

Milan Uhde: Speech on Democracy – 9 October 2013

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

The theme of my address is democracy. However, with your permission I will not begin with a political analysis of this concept but instead open a book by a famous writer and quote one of his verses. The writer is the American poet Walt Whitman and the book is his "Song of Myself". Whitman made a resonant statement when he spoke of "Democracy, my wife".

I must admit that at the age of 20, when I heard this verse for the first time during a lecture at the faculty of philosophy, my first reaction was that the great poet was exaggerating a little. Systems of government seemed to me to be something external which could only have a remote effect on my life. In contrast I was touched to the depths of my being by one of my fellow students, with whom I was in love and whom I wanted to marry.

I used to visit her at least twice a week at the student hostel where she lived and she visited me at my parents' home. We were far removed from the realities of politics, let alone any politics which might try to intrude into our lives.

Of course this perception of mine was completely mistaken and was the product of naive wishful thinking. We were not living in a democracy but in a so-called 'people's democracy', in other words we were subject to the dictatorship of the proletariat, a dictatorship which believed it had the right not just to enter people's homes but also to dominate the entire population of the country and determine every aspect of their destinies.

When I was 20 I had no idea of any of this. Or rather, I read about what was happening in politics in the newspaper and knew the names of former politicians, well-known writers and journalists who had been condemned to death or 25 years imprisonment by the Supreme Court for no apparent reason, but this did not affect me directly.

I studied Slav literature and I was aware of the fact that there were authors and artists who were proscribed and whose books had been removed from all libraries. I knew that there was no point in asking questions on the subject. Our lecturers were scared, and we students were little better. Each of us had a deeply ingrained tendency to respond with silence to specific topics and questions, because those who acted in this way could hope to have a reasonably quiet period of study and life.

Then, in the year 1956 we experienced the unexpected cold wind of a new reality, when all impartial readers of the speech Nikita Khrushchev made that year to the delegates of

the Soviet Communist party's Twentieth Congress came to realise that we were ruled by gangsters.

At the time I asked myself how citizens should behave in such a situation if they did not want to lose their moral identity?

Should we continue to stay silent in order to avoid conflict with these criminal powers?

The majority of people in Czech and Slovak society gradually began to change their behaviour. People who had previously been silenced and had long failed to speak out slowly dared to awake from their oppression. Finally a serious attempt began to be made to weaken the dictatorship of the gangsters, and for the first time I became aware of publicly voiced demands for the democratisation of the entire political system.

This was a sincere and well-intentioned endeavour, but it ended in a way that might have been expected. It became apparent that the power of the gangsters was not something that could be democratised. One day in August 1968 I was awakened by the noise of powerful engines and saw a foreign tank in the street under my window. Our country had been occupied and deprived of any opportunity to bring the democratisation process to a successful end.

Some of my friends and fellow writers emigrated, others became involved in the resistance movement and were persecuted by our country's government, which was cooperating closely with the occupying forces. I made a different decision, however. I was sure of the fact that I wasn't a fighter and made every effort to continue in my former way of life, but the powers installed by the occupying force intruded on my most intimate private life, into which I had withdrawn, believing that this would enable me to survive the years of terror.

I do not wish to exaggerate. In the Fifties the reign of terror had been more brutal and deadly than it was in the Seventies and Eighties, but the collapse of the more liberal regime of the Sixties was devastating – not only for my country's entire society but above all for those participating in the movement to promote the democratic process.

The persecution particularly affected writers and artists, whose creative work was made very difficult by the return of repressive censorship. All writers, journalists or academics who wished to publish their texts, articles, books, plays or poetry first had to produce a certificate from the state as the employer or from the district committee of the party to show that there were no political objections to them and that they had received a permit to engage in some kind of work.

The authorities refused to give me this permit. I looked in vain for a job, and was even willing to take up the meanest occupation. However, I was informed that I would first have to make a public apology or a declaration of loyalty on television, and only then would it be decided in what field I would be allowed to work.

I refuse to accept this condition and joined my friends, who were organising a civil rights movement in the form of Charter 77 and striving to achieve greater freedom.

When Gustáv Husák, the Communist president at the time, asked how many people had signed Charter 77 he was told that there were 246 signatories. Comrade president dismissed the movement with a contemptuous wave of his hand. In his opinion this initiative was not significant. His logic was similar to that of the logic of force applied by the Soviet dictator Stalin who, the story goes, when told that he had been criticised by the Pope responded by asking "How many divisions does the Pope have?"

Then in December 1989 Gustáv Husák was to experience the day on which Václav Havel was elected the country's new president and traditional democracy, which the Communists had derided for years as outmoded bourgeois nonsense, was declared the official election and government programme of Civic Forum, the party which gained a resounding victory in the free elections.

From time to time people in my country ask who it was that actually toppled the Communist dictatorship, and a leading Czech politician has claimed in an article that the force which destroyed the crumbling regime was nothing other than the ordinary citizens who, at demonstrations and protest meetings in November 1989, expressed their will to be given freedom and democracy.

This point of view suggests that Charter 77 and all other freedom movements had very little point and impact and that achieving a political objective - for example the introduction of democracy - is only a matter of waiting for a favourable historical situation which will facilitate its realisation.

There is no doubt that without the thousands and thousands of people on our streets and squares in November 1989 there would have been no political upheaval in Czechoslovakia. However, Charter 77 and all the activities of those involved with it did in fact play an important part. They systematically tested the boundaries of the dictatorship and indicated to the whole of society whether the regime was becoming more aggressive or less aggressive towards its critics and opponents, and whether or not prospects of more favourable developments were opening up. The freedom movement became an outrider in

the struggle for human rights and accordingly for the introduction of a democratic social order.

The deepest experience which I had is therefore based on the firm realisation that uncompromising resistance is the only possible response to dictatorship, intolerance, authoritarian rule, racism, fascism and the other disorders of our political life which threaten democracy.

Those who believe that we are powerless in the face of contemporary threats to our democracy and that a silent retreat into private life will enable us to survive all social conflicts, are evading their responsibilities not just towards our society but also towards themselves and their families. Such attitudes towards matters which affect our daily lives most closely have fatal consequences for the entire world.

However, is the threat to our democracy only to be found in the disorders mentioned above, and in mistaken ideas about the ability or inability of humanity to actively influence its own fate?

I would like to return for a moment to the occupation era, when we dreamt our dreams of democracy and began to forge our political plans. Some of us had the illusion that democracy provides security, and that circumstances within society will be shaped in a democratic fashion for ever.

Only a very inexperienced person will believe that getting married means a carefree and harmonious marriage which will last a lifetime. The great poet Walt Whitman, although he did not have the experience of being married, knew a few things about partnership, and when he wrote about democracy as his "wife" there is no doubt that he was reflecting experiences which represented partnership in all its complications.

Democracy, too, has an impermanent and complex structure which constantly has to be cared for, maintained and protected.

One of the worst sins of totalitarianism is that the dictatorial system does not permit the solution of either the simplest or the most complicated social problems, which therefore forces society to take revolutionary action. And every revolution opens the floodgates not just to politically aware, dedicated and unselfish builders of a democratic social order, but also to profit-hungry and immoral individuals who are only looking to serve their own purposes and whose sole objective is to enrich themselves.

In the Nineties the Czech Republic experienced pernicious political developments, with many of our politicians forming the negative habit of subordinating political principles and the interests of the state to the personal financial gain of state functionaries.

Most Czech political parties have fewer than 20,000 members. As a result, candidates for political office are elected by a small group of delegates, who easily can be persuaded in a number of different ways to support corrupt numbskulls and mafiosi. As a result, these parties have little interest in looking for new members with independent ideas. Such a numbskull needs only a relatively small amount of money in order to purchase and keep in his pocket the members, so-called 'dead human souls' of an entire local or district branch of the party.

Our public has responded to this situation with a constantly increasing distaste for the entire world of politics. Opinion surveys indicate that the profession of politician is regarded as among those held in the greatest contempt. People are increasingly mistrustful with regard to political parties, in particular the traditional parties. This public atmosphere favours the kind of demagogue who promises to get rid of all politicians and replace them by experts. They represent the point of view that a state has to be led and managed exactly like a big corporation. According to the opinion polls this idea has considerable appeal to a certain section of our society and is even welcomed with open arms.

Our education system systematically keeps the dirty world of politics at arms length, and the younger generation is therefore left to its own devices when it comes to discovering all about politics. Their radicalism inspires them on the one hand to positive critical commitment and on the other to misguided and extreme political positions, combined with a tendency to swallow a wide range of political superstitions without question.

The mood in Czech society is also influenced by the disappointment which has been generated by the bitter realities of the capitalism which was hastily resurrected and under which the oldest generation in particular has suffered. An almost complete absence of well thought-through social policies on the part of the state has created a rapidly widening gap in incomes and property. As a result, the tensions within our society have grown and mass dissatisfaction with the general situation has increased.

An alarming feeling of frustration is also leading to increasingly loud expressions of hate towards socially isolated members of society. In the course of time these expressions of hate lead to mass demonstrations which are then manipulated for their own dubious purposes by extreme nationalist and racist bodies.

The original confidence in democracy and boundless enthusiasm for freedom are growing weaker. In bar rooms you occasionally hear a question which might have been taken straight from the speech by the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's novel 'The Brothers Karamazov': "For what purpose did I get democracy and freedom if they can't feed me?"

In the novel people gave the Grand Inquisitor their freedom, and in return he gave them bread.

One of the most urgent threats which our contemporary society needs to combat is this artificial and mendacious contradiction, which states that there is an insoluble conflict between the human wish for a secure supply of daily bread on the one hand and the longing and need for freedom on the other.

The reason for this is that the human longing for freedom can only be satisfied under democratic conditions. At the same time, however, any democratic system which is unable to provide bread for all its citizens will in future be exposed to social storms which won't provide bread for people suffering from hunger, but certainly will have the effect of restricting or liquidating freedom and democracy.

Ladies and gentlemen, I must ask you to excuse the fact that so far I have focused only on the threats to democracy in my post-communist country. The reason for this is that I am experiencing these threats at first hand.

I know that in all traditional democratic states democratic principles are threatened by a wide range of conflicts. Our globalised world has led to the growth of increasingly deep economic interrelationships which demand responsible and mutually coordinated action on the part of statesmen and have, at the same time, created a fundamentally new situation.

Giant trans-national economic structures represent a power which is independent of states and politicians and does everything it can to undermine democratically functioning institutions, efforts which are often worryingly successful.

The development and increasing power of these trans-national structures suggests that contemporary humanity is dominated by alien and unpredictable forces. This leads to feelings of helplessness and can drive desperate people either to blind revolt or passive resignation.

Dostoevsky ended his story of the Grand Inquisitor in a sad and sceptical way: Jesus, who returned to earth in order to make one more attempt at leading people towards freedom, is driven out by false saviours because people reject freedom. In the story Jesus disappears in the crowd.

However, it is my conviction that Jesus was not left alone in the crowd. Millions and millions of people are dedicated to the concepts of democracy and freedom, and will never give these up.

If you ask me what concrete way there is to save democracy I must admit that I don't know of any. However, I'm sure that beyond the horizon a path to democracy stretches, even though we are unable to see it. Searching for and finding this path and then following it is a life-long task for all of us and our inseparable destiny.

Thank you for your attention.