

A Brave Speech by a Brave Man

27 February 2009

Mr. Chairman, Members of European Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you for the possibility to speak here, in the European Parliament, in one of the key institutions of the European Union. I have been here several times but never before had an opportunity to speak at a plenary session. Therefore I do appreciate your invitation. The elected representatives of 27 countries with a broad spectrum of political opinions and views make a unique auditorium, as unique and in essence as revolutionary as the experiment of the European Union itself. For more than half a century, the EU has attempted to make decision-making in Europe better by moving a significant part of decisions from the individual states to the European institutions.

I've come here from the capital of the Czech Republic, from Prague, from the historic centre of the Czech statehood, from one of the important places where European thinking, European culture and European civilisation has emerged and developed. I come as a representative of the Czech state, which has always, in all its various forms, been part of the European history, of a state, that has many times taken a direct and important part in shaping this history, and which wants to continue shaping it also today.

Nine years have passed since the president of the Czech Republic last spoke to you. That was my predecessor, Václav Havel, and it was four years before our accession to the European Union. Several weeks ago, the Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, also held a speech here, as a leader of a country presiding over the EU Council. His speech focused on topics, based on the priorities of the Czech presidency, as well as on the topical problems the EU countries are facing now.

This allows me to focus on issues that are more general, and - at first sight - perhaps less dramatic than solving the current economic crisis, the Ukrainian-Russian gas conflict, or the Gaza situation. I do believe, however, these issues are of extraordinary importance for the further development of the European integration project.

In less than three months, the Czech Republic will commemorate the fifth anniversary of its EU accession. We will commemorate it with dignity. We will commemorate it as a country, which - unlike some other new member countries - does not feel disappointed over unfulfilled expectations connected with our membership. This is no surprise to me and there is a rational explanation for it. Our expectations were realistic. We knew well that we were entering a community formed and shaped by human beings. We knew it was not a utopian construction, put together without authentic human interests, visions, views and ideas. These interests as well as ideas can be found all over the EU and it cannot be otherwise.

We interpreted our EU accession on one hand as a confirmation of the fact that we had managed, quite rapidly, over less than fifteen years since the fall of communism, to become a

standard European country again. On the other hand, we considered (and we still do) the opportunity to actively take part in the European integration process as a chance to take advantage of the already highly integrated Europe and - at the same time - to influence this process according to our views. We feel our share of responsibility for the development of the European Union and with this feeling of responsibility we approach our presidency of the EU Council. I believe that the first six weeks of the Czech presidency have convincingly demonstrated our responsible attitude.

At this forum, I would like to repeat once again clearly and loudly - for those of you who don't know it or do not want to know - my conviction, that for us there was and there is no alternative to the European Union membership and that in our country there is no relevant political force that could or would want to undermine this position. We have been therefore really touched by the repeated and growing attacks we have been facing; attacks based on the unfounded assumption that the Czechs are searching for some other integration project than the one they became members of five years ago. This is not true.

The citizens of the Czech Republic feel that the European integration has an important and needed mission and task. It can be summarized in the following way:

- removing unnecessary - and for human freedom and prosperity counterproductive - barriers to the free movement of people, goods, services, ideas, political philosophies, world views, cultural patterns and behaviour models that have been for various reasons over the centuries formed among the individual European states;

- a joint care of the public goods, existing on the continental level, meaning projects that cannot be effectively carried out through bilateral negotiations of two (or more) neighbouring European countries.

The efforts to realise these two objectives - removing barriers and rationally selecting issues that should be solved at the continental level - are not and will never be completed. Various barriers and obstacles still remain and the decision-making at the Brussels level is certainly more numerous than would be optimal. Certainly there are more numerous than the people in the individual member states ask for. You, Members of the European Parliament, are certainly well aware of this. The question I want to ask you is therefore a purely theoretical one: are you really convinced that every time you take a vote, you are deciding something that must be decided here in this hall and not closer to the citizens, i.e. inside the individual European states?

In the politically correct rhetoric we keep hearing these days, we often hear about other possible effects of European integration, which are, however, of lesser and secondary importance. These are, moreover, driven by the ambitions of professional politicians and the people connected to them, not by the interests of ordinary citizens of the member states.

When I said, that the European Union membership did not have and does not have any alternative; I only mentioned half of what must be said. The other - logical - half of my statement is that the methods and forms of European integration do, on the contrary, have quite a number of possible and legitimate variants, just as they proved to have in the last half century. There is no end of history. Claiming that the status quo, the present institutional form

of the EU, is a forever uncriticizable dogma, is a mistake that has been - unfortunately - rapidly spreading, even though it is in direct contradiction not only with rational thinking, but also with the whole two-thousand-year history of European civilization. The same mistake applies to the a priori postulated, and therefore equally uncriticizable, assumption that there is only one possible and correct future of the European integration, which is the "ever-closer Union", i.e. advancement towards deeper and deeper political integration of the member countries.

Neither the present status quo, nor the assumption that the permanent deepening of the integration is a blessing, is - or should be - a dogma for any European democrat. The enforcement of these notions by those, who consider themselves - to use the phrase of the famous Czech writer Milan Kundera - "the owners of the keys" to European integration, is unacceptable.

Moreover, it is self evident, that one or another institutional arrangement of the European Union is not an objective in itself; but a tool for achieving the real objectives. These are nothing but human freedom and such economic system that would bring prosperity. That system is a market economy.

This would certainly be the wish of the citizens of all member countries. Yet, over the twenty years since the fall of communism, I have been repeatedly witnessing that the feelings and fears are stronger among those who spent a great part of the 20th century without freedom and struggled under a dysfunctional centrally planned and state-administered economy. It is no surprise that these people are more sensitive and responsive to any phenomena and tendencies leading in other directions than towards freedom and prosperity. The citizens of the Czech Republic are among those I'm talking about.

The present decision making system of the European Union is different from a classic parliamentary democracy, tested and proven by history. In a normal parliamentary system, part of the MPs support the government and part support the opposition. In the European parliament, this arrangement has been missing. Here, only one single alternative is being promoted and those who dare thinking about a different option are labelled as enemies of the European integration. Not so long ago, in our part of Europe we lived in a political system that permitted no alternatives and therefore also no parliamentary opposition. It was through this experience that we learned the bitter lesson that with no opposition, there is no freedom. That is why political alternatives must exist.

And not only that. The relationship between a citizen of one or another member state and a representative of the Union is not a standard relationship between a voter and a politician, representing him or her. There is also a great distance (not only in a geographical sense) between citizens and Union representatives, which is much greater than it is the case inside the member countries. This distance is often described as the democratic deficit, the loss of democratic accountability, the decision making of the unelected - but selected - ones, as bureaucratisation of decision making etc. The proposals to change the current state of affairs - included in the rejected European Constitution or in the not much different Lisbon Treaty - would make this defect even worse.

Since there is no European demos - and no European nation - this defect cannot be solved by strengthening the role of the European parliament either. This would, on the contrary, make the

problem worse and lead to an even greater alienation between the citizens of the European countries and Union institutions. The solution will be neither to add fuel to the "melting pot" of the present type of European integration, nor to suppress the role of member states in the name of a new multicultural and multinational European civil society. These are attempts that have failed every time in the past, because they did not reflect the spontaneous historical development.

I fear that the attempts to speed up and deepen integration and to move decisions about the lives of the citizens of the member countries up to the European level can have effects that will endanger all the positive things achieved in Europe in the last half a century. Let us not underestimate the fears of the citizens of many member countries, who are afraid, that their problems are again decided elsewhere and without them, and that their ability to influence these decisions is very limited. So far, the European Union has been successful, partly thanks to the fact that the vote of each member country had the same weight and thus could not be ignored. Let us not allow a situation where the citizens of member countries would live their lives with a resigned feeling that the EU project is not their own; that it is developing differently than they would wish, that they are only forced to accept it. We would very easily and very soon slip back to the times that we hoped belonged to history.

This is closely connected with the question of prosperity. We must say openly that the present economic system of the EU is a system of a suppressed market, a system of a permanently strengthening centrally controlled economy. Although history has more than clearly proven that this is a dead end, we find ourselves walking the same path once again. This results in a constant rise in both the extent of government masterminding and constraining of spontaneity of the market processes. In recent months, this trend has been further reinforced by incorrect interpretation of the causes of the present economic and financial crisis, as if it was caused by free market, while in reality it is just the contrary - caused by political manipulation of the market. It is again necessary to point out to the historical experience of our part of Europe and to the lessons we learned from it.

Many of you certainly know the name of the French economist Frederic Bastiat and his famous Petition of the Candlemakers, which has become a well-known and canonical reading, illustrating the absurdity of political interventions in the economy. On 14 November 2008 the European Commission approved a real, not a fictitious Bastiat's Petition of the Candlemakers, and imposed a 66% tariff on candles imported from China. I would have never believed that a 160-year-old essay could become a reality, but it has happened. An inevitable effect of the extensive implementation of such measures in Europe is economic slowdown, if not a complete halt of economic growth. The only solution is liberalisation and deregulation of the European economy.

I say all of this because I do feel a strong responsibility for the democratic and prosperous future of Europe. I have been trying to remind you of the elementary principles upon which European civilisation has been based for centuries or even millennia; principles, the validity of which is not affected by time, principles that are universal and should be therefore followed even in the present European Union. I am convinced that the citizens of individual member countries do want freedom, democracy and economic prosperity.

At this moment in time, the most important task is to make sure that free discussion about

these problems is not silenced as an attack on the very idea of European integration. We have always believed that being allowed to discuss such serious issues, being heard, defending everyone's right to present a different than "the only correct opinion" - no matter how much we may disagree with it - is at the very core of the democracy we were denied for over four decades. We, who went through the involuntary experience that taught us that a free exchange of opinions and ideas is the basic condition for a healthy democracy, do hope, that this condition will be met and respected also in the future. This is the opportunity and the only method for making the European Union more free, more democratic and more prosperous.

Václav Klaus, European Parliament, Brussels
19 February