

OPENING SPEECHES

// VÁCLAV HAVEL

Former President of the Czech Republic

Countries which had to endure years of totalitarian regimes should be especially sensitive towards all types, and even signs, of totalitarian methods of governing. Even more awareness is demanded from those who have personally experienced the importance of international support and solidarity. It is not true that we live in an ideal democracy and are therefore eligible to criticise others. Like all democratic countries in the world we face the stormy phenomena of modern civilisation in ad-

dition to post-communist features. If we comment the situation in other countries and criticise their governments we must at the same time be prepared for criticism which may be directed towards our own system. There is a difference between solidarity and arbitrary advice as to what to do.

I have the impression that the people in this country follow the situation in Burma, Cuba and many other countries and display their support for those who stand up for human rights and the revival of basic civil liberties. A particular point of interest is, or should be, the situation in Belarus, a country which is not far from us both geographically as in regards to its fate and problems.

It is immensely important for Belarus to exist under truly free conditions and build not only formal but really democratic institutions based on a developing civil society as is the case in other post-communist countries. That those in power are tempted to manipulate their people with the help of the media is one example of what has to be confronted very carefully.

We do not have the right to tell Belarus whether it should belong to the East, the West, the North or the South. It has to decide this of its own free will, democratically, without an authoritarian leader. Our obligation is to do what is in our power to help create a situation in which free decision-making will be possible. If it chooses to become part of an integrated and united Europe, it will again be our obligation to do what we can to support this decision.

Let us hope, that those supporting freedom in Belarus will not have to wait long.

// IVONKA SURVILLA

President of the Council of Belarusian Democratic Republic (in exile)

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Senate and all organisers of this event dedicated to the European future of Belarus. Blessed with an excellent geo-political situation at the crossroads of Europe, Belarus has not yet had the chance to benefit from this advantage. On the contrary, it has made our country become one of the most coveted, and therefore vulnerable, places in Europe. The Soviet system has left our long-suffering, Chernobyl-stricken people with one single concern: their physical survival. The instinct of survival has developed to a degree unknown to many nations. Thanks to their survival skills, the Belarusian people continue to exist, but are hesitant to exert themselves in the face of the challenges they endure in daily life, and the dangers they face from a government that violently discourages freedom of speech. This

may be why the development of democratic values in Belarus, although present, seems at times stalled. However, our young generation admires Western values, and our intelligentsia, who has always looked to the West, is ready to defend their European heritage.

Every young Belarusian should have the possibility to study without being brainwashed and without being forced to become a member of Lukashenko's youth organisation. Freedom and democracy are concepts that are learned, nurtured and fostered. As such, they require exposure, free thinking, and the conviction to generate change. Every Belarusian should have the opportunity to learn first hand about the concept of freedom. Our young people need the opportunity to study abroad, our decision-makers need Western experience in the fields of economy, education, health and ecology, our freedom fighters need help to inform our people of such basic things as human rights. The members of the European Union will, perhaps unknowingly, contribute to the cultivated isolation of Belarus by closing the borders between Belarus and the European Union. The future of Belarus is not to be halfway between Europe and Russia, it is not a no man's land, nor a consolation prize in political negotiation. Belarus is a nation whose geography, history and identity define its place and whose potential as a contributor to the future of Europe rests in the political decisions of our time. If I were to make one request today, it would be to ask you to become participants in the defence of Belarus by insuring the country remains open to Europe, with the hope that Europe will remain open to Belarus.

// JAN RUML

Vice President of the Senate of the Czech Republic

I visited Belarus for the first time, and also for the last time, in 2000 as a member of a delegation of the Senate of the Czech Parliament. Since then, the authorities of Belarus have refused to issue me a visa. One could see similarities with the Czechoslovakia of the 1980s: a determined but fragmented opposition, individual attacks by the regime against dissidents, the hunger of young people for freedom and democracy, strong and merciless repressions, the mockery of elections in different guises, the evident illegitimacy of Lukashenko's regime, and simultaneously, completely passive rural areas. Repressions by the Lukashenko regime are escalating: independent press and NGOs have been annihilated; the Jakub Kolas National Humanities Lyceum, the only Belarusian language secondary school, has been shut

down; dissidents and the public are being arrested and imprisoned for simply attending street gatherings. Yet there is reason for hope. Despite the falsification of municipal elections, several dozens of young democratically-minded opposition representatives managed to become municipal officials. In addition, opposition coalitions have been formed.

I would like to mention three very interesting topics which represent issues frequently discussed in Belarus. The first is the dialogue with undemocratic power. Based on my own experience, I believe that the only possible form of a dialogue is to remind Lukashenko's regime of violations of all international commitments which Belarus has undertaken in the area of human rights and freedoms. Any other type of dialogue could result in further fragmentation of efforts.

The second issue concerns the question of isolation or non-isolation of Lukashenko's regime. We must insist on all resolutions condemning this oppressive regime and undemocratic election mockeries, and a position of no negotiation with Lukashenko and his representatives. However, isolation of Lukashenko's regime must not mean isolation of the Belarusian nation. On the contrary, here we should open up all channels, both informational and personal, so that the space for free dialogue with the people of Belarus is as wide and open as possible. Relations between Belarus and Russia represents the third topic. It is said that the planned union of Russia and Belarus can bring democracy to Belarus. I wish to dispute this, as I believe democracy in Russia is formal and authoritarian, rather than a material democracy based on a certain value system. If the efforts of the people of Belarus and the international community are to result in Belarus becoming a member of NATO and the EU, the road to democracy, freedom and prosperity must be based on traditional Euro-Atlantic values, respecting a broad range of human rights.

Let's have public hearings in our parliaments and let's adopt clear resolutions. Whenever possible, visit Belarus, meet the opposition, provide scholarships and invite the opposition representatives of Belarus to our own countries. Let's activate the international community and its bodies to become more involved in the support of democracy and freedom in Belarus, and create committees for a free Belarus. Let's send material assistance to our persecuted colleagues, IT equipment in particular. And finally, let's hang out the banned national flag of Belarus on the occasion of the independence day of Belarus, celebrated on the 25th March.