

Address given by Vaclav Havel to the Polish Sejm and Senate (Warsaw, 25 January 1990)

Caption: On 25 January 1990, during his first official visit to Poland, Václav Havel, acting President of the Czech Republic, delivers an address from the rostrum of the Polish Parliament in which he emphasises the efforts being made by the two countries to embrace democracy and speculates on the political future of Central Europe.

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Mr. President,
Members of the General Staff,
Members of Parliament and senators,
Friends,

I am very happy that the first foreign parliament in which I have the honor to speak is the Polish Sejm. This is no mere accident. It has special implications, and I assume you are aware of them.

Allow me a brief personal introduction: This is my second visit to Poland. I was here first as a student in 1957. It was after your well-known *pazdziernik**, when your country was alive with joyous hopes, which were so often and so bitterly disappointed later on. At the time, I was fascinated by everything Polish. I read Hłasko, Miłosz, Herbert, Kołakowski, Brandys and Adolf Rudnicki, who wrote about the Holocaust, anti-Semitism and the curse of our part of Europe. I saw Wajda's *Kanal* several times, and I admired the free-thinking Polish spirit and the heroism that emanated from Polish culture. Somewhere in the depths of my soul that heroism was closer to me than the eternal skepticism and, at times, the cult of mediocrity and the underdog that so frequently surfaces in Czech literature. At that time I was beginning to write what were referred to as absurd plays, plays full of skepticism, ridiculous horrors and subtly unhappy endings. Oddly enough, however, my admiration for the Polish ethos did not clash with my literary vision of the world.

Today -- thirty years later -- I am here for a second visit, and moreover I come as the president of Czechoslovakia. This compels me to ask the question: What has changed in those thirty years in your country, in our country, and in our part of the world?

A great deal has changed. The most important change is that the era in which hopes were periodically aroused and disappointed, the merry-go-round of eternal illusion and disillusion, the hellish dance of freedom with death, has definitively come to an end. For the first time it appears to be certain that democracy and freedom, justice and national autonomy are winning, and that the process taking us there is now irreversible. This certainty derives chiefly from the fact that our efforts at self-liberation are not isolated, surrounded by a sea of misunderstanding, but rather flow together to form a single, common stream. The changes won by the Polish nation despite all temporary setbacks, the important changes in the Soviet Union, the attempt to create democratic conditions in Hungary and the German Democratic Republic, followed by our own peaceful revolution in Czechoslovakia, the heroic and costly victory of the Romanians over the autocracy of Dracula, and finally, the changes we are witnessing today in Bulgaria -- all of this flows into a single river that no dam can stop.

The idea of manufacturing a paradise on earth did not triumph, and it will be very difficult now for it ever to do so. Such a notion could only feed the arrogant minds of those who are persuaded that they understand everything, that there are no longer any higher, mysterious institutions above them, and that they can give directives to history. The idea of a paradise on earth failed, and there will be many difficult periods ahead of us; but what has triumphed is the realistic hope that together we can return to Europe as free, independent and democratic nations.

That too is good. Who among us could have imagined anything like it a mere twelve years ago?

Do you remember, Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń and Jan Lityński, our first secret meeting on the Czechoslovak-Polish border? At the time we were all so-called dissidents, that is, people hounded by the police, arrested, locked up, ridiculed. It's true that we laughed at our guardians and we delighted in giving them the slip, but if anyone had told us then that twelve years later we would be members of parliament, ministers and presidents, we might have laughed even louder.

And yet it happened.

The totalitarian systems of the Soviet Bloc are collapsing and we, who did no more than say aloud what we thought and get ourselves locked up for it, have suddenly found ourselves in prominent political positions and now, for the most part, we can laugh only when the television cameras are not trained upon us.

Our main role -- and now I am no longer speaking about my Polish and Czechoslovak friends, but our entire nations -- is to put our minds to what can be done with this freshly won freedom. Before I try to say a few words about this, I must make a brief aside.

The Czechoslovak revolution, which began with the beating of students in November but otherwise unfolded surprisingly peacefully and swiftly, has been called a gentle, kindly, peaceful, and amiable revolution. Naturally, we are glad that there was so little bloodshed, but this is all the more reason for us not to forget the peoples who had to pay for their freedom with blood, and without whose sacrifices we ourselves could scarcely have awakened to freedom so quickly and, on the whole, so painlessly. In my New Year's speech, I have already emphasized -- and I'm happy to repeat it here -- that the Hungarians and the Poles bled for us. We are well aware of this and will not forget it. In a certain sense, the Romanians paid for our freedom too, even though their revolution came after ours. We have no way of knowing whether the dark forces in our country might not have found a way to counterattack had they not been paralyzed by the Romanian example, which demonstrated that the population was capable of courageously defending itself.

In short, although no one gave us any direct help in our revolution -- which is a genuine historical novelty in our country -- we know that without the long years of struggle by the Poles, without the efforts of the nations in the Soviet Union to liberate themselves, without the memories of the German uprising of 1953 and the Hungarian revolt in 1956, our freshly won freedom and the relative ease with which it was all carried off, would be hard to imagine.

We also know, of course, that the Polish Solidarity movement, led by Lech Wałęsa, was the first to find a peaceful and effective way to offer continuous resistance to the totalitarian system. Nor will we forget that it was you, the Polish Senate and the Sejm, who were the first -- in the summer of last year -- to condemn the shameful invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Allow me therefore to use this occasion to thank you and the entire Polish nation.

I promised to offer some brief thoughts on the tasks that the new situation has placed before us.

There are many of them.

First of all, we must take advantage of the fact that after many long years and decades, the prospect of a genuine friendship between our nations now lies before us. Ancient conflicts, rivalries, animosities are covered over by the common experience of totalitarianism. The so-called "dru'ba" -- that formal and stage-managed demonstration of friendship within the framework of the Warsaw Pact and Comecon -- is vanishing along with the totalitarian systems. Along with them, the covert, quiet and malicious incitement of nationalistic and selfish tendencies -- carried out in the spirit of "divide and conquer" -- is vanishing as well.

The years of similar destinies and struggles for similar ideals ought therefore to be assessed in the light of genuine friendship and mutual respect; that is, precisely in the spirit that dominated the years during which secret independent literature was smuggled in rucksacks across our common mountain ranges, an activity that ultimately led to the autumn Festival of Independent Czechoslovak Culture in Wrocław, which was such a marvelous success, mainly thanks to the tireless members of the Polish-Czechoslovak Solidarity Committee led by Zbyszek Janas and Mirek Jasiński. Unintentionally, this became one of the prologues to our Czechoslovak revolution.

This authentic friendship -- based on a proper understanding of the destiny imposed upon both our countries, on the common lessons it taught us, and above all on the common ideals that now unite us -- should ultimately inform a proper coordination of our policies in a process we both refer to as "the return to Europe." We should also coordinate our efforts as best we can with Hungary -- where I and my coworkers

are going tomorrow -- and with other nations in our part of Europe.

We should not compete with each other to gain admission into the various European organizations. On the contrary, we should assist each other in the same spirit of solidarity with which, in darker days, you protested against our persecution as we did against yours.

It is too early to predict what institutional forms our coordination in Eastern and Central Europe will take. Western Europe is considerably ahead of us in the integrating processes, and if each of us were to return to Europe separately, it could take a great deal longer and would be far more complex a process than if we proceed in a coordinated fashion. This concerns not only economics; it concerns everything, including disarmament talks.

Very soon, I would like to invite various representatives of the state and the public from Poland and Hungary, perhaps with observers from other Central European countries, to a meeting in the Bratislava Castle, where we could spend a day quietly talking about these matters. Perhaps this would again make us somewhat wiser.

One way or the other, one thing is certain: For the first time in history, we have a real opportunity to fill the great political vacuum that appeared in Central Europe after the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire with something genuinely meaningful. We have an opportunity to transform Central Europe from what has been a mainly historical and spiritual phenomenon into a political phenomenon. We have an opportunity to take this wreath of European states -- so recently colonized by the Soviet Union and now attempting to build a relationship with the nations of the Soviet Union based on equality -- and fashion it into a special body. Then we can approach the richer nations of Western Europe, not as poor failures or helpless, recently amnestied prisoners, but as countries that can make a genuine contribution. What we have to offer are spiritual and moral impulses, courageous peace initiatives, under-exploited creative potential, and the special ethos created by our freshly won freedom. We can offer the inspiration to consider swift and daring solutions.

We have awakened, and now we must arouse those in the West who have slept through our awakening. The more coordinated our approach, the better we will be able to achieve our ends.

If we are thinking of ways to synchronize or coordinate our steps on the road to Europe, we must naturally be clear about what ought to be at the end of that road. In other words, what kind of Europe are we really heading toward?

The general ideal is perhaps clear to all of us: We wish to belong to a Europe that is an amicable community of independent nations and democratic states, a Europe that is stabilized, not divided into blocs and pacts, a Europe that does not need to be defended by superpowers because it is capable of defending itself, of building its own security system.

There is hope that the Soviet Union -- in the interests of good relations with its former satellites -- will gradually withdraw its troops from our territories. The appropriate negotiations are already under way, and they will sooner or later lead to success.

I believe that the Helsinki process provides us with a rather good starting point. If it were to be accelerated and intensified -- along with various disarmament negotiations and unilateral disarmament initiatives -- it may grow in time into something that would serve the function of a peace conference or a peace treaty to make a definitive end to the Second World War, as well as to the Cold War and the artificial division of Europe that grew out of the Second World War. Then both military alliances could be dissolved, and the process of pan-European integration could be finally set in motion.

So far, Europe remains divided. Germany, too, is divided. These are two sides of the same coin. It is hard to imagine an undivided Europe containing a divided Germany, just as it is hard to imagine a united Germany in a divided Europe. Obviously then, both unification processes should take place at the same time -- and as

quickly as possible.

Thus one of the keys to a peaceful Europe lies at its very center -- in Germany. The Germans have done much for all of us. It was they who began to tear down the wall that separated us from the ideal we longed for, the ideal of a Europe without any iron curtains or barbed-wire fences.

Shortly after being elected president, aware of the current significance that the German question has for all of us, and aware at the same time that without peace in Germany none of us will live in peace, I spent several hours in both German states to determine how the Germans themselves see their situation and the situation in Europe and, at the same time, to stress how closely the future destiny of us all is linked with the future destiny of Germany.

I was favorably impressed. Reasonable people in both German states want the same thing we all want: a peaceful evolution toward a democratic and peaceful Europe.

I believe this is also good news for you, who sacrificed many more human lives in the Second World War than we did, and are therefore justifiably less trusting of the Germans than I am -- even though, for the most part, they are now only the descendants of the generation who murdered your people.

Yet I cannot hide the fact that many of my Czechoslovak compatriots are less trusting than I am, and it was for them, too, that I went first to Germany. I resolved to try -- within the bounds of my modest possibilities -- to spread trust in today's distrustful world.

On the subject of Germany, it is my pleasant duty to assure you that democratic Czechoslovakia also considers the border on the Oder and the Neisse rivers as final and inviolable.

In general, I believe that borders in the future Europe should become less and less important, that people should be able to move freely from one country to another, and that this should be true, first of all, of our common border.

What should not flow across our borders is toxic smoke, sulphur and acid clouds, whether it be from Stonava or Turoszów.

There are, however, walls more dangerous than those that divide Europe. There are walls that divide individual people from one another, and there are walls that divide our own souls. It is against these walls above all that I would like to struggle, and this concerns mainly my own country.

The most dangerous enemies of a good cause today are no longer the dark forces of totalitarianism, with its hostile and plotting mafias, but our own bad qualities. My presidential program, therefore, is to bring into politics a sense of culture, of moral responsibility, of humanity, of humility and respect for the fact that there is something higher above us, that our behavior is not lost in the black hole of time but is written down and evaluated somewhere, that we have neither the right nor the reason to think that we understand everything and have license to do anything we wish.

I think that Poles, with your strong religiousness, embodied in the marvelous personality of the Pope you have given to the world, can have a special understanding of this modest presidential intention of mine.

Thirty years ago I spent two weeks on the north coast.

Today I find myself in Warsaw, the courageous heart of Poland.

I would be glad if this meant that not only I personally, but above all the movements and the ideas I represent, are considerably closer today to the Polish heart.

I thank you for your attention.

JESZCZE POLSKA NIE ZGINELA!**

* Październik - October. In October 1956, strikes and riots brought about changes in the government and a temporary political liberalization.

** POLAND HAS NOT YET PERISHED! The first line of the Polish National Anthem.