

NEBRASKA

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**CZECH RESEARCHER SPEAKS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA - LINCOLN
ON THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE – *Louis J. Reith***



Dr. Martina Klicperova-Baker, a senior researcher from the Institute of Psychology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, was a guest speaker at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln on August 22, 2017.

She was invited by the university's Czech and Global Studies program, co-sponsored by the Komensky Club of UNL and by the Nebraska Chapter of SVU, to discuss the state of democracy in Europe today. Her research has focused upon the psychology of democracy and the transition to democracy in her own country, as well as in a broader global perspective.

Dr. Klicperova-Baker opened her presentation by referring to her own experience of living with, and losing, democracy in her own country. "Thank you for sharing with me your solar eclipse," she began. "The day of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was the day of the eclipse. It is a day ingrained in our memory, it began an age of totality that lasted 20 years." Quoting Madeleine Albright, she said: "While democracy, in the long run, is the most stable form of government, in the short run it is the most fragile." Despite the "permanent tension" of democracy, Klicperova-Baker called it the form of government that best secures the rights and self-actualization of its citizens: "Democracies are killing fewer of their own citizens than other regimes," she noted, "and real democracies do not wage war with each other."

Pointing to the examples of Canada and Australia as secular democratic systems in which citizens enjoy a high quality of life, she conceded that "while democracy is imperfect, we don't have anything better. The more we approach [an ideal] democracy, the more it is running away from us. It is always on the horizon." Around the world, she noted, the number of people living under democratic institutions is growing, but the

number of those in autocracies remains stable: "Humans are not necessarily naturally predisposed to a positive democratic co-existence," she said. "The human psyche is, to a great degree, selfish and self-serving."

She then examined the structure of democracy, breaking it down to its simplest values in terms of the French Revolution's motto of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." "Liberty, or freedom," she continued, "is exemplified by less frustration and, in turn, less aggression," Klicperova-Baker said. "Equality or vertical closeness, appears when the gap between the law and popular sovereignty is small; the law applies to everyone and almost all people can vote or get elected. Fraternity, or horizontal closeness, is apparent in humanism, civic culture, and civility." Expanding on her final point of civility, Klicperova-Baker continued: "Civility is the most important aspect of democracy. Benevolence and respect: that is the cushion that is the buffer to permanent conflicts in the world." She pointed to the Velvet Revolution and the Velvet Divorce as two events in recent Czech history that highlighted the importance of civility: "They were not even stepping on the grass," she said. "It was a moral revolution, more like a cultural festival."

In assessing the state of democracy in Europe today, she stressed the importance of looking at specific groups of people rather than at entire nations. "What is important? We found democracies, whether religious or secular, in every country. We cannot forget about the minority, the people who have it very tough in those countries." How then should one regard minorities? "The democracies have to stand their ground; they have to fight for free and honest media. To call this era post-factual or post-truth . . . we must not accept that. We cannot let that kind of language win."