"Let us never forget that new hopes are born from crises" – An interview with Anna Šabatová on today's Europe and the world

Anna Šabatová, Petr Bittner

interview

Petr Bittner asked Anna Šabatová, a legend of Czech dissent, Charter 77 spokesperson, former chairwoman of the Helsinki Committee and Public Defender of Rights, about one of the topics of this year's Inspiration Forum, specifically Europe and its future

In an interview for Aktuálně ten years ago, you said: The moment that undercurrents erupt on the surface, the authority of words will no longer be able to prevent anything. Are these times now upon us? Have the "undercurrents" now erupted in Europe (and elsewhere)? And does this mean that our talk here today is futile?

Striving for a change for the better, or having the courage to insist on the truth when everything seems lost, is never futile. An effort like this always contains a sort of “seed for the future”. This is always true, regardless of whether situations are promising or they seem completely hopeless.

So no, even if such times are really upon us, talking about improving them will never be in vain.

So there’s still room for improvement here? At least if we’re talking about Europe?

The murky underlying currents in Europe have undoubtedly become stronger, but I don’t see the situation as being hopeless. In some countries, anti-European forces have strengthened, while in others, positive trends are also evident from time to time.

There’s one thing that’s specific in Europe, and one could even say it’s exciting: In each of the European Union’s 27 countries, elections are held at a different time. We do have joint elections to the European Parliament, but election influencing is a two-way process, not one-way. European structures, Parliament and the Commission naturally have an influence on what happens in the nation states, and the actions of the European Council of course mediate influences from the nation states towards Europe. But it’s obvious – and it can’t be overlooked -- that Europe has generally shifted to the right, and it’s especially clear that the far right has become stronger.

What influence does Donald Trump have on this shift?

The influence of Donald Trump and Trumpism on European politics is evident. On the one hand, he’s undoubtedly poured fuel into various far-right formations. But on the other hand, he’s forcing us others to rethink and, to some extent, to reevaluate what we’ve become accustomed to calling the “transatlantic relationship”.

This situation is of course made extremely complicated by the fact that there’s a war underway in broader

European space. However, I think that even this is ultimately a symptom of a crisis not only of Europe, but also of a global one – not only a crisis of its security architecture, but also a crisis of international law. To put it succinctly, the situation is serious, and full of tension and risk. And we're only just coming to the most serious crisis of all – the climate crisis. To a certain extent, we're trying to respond to this in some way, but certainly not nearly as much as the situation would require.

But, even in this context, we shouldn't yield to despair. Let us never forget that new hopes and opportunities are born from crises.

For centuries, Europe has been a project of reason and progress – but also of war and guilt. When you say "the future of Europe" today, what does that mean to you? Is Europe's purpose changing in the 21st century, or does it remain the same, and does it need to be defended in a turbulent world?

I think that the contribution made by the founding fathers of the European Union after a terrible World War – i.e. never to have another war in Europe – is a lasting value, and it should always be remembered. And it should be rethought, with inspiration from Helsinki, to help end the war between Russia and Ukraine as soon as a window of opportunity opens. Nonetheless, today's world is of course very different from the post-war one...

What mainly makes it different?

I see two very important realities, which couldn't be seen back then and therefore weren't taken into account, in two global factors: the climate crisis, and in the unjust and ever-worsening redistribution of social resources. These two key phenomena go hand in hand while influencing the world – and they've been reflected for decades. But we've only been living in an information world shaped by the algorithms of global information networks for about ten to fifteen years, and this is a completely new factor. This transformation of what is public is having a significant impact on society's shared psyche.

From all the examples we have, it's clear that we as humanity have come into conflict with our planetary boundaries, which poses an existential threat to us. We're not even able to imagine, and perhaps not even fully believe, all the consequences this might have for us. That's why our response has to be deeper and more consistent than the current one is. I'm convinced that the climate crisis is also related to capitalism as a global system and its emphasis on maximizing profits regardless of collateral losses, and also to the topic of the redistribution of produced goods. I mean this both globally and within nation states. The difference between what the narrow class of the richest owns and what the rest of the population owns is immeasurable, and it's getting deeper. The gap continues to widen.

This state of affairs has been occurring for several decades. And this unsustainable situation will always be complicating and even paralyzing any possible solution to the climate crisis.

What kind of political implications does this have?

First of all, it has long been clear in the various corners of the free world that all this has a fundamentally negative impact on the quality of democracy. The deteriorating situation of a huge number of people is obviously directly proportional to the growing influence that billionaires have on politics. It's no coincidence that the "cradle of democracy", the United States, hasn't been perceived as a de facto democratic country for some time – new political science terms such as "technofascism" are increasingly appearing in the context of the United States, and

there’s also more and more talk about the oligarchization of American society (and that of other countries).

Since Donald Trump's victory, his administration has managed to openly and unscrupulously attack a number of institutions serving the democratic rule of law.

Is there a way out of this multi-faceted and interconnected crisis?

It’s necessary to radically reconfigure redistribution and invest a significant part of the funds obtained in this way into measures related to the climate crisis (mitigation and adaptation measures), as well as into strengthening and improving public services, which benefit all citizens. This will strengthen the sense of perception of the world as a fair place, people’s sense of belonging to society as a whole – and ultimately also to the state and the European Union – but also, of course, to democracy as such.

Around 25 years ago, I did an interview for Literární noviny, which I concluded with the theory that it was necessary to establish a state where politics would not be in the economy’s tow and that it was precisely democratic politics that should be directing the crazy "self-propulsion" of economic and financial forces. Over the course of that quarter of a century, I haven’t noticed anything that would make me revise that belief. On the contrary, we’re facing this today as a crucial challenge.

Your life is linked professionally, civically and as an activist to the fight for freedom and human rights. The European Union itself is founded on the ideals of solidarity, justice and dignity. What risk do you see in the fact that these ideals are now beginning to be relativized – both from the outside (Russia, China, the USA) and from within the EU’s member states? Do you feel that Europe can still be a "continent of humanity"? Or will the conviction prevail that there’s no point in defending something that the rest of the world has definitively abandoned, and that we shouldn’t undermine our starting position in the all-against-all battle of a multipolar world by "being considerate" of things?

We must not lose our humanity – and I firmly believe that we will not. Of course, the situation may temporarily get worse, but humanity is an eternal value and I believe that we’ll always return to it. Europe shouldn’t get carried away with the logic of economic competition with the United States and China. It shouldn’t believe in the tale that it’s necessary to reduce the welfare state in order to support economic growth – which is a very ambiguous thing to quantify. However, opinions like these are unfortunately voiced fairly often. Humanity, empathy, solidarity, or critical thinking are values that we should develop and ones that should become part of European education and upbringing. And of course, we should strive for a fairer redistribution of the goods that society produces.

How should Europe raise a new generation that understands law not only as a system, but also as a moral obligation? The experience of dissent and civic courage is something that the current younger generations in democratic Europe are no longer familiar with. Do you think that Europe can continue to understand itself without this vivid experience? Or do we risk losing our moral compass and with it our place in a multipolar world? And can we be reminded of our legacy by civil societies in countries now negotiating accession such as Belarus or Georgia, which are now fighting against authoritarians who are dragging them away from Europe under Russia's sphere of influence?

I’m skeptical about making role models out of other countries or eras. Learning lessons from the past is undoubtedly necessary, but only on a general and abstract level. We nonetheless have to use modern analysis

and modern society as our starting points. I don't think that brave people only existed in the past or in other countries. They're also here in our country, right now.

Particularly in the last two years, I've been troubled by the European Union's failure to take a common and principled position on the genocidal actions and the committing of war crimes in Gaza. And indifference to this was by far the worst in the Czech Republic. Political representations have been unable or unwilling to draw any effective conclusion about Netanyahu's government and develop means of pressure. It's not only a disaster for the Palestinians, but it's also dragging Israeli society into an abyss, as the well-known Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari wrote a year and a half ago. On the other hand, however, a certain credit must be given to European societies – in terms of this issue, the European people are behaving better than the EU's main representatives and the representatives of many national governments.

Migration, the climate crisis, inequalities, artificial intelligence – these are all challenges that are transforming human rights. Should the culture of human rights itself somehow change in order to cope with these new conditions? Or, on the contrary, is it necessary to face new challenges on an immutable basis of human rights to prevent barbarism from returning under the weight of great changes?

The concept of human rights naturally has the ability to respond to new challenges. Fundamental rights are formulated in general terms, and their interpretation and fulfilment change over time. This is a wholly natural process.

You often refer to human rights as a language of hope. How can this hope be kept alive today, in the age of populism and cynicism, without people starting to consider it simply na?ve under the weight of an increasingly harsh reality?

I have no choice here but to repeat the fact that we must not lose our humanity and empathy. That we must show solidarity. Both as individuals and as a society, we must associate and organize for this purpose, and demand the same from our governments.

Europe finds itself between two pressures: globalization and the return of nationalism. Do you feel there is a path towards remaining free and cohesive at the same time? In the 1970s, you fought against a regime that suppressed the freedom of speech. Today, we live under the excessive pressure of information, where freedom of speech is almost absolute from a certain point of view, but the truth is undergoing a sort of inflation and often loses its weight because of this. What changes have occurred to the field itself on which the fight for freedom of expression is being waged?

The field is so different that it basically no longer makes sense to compare the two. I am nearing the conviction that legal regulation on social networks should actually be similar to – or at least close to – the regulations on television, radio broadcasting and in print media.

However, I also see a problem in another dimension. Social networks are in private hands, yet they occupy and fill public space and can deform discussions into very distorted forms via algorithms. This distorted image may not in fact reflect the distribution of opinions and moods in society, but in retrospect, of course, it strongly influences them. We already know that democratic elections can also be influenced in this way. Whether the motivations for the platforms are economic, unconditionally subordinate to profit, or political, the impact on society is in any case

enormous and objectively harmful in a wide range of areas. We'll have to deal with these phenomena and think about how to reduce their harmful effects through some regulation.

If we were to look thirty years ahead – what kind of Europe would you wish to see? And what values should it protect, even if everything else changes?

We absolutely need to reconfigure our systems of taxation so they don't create such abysmal differences. Today, these systems are a source of the feelings of hopelessness, injustice and also distrust in institutions. And as such, they erode and deform democracy. Such decisions require more than just a lot of political courage and the support of society, but they can't be made completely in isolation within individual states. There has to be a common European political strategy that tries to harness the corrupt power of oligarchic capital and restore the priority of politics over (apparent) economic and financial self-propulsion.

The Europe I would like to see should have highly developed and high-quality public services. Mitigation measures would make it possible to stop warming. Europe's cities and landscapes would adapt to the new climatic conditions so that life in them would be bearable. Our primary social goal in such a Europe would not be the growth of gross domestic product, but above all an increase in people's satisfaction. Housing will not only be a high-interest commodity; everyone should have a place to lay their heads, since the possibility of housing will be understood as a fundamental right. My Europe will be a resilient, solidary and empathetic one. And above all, humanity will remain its core value.

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