



THE VÁCLAV HAVEL BENCH

A SPACE FOR DISCUSSION AND CONNECTION:
A PATH TO DEMOCRACY AND UNITY

Portrait of Václav Havel
Portrait of playwright and Czech President Václav Havel, Prague,
Czech Republic, 2005. (Photo by Chris Felver/Getty Images)
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Printed by the European Parliament
Luxembourg, European Parliament © European Union, 2022
Reference L-3426745

For many across Europe, including myself, Václav Havel represents perseverance, unity and the triumph of democracy. As the first president of Czechoslovakia following the fall of the communist dictatorship in 1989, Havel dedicated his life to bringing people together and fostering openness and dialogue — shaping the Europe we recognise today. These values are key to who we are both as individuals and as Europeans: which is why this meeting place, a spot for conversation and connection that is both functional and beautiful, is such a fitting way to honour Havel's work and legacy.

This isn't the first Havel bench inviting passers-by to sit and start a conversation. In 2021 a Václav Havel bench was inaugurated in front of the European Parliament in Brussels. It was such a success that in June 2022 we brought this unique space to the garden of the Jean Monnet House. After all, where better to have a discussion than the home of a founding father of Europe?

This space connects visitors to a network of discussions happening right now across the world inspired by Havel's work. Since the installation of the first Václav Havel bench in America in 2013 they have been installed in over 45 countries, sparking discussion and debate from Lisbon to Lima. As Šípek, the bench's architect and close friend of Havel himself, said of the project: 'the state when we communicate is a state of happiness.'

I invite you to take a moment to rest in this peaceful place, under a Linden tree (a traditional symbol of Czechoslovakia); reflect on Havel and his work; maybe even start a conversation with someone. I leave the last word to the man himself. Around the table's rim are inscribed his words: 'Truth and love shall prevail over lies and hatred'.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping, fluid strokes that form the name 'Roberta Metsola'.

Roberta Metsola
President of the European Parliament

VÁCLAV HAVEL

DISSIDENT, VISIONARY, EUROPEAN

The name Václav Havel holds a special resonance for many across Europe. A guiding light in Europe fighting for democracy in the dying days of the USSR, Havel was a playwright, philosopher, dissident, politician and head of state.

Havel: the early years

Václav Havel was born in Prague in what was then Czechoslovakia on 5 October 1936 to a bourgeois, intellectual family. However, his privileged youth came to an abrupt end in 1948 when the communists came to power. His parents were stripped of their assets and both professionally and socially ostracised. Under the new regime's campaign against the bourgeoisie, Havel was branded a 'class enemy' and forbidden from studying literature at university. Undeterred, he attended evening classes at the Czech Technical University in Prague and managed to graduate in economics, despite spending his days working in a factory.

Havel the playwright

In the early 1960s, with political pressure in society lessening, Havel embarked on a career in the theatre as a stagehand and lighting technician. He began writing and directing his own plays, promoting the democratic ideal by subtly exploring the absurd and Kafkaesque notions of human identity. Theatre and politics were never far apart for Havel. As a dramatist he was heavily influenced by the plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, exposing the mechanisms of political domination and manipulation through language and analysing the grounds for and means of resistance.

Havel slowly began to make a name for himself as a theatre producer. As his renown grew among the intelligentsia, his plays increasingly attracted the attention of the regime's censors until his works were banned in 1971. But it was thanks to the crushing of the 1968 democratic uprising the Prague Spring, in the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops, that his activities as an opponent of the regime adopted new political dimension.

Havel the intellectual

Havel was resolute and stood by his convictions: rather than flee the country, he became a dissident and exposed the critical situation in society, pointing the finger at the political regime. He soon became known as a human rights activist and was heavily involved in the drafting of the 1977 'Charter 77' manifesto, for which he became one of the main spokespersons alongside philosopher Jan Patočka. In the charter, Havel reminded the country's communist leaders of their human rights obligations – obligations they were violating in their suppression and 'normalisation' of Czechoslovak society. Instead of challenging the regime's ideology, the charter called for it to uphold human rights in accordance with the UN Convention and the Helsinki agreements on security and cooperation in Europe that it had signed in 1975. The regime was quick to react: Havel was imprisoned for several years for dissidence.

Václav Havel's political writings gradually earned him recognition across Europe as a great observer and political thinker of his time. His experiences of totalitarianism in central Europe led him to think more generally about the nature and logic of power in modern societies, about the means of resistance to dictatorship and about the ethical and civic foundations for a political community. Havel took a fresh look at totalitarianism, developing an ethical and existential understanding of political commitment. He came up with an framework in which resistance within civil society formed the basis for politics and a public democratic space. His reflections on the challenges facing Europe led him to see the continent as somewhere between a civilisation and an institution.

Havel the dissident

Over time, Havel became a recognised public figure. His fight for democracy inspired confidence among the Czechoslovak people. In 1989, he joined the leadership of the Civic Forum, a movement that brought together dissident forces and democratic thinkers. Havel's presence and speeches at rallies began to draw growing crowds, and he became a key figure in the Velvet Revolution, a peaceful movement which led to the fall of the communist regime in December 1989.

The Czechoslovak people and international onlookers saw the politically unclassifiable Havel as a philosopher-king, an intellectual dissident who had passed the test of power, someone who would reinvent democracy and establish a new European order. Havel was elected President of the Czechoslovak Republic in a unanimous vote in December 1989, marking a turning point in the country's political history.

Havel the politician

However, in July 1992, Havel decided to resign as President due to his opposition to the separation of the Czechs and the Slovaks. His break from politics did not last long, though, as he was elected President of the independent Czech Republic in January 1993. He was hugely popular abroad. In 1994, 2000 and 2009, Havel addressed Members of the European Parliament. He stressed the need to strengthen European values, and called for the EU to open up to the countries of central and eastern Europe and to take on an ethical dimension in its identity.

During his term in office, Havel oversaw his country's democratisation, economic transformation and accession to NATO in 1999. He believed that Europe should not forget the legacy of its civilisation and the values underpinning the European project, which for him was about much more than just a single market and shared legal or technical standards. Havel was one of the first European statesmen to advocate for the adoption of a European Constitution. Owing to ill health, he left office in February 2003, but not without actively preparing his country for EU membership the following year.

During this period, he received multiple literary and artistic accolades as well as honours for his political action in his home country. He also had around 40 honorary doctorates to his name, bestowed by universities throughout the world. Václav Havel died in Prague on 18 December 2011.

In July 2017, the European Parliament named one of its buildings in Strasbourg after Havel to pay tribute to his tireless battle for human rights, democracy and a united and reconciled Europe.

‘This tendency towards integration’

VÁCLAV HAVEL’S SPEECH
AT THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,
8 MARCH 1994



Address by Mr Václav Havel,
President of the Czech Republic
8 March 1994

Mr Chairman, Members of Parliament, I am most grateful to you for the honour of addressing the European Parliament, and I can scarcely think of a better way of using this opportunity than to try to answer three questions: First, why is the Czech Republic, which I represent here, requesting membership in the European Union? Secondly, why is it in the interest of all of Europe to expand the European Union? And thirdly, what, in my opinion, are the more general tasks confronting the European Union today?

Europe is a continent of extraordinary variety and diversity - graphically, ethically, nationally, culturally, economically and politically. Yet at the same time all its parts are, and always have been, so deeply linked by their destiny that this continent can accurately be described as a single - albeit complex - political entity. Anything crucial in any area of human endeavour occurring anywhere in Europe has always had both direct and indirect consequences for our continent as a whole. The history of Europe is, in fact, the history of a constant searching and reshaping of its internal structures and the relationships of its parts. Today, if we talk about a single European civilization or about common European values, history, traditions, and destiny, then what we are referring to is more the fruit of this tendency towards integration than its cause.

From time immemorial, Europe has had something that can be called an inner order, consisting of a specific system of political relations that circumscribed it and tried in one way or another to institutionalize its natural interconnectedness. This European order, however, usually was established by violence: the more powerful simply forced it upon those less powerful. In this sense, the endless series of wars in Europe can be understood as an expression of the constant effort to alter the status quo and replace one order with another. From the ancient Roman Empire, through the Holy Roman Empire and down to the power systems created by the Congress of Vienna, the Treaty of Versailles and finally by Yalta - all these were merely historical attempts to give European coexistence a certain set of game rules.

A thousand times in its history Europe has been unified or divided in various ways; a thousand times one group has subjected another, forced its version of civilization on another and established self-serving political relations; a thousand times Europe's internal balance has been dramatically sought, found transformed and torn down. And a thousand times the French, the Swedes, the Germans or the Czechs have dealt with apparently internal matters, only to have their actions affect the rest of Europe.

I do not believe therefore, that the idea of a European Union simply fell out of the sky, or was born in the laboratory of political theoreticians or on the drawing boards of political engineers: it grew quite naturally out of an understanding that European integrity was a fact of life, and from the efforts of many generations of Europeans to project the idea of unity into a specific 'supranational' European structure.

We may all be different, but we are all in the same boat. We can fight for our places and means of co-existence on this boat, but we also can agree on them peacefully. I understand European unity as a magnanimous attempt to choose the second of these possibilities, and to give Europe - for the first time in its history - the kind of order that would grow out of the free will of everyone, and be based on mutual agreement and a common longing for peace and cooperation. It would be a stable and solid order, one based not merely on military and political treaties, which anyone can break or ignore at will, but on such a close cooperation between European nations and citizens that it would limit, if not exclude, the possibility of new conflicts. This is not a mere dream: soon half a century will separate us from the end of the Second World War. During that time all of Western Europe has successfully averted the threat of many potential conflicts precisely by building, step by step, such an integrating system.

This alone is enough to demonstrate that this youngest type of European order is not, or need not be, a mere Utopia, but that it can work in real terms.

I do not perceive the European Union as a monstrous super state in which the autonomy of all the various nations, states, ethnic groups, cultures and regions of Europe gradually would be dissolved. On the contrary, I see it as the systematic creation of a space that allows the autonomous components of Europe to develop freely and in their own way in an environment of lasting security and mutually beneficial cooperation based on principles of democracy, respect for human rights, civil society, and an open market economy.

The Czech Lands lie at the very centre of Europe and sometimes even think of themselves as its very heart. For this reason, they have always been a particularly exposed place, unable to avoid any European conflict. In fact, many European conflicts began or ended there. Like some other Central European countries, we have always been a dramatic crossroads of all kinds of European spiritual currents and geopolitical interests. This makes us particularly sensitive to the fact that everything that happens in Europe intrinsically concerns us and that everything that happens to us intrinsically concerns all of Europe. We are among the expert witnesses of the political reality of Europe's interconnectedness. That is why our sense of co-responsibility for what happens in Europe is especially strong, and also why we are intensely aware that the idea of European integration is an enormous historic opportunity for Europe as a whole, and for us.

I think I have essentially answered my first question - that is, why the Czech Republic wants to become a member of the European Union. Yes, we are able and happy to surrender a portion of our sovereignty in favour of the commonly administered sovereignty of the European Union, because we know it will repay us many times over, as it will all Europeans. The part of the world where we live can hope for a gradual transformation from an arena of eternally warring rulers, powers, nations, social classes and religious doctrines, competing for territories of influence or hegemony, into a forum of down-to-earth dialogue and effective cooperation between all its inhabitants in a commonly shared, commonly administered and commonly cultivated space dedicated to their coexistence and solidarity.

I believe my thoughts about the interconnectedness of Europe have, to a considerable degree, answered the second question as well: Why the European Union should gradually expand. Europe was divided artificially, by force, and for that very reason its division had to collapse sooner or later. History has thrown down a gauntlet we can, if we wish, pick up. If we do not do so, a great opportunity to create a continent of free and peaceful cooperation may be lost. Only a fool who has learned nothing from the millennia of European history can believe that tranquillity, peace and prosperity can flourish forever in one part of Europe without regard for what is happening in the other.

The era of the Cold War, when the forced cohesion of the Soviet Bloc contributed to the cohesion of the West, is definitively over. We must all accept that the world is radically different today from what it was five years ago. The vision of Europe as a stabilizing factor in the contemporary international environment, one that does not export war to the world but rather radiates the idea of peaceful coexistence, cannot become reality if Europe as whole is not transformed. The gauntlet simply must be taken up. What is going on in the former Yugoslavia should be a grave reminder to any of us who think that in Europe we can ignore with impunity what is going on next door. Unrest, chaos and violence are infectious and expansive. We Central Europeans have directly felt the truth of this countless times, and I think it is our responsibility to repeatedly draw others' attention to this experience, especially those fortunate enough not to have undergone it as often as we have.

Western Europe has been moving toward its present degree of integration for nearly 50 years. It is clear that new members, particularly those attempting to shed the consequences of Communist rule, cannot be accepted overnight into the European Union without seriously threatening to tear the delicate threads from which it is woven. Nevertheless, the prospect of its expansion, and of the expansion of its influence and spirit, is in its intrinsic interest and in the intrinsic interest of Europe as a whole. There simply is no meaningful alternative to this trend. Anything else would be a return to the times when European order was not a work of consensus but of violence. And the evil demons

are lying in wait. A vacuum, the decay of values, the fear of freedom, suffering and poverty, chaos - these are the environments in which they flourish. They must not be given that opportunity.

For if the future European order does not emerge from a broadening European Union, based on the best European values and willing to defend and transmit them, it could well happen that the organization of this future will fall into the hands of a cast of fools, fanatics, populists and demagogues waiting for their chance and determined to promote the worst European traditions. And there are, unfortunately, more than enough of those.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me now to turn to the third question I have posed. That is, the question of the tasks with which, in my opinion, the European Union is now confronted. There are certainly many of them and all of them are difficult. One, however, appears to me especially important and it is this task I would like to talk about.

I confess that when I studied the Maastricht Treaty and the other documents on which the European Union is based, I had a somewhat ambiguous response. On the one hand, it is undoubtedly a respectable piece of work. It is scarcely possible to believe that a common framework could be given to such a complex and diverse legal and economic order, involving so many different European countries. It is amazing that common rules of the game have been created, that all the legislative, administrative and institutional mechanisms that enable the smooth running of this great body have been invented and that, in so colourful a political environment, agreement on an enormous number of concrete matters was reached and many different interests were harmonized in such a way that everyone will benefit. It is, I repeat, a remarkable labour of the human spirit and its rational capacities.

However, into my admiration, which initially verged on enthusiasm, there began to intrude a disturbing, less exuberant feeling. I felt I was looking into the inner workings of an absolutely perfect and immensely ingenious modern machine. To study such a machine must be a great joy to an admirer of technical inventions, but for me, a human whose interest in the world is not satisfied by admiration for well-oiled machines, something was seriously missing. Perhaps it could be called, in a rather simplified way, a spiritual or moral or emotional dimension. My reason had been spoken to, but not my heart.

Naturally, I am not claiming that an affirmation of the European Union can be sought in a reading of its documents and norms alone. They are only a formal framework to define the living realities that are its primary concern. And the positive aspects of those realities far outweigh whatever dry official texts can offer. Still, I cannot shake the impression that my feeling of being confronted with nothing more than a perfect machine is somehow significant; that this feeling does indicate something or challenges us in some way.

The large empires, complex supranational entities or confederations of states we know from history, those that in their time contributed something of value to humanity, were remarkable not only because of how they were administered or organized, but also because they were always buoyed by a spirit, an idea, an ethos - I would even say by a charismatic quality - out of which their structure ultimately grew. For such entities to work and be vital, they always had to offer, and indeed did offer, some key to emotional identification, an ideal that would speak to people or inspire them, a set of generally understandable values that everyone could share. These values made it worthwhile for people to make sacrifices for the entity that embodies them, even, in extreme circumstances, sacrificing their very lives.

The European Union is based on a large set of values, with roots in antiquity and in Christianity, which over 2,000 years evolved into what we recognize today as the foundations of modern democracy, the

rule of law, and civil society. This set of values has its own clear moral foundation and its obvious metaphysical roots, regardless of whether modern man admits it or not. Thus it cannot be said that the European Union lacks its own spirit from which all the concrete principles on which it is founded grow. It appears, though, that this spirit is rather difficult to see. It seems too hidden behind the mountains of systemic, technical, administrative, economic, monetary and other measures than contain it. And thus, in the end, many people might be left with the understandable impression that the European Union - to put it a bit crudely - is no more than endless arguments over how many carrots can be exported from somewhere, who sets the amount, who checks it and who eventually punishes the delinquent who contravenes the regulations.

That is why it seems to me that perhaps the most important task facing the European Union today is coming up with a new and genuinely clear reflection on what might be called European identity, a new and genuinely clear articulation of European responsibility, an intensified interest in the very meaning of European integration in all its wider implications for the contemporary world, and the recreation of its ethos or, if you like, its charisma.

Simply reading the Maastricht Treaty, despite its historical importance, will hardly win enthusiastic supporters for the European Union. Nor will it win patriots, people who will genuinely experience this complex organism as their native land or their home, or as one aspect of their home. If this great administrative work, which obviously should simplify life for all Europeans, is to hold together and stand various tests of time, then it must be visibly bonded by more than a set of rules and regulations. It must embody, far more clearly than it has so far, a particular relationship to the world, to human life and ultimately to the world order. Far more clearly than before, it must impress upon millions of European souls an idea, a historical mission and a momentum. It must clearly articulate the values upon which it is founded and which it intends to defend and cultivate. It also must take care of all its emblems and symbols, which are visible bearers of its significance.

It should be perfectly clear to everyone that this is not just a conglomerate of states that has been brought into existence for purely utilitarian reasons, but an entity that in an original way fulfils the longings of many generations of enlightened Europeans who knew that European universalism can become - when projected into political reality - the framework for a more responsible human existence on our continent. More than that, it is the way to achieve the genuine inclusion of our continent as a partner in the multicultural environment of contemporary global civilization.

Naturally, my intention is not to advise the European Union on what it should do. I can only say what I, as a European, would welcome.

I would welcome it, for instance, if the European Union were to establish a charter of its own that would clearly define the ideas on which it is founded, its meaning and the values it intends to embody. Clearly, the basis of such a charter could be nothing other than a definitive moral code for European citizens. All those hundreds of pages of agreements on which the European Union is founded would thus be brought under the umbrella of a single, crystal-clear and universally understandable political document that would immediately make it evident what the European Union really is. At the same time, it also would be to its advantage if it were made even more obvious which particular personalities represent it and embody and guarantee its values. If the citizens of Europe understand that this is not just an anonymous bureaucratic monster that wants to limit or even deny their autonomy, but simply a new type of human community that actually broadens their freedom significantly, then the European Union need not fear for its future.

You will certainly understand that at this moment my concern is not so much any particular suggestion but something deeper: that is, how to make the spirit of the European Union more vivid and compelling, more accessible to all. For it seems to me that this is a project of such historical importance that it would be an unforgivable sin if it were to languish and ultimately disappoint the hopes placed on it only because its very meaning were drowned in disputes over the technical details of its existence.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have come from a land that for almost 60 years did not enjoy freedom and democracy. You will perhaps believe me when I say that it is precisely this historical experience that has allowed me to respond at the deepest level to the revolutionary meaning of today's European integration. And perhaps you will believe me when I say that the very depth of that experience compels me to express concern for the proper outcome of this process and to consider ways to strengthen it and make it irreversible.

Allow me, in conclusion, to thank you for approving the Europe Agreement on the association of the Czech Republic with the European Union two weeks after it was signed. In doing so, you have shown that you are not indifferent to the fate of my country.

Thank you for your attention.

After reading Václav Havel’s words, what are your thoughts on building a ‘European identity’? What do you think are the main issues facing Europe today, and how can we solve them together?

Write your ideas down below, and use them to start a conversation with someone else about this topic.



Bench Václav Havel Photo © European Parliament



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Podcast

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