

Dr. Terry Carlbom, International Secretary, International PEN (London)
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Dear Participants,

International PEN was founded in 1921, in the aftermath of the Great War. It was founded because a set of writers in London wanted to create a space free from nationalism, where writers of all countries could meet and freely come together and discuss issues of literature and common interest. And where they could be proud of their own language, traditions and identity – but never at somebody else's expense, and never be called on to represent governments, regimes, or political movements. In short, where they could be themselves as individuals. But when Mussolini started exiling journalists, Hitler burnt books, and Franco strangled poets, International PEN rose to the defence of its colleagues.

Today, International PEN is the oldest of global literary organisations. We are in Formal Consultative Relations with UNESCO. We consist of 127 autonomous Centres in over 90 countries. Our aims today, as a modern NGO, are “to promote literature, and defend freedom to write”. Our Standing Committee for Writers in Prison actually preceded Amnesty and other NGO's for Human Rights, with whom we today freely cooperate, supported also by overlapping UNESCO ideals.

Today, our Members include both writers and journalists, including radio journalists and script-writers. They are bound together by a common Charter, especially concerned with the ethics of free speech, - the self-imposed restraints necessary for the common good in a decent society.

Today, with the themes of this meeting concerned with Culture in Radio and its relation to quality of civil society, I would like to tell you of some recent experiences of travelling in Europe. Nothing out of the ordinary – but maybe with a few conclusions that could make a contribution to our debate today.

In June I visited Minsk. No-one can help noticing that past history is throwing long dark shadows over that society. Hampered by politically promoted introvert pan-slavic ideals and attitudes of self-containment, we see a regime not interested in free individuals or freedom of expression, but one where yesterdays mentalities are nurtured – to the advantage of the regime, maybe, but to the detriment of free entrepreneurs, free markets and free speech - and of the personal security of journalists and writers. It has become a country marching backwards into the future. It is a country seemingly unable to modernise. And in not doing so, it will inevitably trail, and be left behind.

I have, as all of us, been thoroughly sickened and disgusted by the waves of nationalism that have swept over South-East Europe during the nineties and which still influence many Balkan societies. Waves of thoughtless, single-minded nationalism that have been made political tools of ruling elites, fostering the destruction of civil, age-old multiethnic society, and ultimately ending up in slaughter and murder. What chance do critical voices stand in these environments? And why must we insist that the quality itself of civil society does matter, and yesterday's mentalities must be replaced?

Because ours is the choice. The choice between Closed-minded societies and Open-minded Societies. The former, history shows us, have no long-term future. The latter, the Open-minded society, is on the other hand a society which accepts philosopher Karl Popper's careful, undramatic view that the best future is created by open-ended dialogue. One where, to quote John Stuart Mill, free speech is not a minor ailment grudgingly to be accepted, but the very precondition of development and welfare – and Modernity.

I do believe that a careful examination of the concept of Modernity will disclose that a “good” society is upheld by values that are seldom cultivated by the free market as measured by audience attendance. This will be nothing new to you, and certainly something we have to construct and protect also in Western societies. The point is the link to Modernity and Development. A healthy and sustainable Welfare State cannot be created or upheld without Freedom of Speech and a variety of voices. Remembering, in a society which truly embraces Modernity, that variety is always more important than those heard loudest.

Culture is something cultivated; the Open-minded society itself depends on alternative voices being made available – quite obviously these will also by necessity include the untamed, but also the independently critical and also the philosophically self-critical or ‘reflexive’. It is quite obvious too that the tasks and the qualities of Public-Service-companies are tied to the very core of the concept of the Welfare state; which can never be allowed to be material only, - it must also cultivate the qualities of Openness and the manifold!

Awareness of these elements is vital. This is why it is so important to make the choice – maybe especially so in the Balkan countries of today; the choice between Minsk and Modernity. The former is grim and offers tradition with threatening dimensions. The latter may well be uncertain – but, if consciously embracing the idea of creative diversity in an open society, at least it offers an intellectually honourable chance of a decent future for our societies .

Thank you.