

Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland

Opening remarks at the Norwegian-Czechoslovak seminar on democratic institutions, Prague, 11 October 1991.

Ministers,  
Distinguished participants,

A few weeks ago, a broad panel of literary critics in Norway were invited to pick out the most significant works of literature of the twentieth century. Their first choice was a novel written early in the century here in Prague: "The Process" by Franz Kafka. In retrospective, we have realized to what extent Kafka's vision reflects a major aspect of our century's Europe. We know but too well how this nightmare of modern man facing an inhuman and arbitrary power should become a reality for so many people on this continent.

Prague has been a focal point of our common history throughout this century. Like Kafka's visions from its first decades, later important events in this city and in this country have become part of our European consciousness, milestones in a history of tragedy and oppression: 1938, 1948, 1968 - but also of hope and of new beginning, through the peaceful revolution of 1989.

Coming to Prague and introducing today a seminar on democratic institutions therefore has a very special significance. Prague no longer belongs to the other part of a divided Europe. Europe is becoming whole and free. Prague is regaining its rightful position as an important cross-roads at the centre of our continent and of our common European civilization.

People who have been deprived of democracy, probably know a lot more about its importance and significance than those who sometimes seem to have become all too used to having it. For the "old" democracies there is an important lesson to be drawn from the democratic revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe: Freedom, democracy and human rights are values that cannot be taken for granted. They must be fought for. And, they are worth fighting for.

Democracy is not achieved once and for all. Democracy is a never-ending process. In this process, we must learn again and again how to strike the right balance between the search for the common good and the rights and the freedom of the individual; between the principle of majority rule and the respect for the rights of the minorities; between the need for efficient decision-making and the need for a broad and effective participation in the decision-making process.

In today's Norwegian-Czechoslovak seminar, these vital issues will be addressed from different angles, and on the background of the different experience in our two countries. But our agenda is common: the preservation and renewal of democracy is equally important for both of us. We believe it will be useful for you to hear from leading Norwegian politicians and experts about the experiences we have made in our country. And we look forward to learn more about how you perceive the future developments of the democratic Czechoslovakia.

Together, we face the crucial challenge of shaping the new Europe, of shaping our own future and the future of our children.

We must build new and stronger cooperative structures allowing us to prevent conflicts and to resolve common problems. The dramatic and tragic developments we now witness in Yugoslavia are a striking illustration of the need for new and more adequate mechanisms for conflict resolution. And the very grave threats against our common environment are the best example of the necessity of seeking solutions at a European - and indeed a global - level.

We must develop our economic cooperation, bringing the countries of Central and Eastern Europe into the process of economic integration on our continent, and assisting them in developing a market-oriented economy with a social dimension.

We must make sure that viable democratic institutions are established, ensuring political and social stability and a harmonious development of the new democracies. Our commitment to freedom and human rights must be translated into concrete measures. The principle of equality between men and women is a fundamental aspect of a just and democratic society, and certainly needs to be strengthened and put more systematically into practice. The protection of the rights of children is another question which deserves more attention in our societies.

All these tasks are closely interrelated. A framework of democracy and individual freedom is necessary for the development of a free economy. An economic development responding to the expectations of the population and meeting their basic needs is the best guarantee against social unrest which might threaten the new and still fragile democratic institutions. And a broad and common democratic culture throughout our continent is the best foundation for the development of the cooperative structures we need at European level.

This interrelationship has from the very beginning been one of the basic principles of the Helsinki process. In the radically new situation in Europe, we must now pursue our efforts to make the CSCE the effective framework for all-European cooperation that we need, on the basis of the firm commitments set out in the Paris Charter last year.

It is essential to continue and further develop the Human Dimension component of the CSCE as one of the cornerstones of the process. We therefore attach great importance to the CSCE Seminar of Experts on Democratic Institutions which we will have the privilege to host in Oslo next month. The Oslo seminar will underline our common concern and our common responsibility for the consolidation of democratic institutions, the rule of law and the protection of human rights throughout Europe.

We should also pay due attention to the concrete organization of our cooperation on these questions. Different ideas have been put forward, which all merit attention. In particular, we believe that the proposal to expand the mandate of the Warsaw Office of Free Elections to become an Office of Democratic Institutions should be pursued.

When President Havel and I earlier this year discussed the idea of organizing this Norwegian-Czechoslovak seminar, we wanted to place it into this broader context of European cooperative efforts on the vital issues of freedom and democracy, and as part of our preparations to the CSCE seminar in Oslo. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Czechoslovak Institute of Foreign Relations for its readiness to organize the seminar, and to thank all the distinguished participants from our two countries for the contribution they will bring to a process which certainly will benefit us all.

I wish you a successful seminar.