

Reflections on “Europeanism”

by Václav Havel

Nowadays, we often hear a question concerning whether or not, in addition to an awareness or a feeling of “national affiliation”, there is a similar awareness or feeling also present in the souls of Europeans as regards their “affiliation to Europe”; that is, whether Europeans truly regard themselves as Europeans or whether this is rather a fiction, or a theoretical construction which attempts to raise a geographical circumstance to the level of a “state of mind”. This question is posed, among other things, in connection with the debates on the measure of sovereignty that nation states can, or should, transfer to the collective organs of the Union. Many have pointed out that if the affiliation to a nation – an established and clearly perceived phenomenon – was to be pushed into the background too fast in favour of a rather unfamiliar, if not chimerical, concept of a European affiliation, it might not end well.

So where do we stand about our being European? When I ask myself: “To what extent do I feel European, and what links me with Europe?”, my first thought is a mild astonishment at the fact that it is only now, under the pressure of certain political issues, or tasks, of the day, that I begin to ponder this question. Why didn’t I think of it long ago, in those times when I began to discover the world; to dwell upon it; and, to dwell upon myself? Was it because I regarded my belonging to Europe as a merely surface matter of little significance that was not worth troubling over, or even thinking about? Or did I see my European linkage simply as taken for granted, and therefore meriting no query, examination, or even articulation?

More likely, the latter was true: My entire background was probably so self-evidently European that it never occurred to me to think of it that way, nor did I deem it important to call it European, or to probe into whether my thoughts are to be associated with the name of a continent. And, not only that – I have a feeling that I would have looked, to myself in my youth, somewhat ridiculous if I had written or declared that I was European, felt European, and thought so; or, in fact, if I had professed a European orientation in any explicit fashion. Such manifestations would have appeared to me then to be very pathetic and pompous, and I

would have regarded them merely as a different, still haughtier version of the kind of patriotism that I have always disliked from national patriots.

In other words: It was so natural for me to be European that I did not reflect on it. The same seems to be true of most Europeans: They are intrinsically European, but they are not aware of it; they do not call themselves Europeans; and, when asked about it in opinion polls, they show a mild surprise that, all of a sudden, they should verbally declare their European affiliation. Conscious Europeanism seems to have had little tradition on this continent.

I do not think it good, and I welcome it that our European awareness is now beginning to rise from an indistinct mass of the self-evident. By inquiring about it; thinking about it; and, trying to grasp its essence, we make a substantial contribution to our self-awareness. This is immensely important – especially in light of the fact that we are now finding ourselves in a multicultural and multipolar world, in which the ability to recognise one's own identity is the primary prerequisite for a good coexistence with other identities. If Europe, until recently, paid so little attention to its own identity it was, most probably, because it saw itself, incorrectly, as the entire world; or, at least, considered itself to be so much superior to the rest of the globe that it felt no need to define itself in relation to the others. Inevitably, this had deleterious consequences in its practical behaviour.

Reflecting on Europeanism means inquiring what set of values, ideals or principles evokes, or characterises the notion of Europe. And more than that: It also entails, by definition, a critical examination of that set of thoughts, followed soon by the realisation that many European traditions, principles or values may be double-edged, and that some of them – if carried too far and used, or abused, in certain ways – can lead us to hell. If Europe is now entering an era of self-reflection, it thus means that it wants to define itself *vis-à-vis* the others, and also to search itself for that which is good in it; that which has proved beneficial; and, that which points to the future.

When I had the honour to address the European Parliament some years ago, I spoke about the need to place emphasis on the spiritual dimension and the underlying values of European integration, and I shared with this body my concern about the circumstance that the spiritual, historical and political significance of European unification, and its meaning in the wider context of civilisation, appeared to be largely hidden behind technical, economic, financial or administrative issues, and that the public might, therefore, be given a totally misleading impression of the process. At that time, my words sounded somewhat provocative, and I was not sure whether the European Parliament would not boo me. It did not, and I am pleased to note that today the same words would not sound so provocative at all.

The dramatic developments in Europe since the fall of the Iron Curtain; the enlargement of the European Union; economic integration progressing at a quickening speed; and, the wide variety of new dangers which arrived with the new era have naturally led the European Union to open up room for a new, more thorough self-reflection; and, for a renewed quest, with a view to restating the values which unite it and which give its existence meaning. Some say that this quest comes too late; that self-reflection and integration in the cultural and political fields should have preceded economic integration; that the process was, so to speak, started from the back.

I do not consider this a valid judgement. After 1945, democratic Western Europe was faced with the memory of the horrors of two World Wars, and with the threat of Communist totalitarian rule and its expansion. At that time, it was virtually unnecessary to speak about the values that had to be defended, because these values were self-evident to all. On the other hand, it was necessary to unite the West as speedily as possible in the so-called "technical" sense, in order to reduce, at a very practical level, the potential for emergence or spreading of dictatorships, as well as the danger of a relapse into the old national conflicts.

It seems to be very much the same as my attitude towards my European background: Just as my being European was to me, for long years and decades, so self-evident that it did not occur to me to profess it verbally, Western Europe considered all that it had to defend as something that was equally self-evident and, therefore, felt no special need to describe it; analyse it; elaborate it; or, translate it into various political or institutional realities. And just as it is only now that I have been compelled to ponder over the question of whether I see myself as a European, and what it means to be European, it was not until the historic events since the 1990s that the integrating, democratic Europe has been prompted to engage in a really profound thought process on what is the foundation of its unification, and what should be its objective.

The basic set of European values – as they have been formed by the eventful spiritual and political history of the continent, and as some of them are now being embraced also in other parts of the world – is, to my mind, clear. It consists of respect for the unique human being, and for humanity's freedoms, rights and dignity; the principle of solidarity; the rule of law and equality before the law; the protection of minorities of all types; democratic institutions; the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers; a pluralist political system; respect for private ownership, private enterprise, and the market economy; and, a furtherance of civil society. The present shape of these values mirrors also the countless modern European experiences, including the fact that our continent is now becoming an important multicultural crossroads.

May I address myself first – for reasons that I shall explain – to one of the aforementioned values, civil society. In the Western, that is the Euro-American, world of today, a richly structured, open and decentralised civil society, which is based on a confidence in the abilities of citizens and of their various communities, constitutes the foundation of the democratic state and a guarantee of its political stability.

In enlarging the European Union it is very important, if not most important of all, that it helps to restore and develop civil society in those countries. It was no coincidence that Communist dictatorships proceeded shortly after their establishment, with speed and use of force, to tear up the fine tissue of civil society, until they virtually destroyed it. Communist dictators were well aware that as long as there were diverse structures of civic life, growing and operating from the grass-roots level, they would never gain real control over the population. That which was left of an authentic civil society then lived and developed as a direct or indirect resistance. European values survived in that environment not by virtue of the political system, but despite it.

Self-structuring of a society cannot, of course, be decreed from above. But it is possible to provide favourable conditions in which it can thrive. The task to help the new democracies in this respect should be an organic part of a wider commitment to a continuous deepening and advancement of civil society on a pan-European scale. The more widely ramified, the more diverse and the more interconnected European civic structures will be, the better equipped the new democracies are for membership; the faster they will embrace the principles of confidence in their citizens and of subsidiarity; and, the more stable they will become as states. Moreover, the foundations of the European Union itself, as a supranational community, will also be strengthened through this process.

In concrete terms, this means, among other things – or perhaps first of all – transferring various tasks of societal solidarity to the levels of self-governing bodies and of non-profit, or public service organisations. The lower the level of redistribution of means, the more transparent and more economical it will be; and, the better it will satisfy society's multiple needs which the central authorities cannot discern. Societal solidarity will become more authentic if it is more closely linked with concrete people or their associations. Such an authentic solidarity amongst people, social groups, settlements and regions is also the best background for those forms of solidarity which can be implemented only by the state as a whole. If there is such a large supranational entity as the Union, and if such an organisation is also to serve as an effective tool of solidarity, its authentic civic foundations must be all the stronger and richer.

The emerging sense of European togetherness should naturally include a constantly growing general sensitivity to all indications or expressions of national egoism, xenophobia and racial intolerance. One of the most bitter chapters in modern European history was the policy of appeasement, which led to capitulation before evil at Munich. This experience conveys a strong appeal for vigilance. Evil must be confronted as soon as it has emerged, and it is not enough if this is done by governments only. Policies of governments must grow from the sentiments of the people.

Concern for security is another manifestation of societal solidarity. Security is a task for states, or for supranational alliances. The European Union is still working intensively on a new concept of its security policy. It should be marked by a capability to decide quickly, and to speedily translate joint decisions into action. This appears to me to be immensely important, and urgently needed – the experience with Yugoslavia some years ago told us a lot about that. In my opinion, the NATO intervention showed, fairly clearly, several things. First: Respect for human life and human liberty, and consideration for pan-European security, can, in an extreme case, necessitate intervention outside the borders of the European Union. The stronger the mandate for such action, the better – that goes without saying. However, there may be, unfortunately, conceivable situations in which a UN mandate may not come, although an intervention will clearly be in the interest of many people; of the whole of Europe; and, of human civilisation as such. I am not sure whether, until recently, Europe was prepared for such an unfortunate alternative. It is certainly more prepared now, at least psychologically. I think that this should be utilised for speedily advancing also its material, or technical preparedness.

Second: Much more should be done in the field of preventive security. Tens of thousands of human lives and immense material values could have been saved in Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in other parts of the former Yugoslavia, if the international community had been capable of adequate action at an earlier stage, at the very beginning of the conflicts. In spite of all calls, appeals and warnings about possible, or impending, horrors such action was lacking. The reasons for that failure undoubtedly included consideration for various particular or domestic interests, as well as a lack of readiness on the part of the ruling forces to take risks for the sake of a generally good cause.

Third: The decisive role was played, in this case, by the United States, and it is more than likely that without its energy the international community would still be helplessly watching the same horrors that led to the intervention in Kosovo. But Europe cannot remain forever dependent on the United States, especially when it comes to European problems. It must be capable of agreeing on solutions

and handling such situations on its own. In the world of today, in which small entities inevitably unite in various international or supranational communities, it is unthinkable that the European Union could stand as a respectable component of the global order if it proved unable to agree on ways of protecting human rights, not only in its own territory, but also in the wider field within the range of its rays, that is, in the area that may one day belong to it.

Maybe it is the experience of a man who underwent forty years of Communist rule, and a Nazi regime before that; or, maybe it is the specific experience of an inhabitant of a country in the very centre of Europe, which has for centuries been a crossroads of multiple European spiritual currents as well as of geopolitical interests, and also the birthplace of many a pan-European confrontation, that leads me to the firm conviction that Europe is one political entity whose security is indivisible. The idea that there could forever be two Europes – a democratic, stable and prosperous Europe engaged in integration, and a less democratic, less stable and less prosperous Europe – was, in my opinion, totally mistaken. It resembled a belief that one half of a room could be heated and the other half kept unheated at the same time. There is only one Europe, despite its diversity, and any weightier occurrence anywhere in this area will have consequences and repercussions throughout the rest of the continent.

Nowadays, Europe – as the single political entity that it is – has a chance that it has never had before in its long and eventful history: A chance to build, for itself, a truly fair order, based on the principles of peace, equality and cooperation of all. Not force employed by the more powerful against the less powerful, but a general understanding, or consensus of all – whatever the length of time to reach it, or the difficulty of the effort – should be the source of the European order and of European stability, and when I say “European” in this context, I naturally mean “pan-European”.

The technical civilisation which now extends all over our planet has its earliest origins on European soil, and was decisively influenced by the Euro-American sphere of civilisation. Europe thus has a special responsibility for the condition of this civilisation. But this responsibility must never again take the form of a forcible exportation of our own values, ideas or properties into the rest of the world. Just the opposite: Europe should, finally, start with itself, influencing others solely by setting an example that others may follow if they want to, but without having any such obligation. The entire modern understanding of life as constant material progress and growth, based on humanity’s self-confidence in its alleged position as the master of the universe, is the reverse, and adverse, side of the European spiritual tradition. This concept of life also co-determines the nature of the contemporary threats to our civilisation. Who, therefore, should be the one to

confront these threats most energetically, if not that part of the world which once set in motion this major, and entirely one-sided, self-movement of the world's civilisation?

It appears to me that one of Europe's crucial tasks at this turn of ages is to boldly reflect upon the double-edged nature of that which we gave the world, to realise that we not only taught the world about human rights, but also introduced the Holocaust; that we generated spiritual impulses not only for the industrial, and later the information revolution, but also for the modern impudence to devastate nature, to plunder its resources and to contaminate the air around our Earth in a fashion never seen before, in the name of augmentation of material wealth; that we opened up room for an enormous advancement of science and technology, but, at the same time, ruthlessly ousted a whole set of essential and comprehensive elements of human experience, that have been formed for several millenniums.

Europe can, indeed, start with itself. It can begin to live more economically and more modestly, rededicate itself – in accordance with the best in its spiritual traditions – to honouring the higher order of the universe, as something that transcends us; and, to honouring the moral order as a product thereof. Humility; kindness; respect for that which is beyond our understanding; profound commitment to solidarity with others; respect for all that is different; readiness to make sacrifices or to perform good deeds that will be appreciated only by eternity, silently watching us through our conscience – these appear to be the values that could, and should, make up the European platform as Europe pursues its unification.

The worst events of the twentieth century – two World Wars, Fascism and Communist totalitarianism – were wholly, or for the greater part, Europe's doing. On the other hand, in the last century Europe also experienced three auspicious events, though all of them were not exclusively European accomplishments: the end of colonial rule over the world; the fall of the Iron Curtain; and, Europe's own integration. The fourth great task that, to my mind, lies ahead of Europe now is attempting to demonstrate, through the manner of its own being, that the dangers generated by this contradictory civilisation can be combated. I am happy that the country that I come from can participate in this endeavour as a full-fledged partner.