



Reflections on the 1990 Copenhagen document: A speech by Harry Hummel

Note by the author: I spoke in personal capacity but of course my ideas and recommendations are shaped by my work at the Netherlands Helsinki Committee and in the Civic Solidarity Platform.

I.

I will start with a short reflection on another commemoration, just two weeks ago. It is not about an event 30 years ago, but 25 years. The genocide of Srebrenica was commemorated just two weeks ago. The genocide holds great significance for the Netherlands; it was UN soldiers from our country who could not prevent it. A number of the culprits have been convicted by international tribunals. Yet we see large scale denial and belittling of what happened among parts of the media and political world.¹ Criminal prosecution is not sufficient as a mechanism to deal with an extremely antagonistic and violent past. Different versions of what has happened will continue to proliferate and can be exploited all too easily.

This is something that can be observed all over the place, not just in the former Yugoslavia, but east as well as west of Vienna. Look at how in several countries past dictatorships or an imperial past are being embellished. Look at how past repression of and violence against sectors of the population, including centuries of domination, robbery, slavery and colonialism, are being assigned a minor place in mainstream historic discourse. Look at how people who want to document past injustices can become the subject of persecution. This widespread phenomenon affects trust between countries and within countries. Ideally the OSCE should develop a full programme on dealing with the past including working with opposing parties on methodologies for truth and reconciliation. I posit that it would be appropriate that every country would be subject to a process of analysis and recommendations in this field. Around the Srebrenica debacle and horror a number of steps have been taken in the Netherlands, but more can be done². Other elements of the colonial and racist past still need more fundamental consideration.

II.

This could become a standard review, in much the same way that ODIHR observation has become a quasi standard feature of elections in our region. With an unfortunate, it seems, interruption in the case of the upcoming elections (9 August) in Belarus³. If ever a

¹ <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/457186>

² Information about inclusion in the official curriculum: <https://www.canonvannederland.nl/en/srebrenica>; campaigning for additional steps (one of which has in the meantime also been agreed, the creation of a permanent national commemoration site in The Hague): <https://srebrenicaisnederlandsegeschiedenis.nl/>

³ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/457309>



trustworthy long-term and expanded election observation mission was justified it seems to be in the current situation, with opposition candidates being detained and their followers chased in the streets by police. I hope fellow OSCE participating states will find appropriate ways to address the repression and manipulation linked to the elections in the country, and find ways to include the whole Belarussian society in their relations with the country.

I have to say that when it comes to implementation of recommendations for improvements in election observation reports, a much greater range of countries is performing poorly to problematically. The introduction of a system to track follow-up of election observation reports would be a big improvement.⁴

The elections subject brings me back to the Copenhagen Document, which laid the basis, among other things, for the election monitoring work of the OSCE. I will continue with a number of remarks about elections.

Ideally, a serious expansion of the scope of election monitoring should be considered. The current observation process rightly focuses not just on the election date, but also takes into account the way in which the election campaign is conducted, including how media deal with the different candidates. This is a good extension beyond a mere focus on the election day, but I would argue that a further expansion is needed. An evaluation is needed of electoral systems – some voting systems are clearly less representative than others or are more prone to polarization, and some clearly lend itself more than others to clientelism and corruption. A next issue seriously affecting democracy is whether and how wealthy corporations or individuals can influence who gets elected, or whether those who have been elected abuse their positions for own material gain.⁵

In short, it is the political system as a whole that should be monitored against democracy-stimulating and democracy-depressing characteristics. Media pluralism and freedom for civil society are important aspects of this complex of issues that determine how easily a democratic system can be captured by autocratically minded leaders. This goes beyond freedom in the sense of being able to say or write what you want. If the place where you can do the writing is a marginal corner of the media landscape, or you can do the speaking literally only in a marginal corner of your city, the damage has been done. Please refer to Civil Society Parallel Conference Declarations which the Civic Solidarity Platform has issued

⁴ At the Human Dimension Committee meeting, one of the participants made reference to this website on Western Balkans election recommendations including follow-up: <https://paragraph25.odhr.pl/>

⁵ A number of the points mentioned are prominent features of 'western' election systems; increasingly we see though it is also the 'established' democracies in the 'west' whose systems are in need of improvement, see ratings here, <https://www.in.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Democracy-Index-2019.pdf>



since 2015 on freedom of the media⁶, space for civil society⁷ and freedom of peaceful assembly⁸.

Scholars who work on the question of what strengthens and weakens democracy and the rule of law, seem to tentatively conclude that civic culture and the quality of public discourse are important factors.⁹ This would complement the mostly legally oriented human rights framework with thinking that borrows from social science. These are not concepts that are easy to operationalize. But in the same way the Copenhagen Document was a response to the requirements of that time, the need for approaches additional to what we have now seems evident if we want to redress the erosion of trust in our region. Trust and openness between people and their leaders can only be achieved in a well-designed and practiced democracy. All people should have access to channels of discussion and interaction on issues that affect them. Regardless of gender, ethnic background or elite connections.

Looking at international relations, similarly trust among leaders and their states depends on whether the information they make available can be trusted. This again is only possible with a transparent administration and media that are free to investigate. International observers are a second best and cannot easily be used in many fields.

III.

We need new thinking on how to address today's big challenges. Let me jump again to another commemoration, one that will take place in five years time: in 2025 the signing of the Helsinki Final Act will be 50 years ago. The Netherlands Helsinki Committee has joined an initiative called "Reviving the Helsinki Spirit" which seeks to promote a process of discussing what it means today to live together securely in our region. We want to involve academics, we want to involve youth, we want to involve whoever wants to contribute in a thoughtful way. The programme will kick off next year at the time of the celebration of the 100th birthday of Andrei Sakharov. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in the same year the Helsinki Act was signed. The title of his Nobel Prize speech was "Peace, Progress, and Human Rights." Let us try to imagine what his thinking means, applied to today's world. And see

⁶ See Belgrade Declaration, page 43 and further in http://civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/parallel_civil_society_conference_outcome_documents_belgrade_december_2015_final.pdf; reference is made (page 47) to the Media Pluralism Monitor of the Centre for Media Pluralism and Independence of the European University Institute, <https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/>

⁷ See Hamburg Declaration, <http://civicsolidarity.org/article/1173/civil-society-recommendations-receive-prominent-attention-hamburg>

⁸ See Bratislava Declaration, on page 4 the issue of a meaningful location for assemblies is raised, http://www.civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/bratislava_declaration_osce_parallel_cs_conference_2019_2.pdf

⁹ See e.g. <https://reconnect-europe.eu/blog/why-we-need-an-athens-commission-on-the-quality-of-public-discourse/>



how far civil societies can get in applying ideas themselves directly. Citizens should, free from governmental interference or commercial interests, be able to start cleaning our own information environment, for example.¹⁰

You may have noticed that I used the word 'ideally' several times. The current political climate in the OSCE does not seem conducive to the ideas I have presented. This is why I mention this approach of citizens themselves, across borders of all kinds, building a new security and cooperation infrastructure. For which I am sure there is interest from across the OSCE region.

¹⁰ See e.g. <https://immerse.news/25-years-of-internet-its-broken-but-we-can-fix-it-24d46ccfc475>