey.

One of the leftovers of our era of naivety is that many Europeans still tend to see democracy and the rule of law as a goal; they see this goal as the end of a linear development. When we don't reach the goal or go around in circles for a while, many people get disillusioned and say: "See, democracy doesn't work. Let's try something else. Maybe it's time for a strong leader."

I believe we should be looking at democracy in a different way. It's not a goal. It's a process. A process that constantly changes, over time. The French philosopher Frédéric Worms has written that democracy is "a means to balance, manage, different groups in society so they won't get at each other's throats". Every change in the wider world affects this difficult balance between the groups, and the way democracy is organised. Each time we have to adjust. Make changes. Sometimes we do better, sometimes worse. When you look at it like this, bumps on the road are normal. They are part of the process.

Right now, the world is changing fast. This upsets this delicate balance between groups in many societies. No wonder democracy is in trouble in so many places. The trouble is, in my view, aggravated by the fact that citizens refuse to accept that democracy *can* be in trouble.

There is only one way to make it function as well as possible - which is *to keep working on it*. Never give up. The same goes for the international systems that we put in place to keep check of how we behave on a bigger scale. We have a problem with asylum and migration? Let's not abolish the refugee convention, but look at new ways to implement it. Problems with security in Europe? Remain true to the principles we signed up for and try to find clever ways to implement them – it is *now* that we need these principles the most.

Once, at the Human Rights Council in Geneva – another embattled institution full of states making full use of their veto rights – I heard a Sudanese minister say, after massacres by government troops in Darfur: “The perpetrators will be brought to justice!” This was a lie. He was never planning to arrest anyone, ever. But the fact that the minister *said* it, clearly showed that he knew exactly what he was supposed to say. He *knew* the standards, even if he didn't adhere by them.

My point is this: if we undo the standards, we have no way left to hold anyone accountable for anything. Benjamin Franklin once said: “The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” This is no less true today.