

Prague, November 17, 2003

Dear friend,

I was delighted to read your letter and to find in it some observations that were very familiar to me.

In these days even I am wandering through a “time machine”, as you put it in your letter. However, I have the indisputable advantage of doing so only in my memory and in my thoughts. Your letter actually arrived just before the anniversary of November 17 – the day on which Czechs and Slovaks commemorate among others the beginning of the overthrow of the communist totalitarian regime. This occasion always inspires me to a deeper reflection of the experiences of those days and a contemplation of what turned out well – and what did not.

A Czech journalist recently asked me why am I so interested precisely in Cuba rather than for example North Korea. I answered that I felt a deeper connection with Cuba. I had the opportunity to meet and talk to you and other opposition activists, and my opinions are well known in Cuba, because much of my work has been translated to Spanish and I know it is imported or published in samizdat. The main reason for my interest in Cuba, however, lies in the fact that of all the present totalitarian regimes the one in Cuba is probably closest to my own experience. The number of parallels is the highest and the advanced state of collapse is similar to the one in our country in those years.

I and my friends from the dissident movement have numerous experiences which – God permit – we can offer you, and possibly even give you advice on various issues, so that you may avoid repeating at least some of our mistakes. Although the Cuban way to freedom is and still will be distinctive, given by its unique conditions, some steps and patterns of behavior are relentlessly repeated during regime changes all around the world. In this context I take the liberty to offer you several remarks, discussing separately the period of the currently ending totalitarian era, the period of transfer of power, and finally the formation of a democratic society. Each of these stages requires special attention, and even though all of them share a common ethos, the practical steps in each of them are different.

In this letter let me discuss the first period – the end of the totalitarian era of the communist regime.

The end of the totalitarian era in former Czechoslovakia was marked by an extreme nervousness of the regime. Those who until recently had thought they would hold their posts in perpetuity started to lose their footing. Some of them probably already started to sense they would have to plan for if not political survival, then at least making provision for the case of societal changes. The handful of up to then derided dissidents started to be taken seriously when a growing number of citizens started to publicly display their sympathy towards them. Even the totalitarian regime already stopped pretending these were merely individuals fanaticized by foreign intelligence, and two years before its collapse it had to intervene against a growing number of citizens during anniversary demonstrations with brute force. The citizens of Czechoslovakia thus saw for the first time in twenty years armored police cars in the streets together with emergency squads armed to their teeth. In such moments everyone perceived the totalitarian reality of everyday life. The propaganda in the media still managed to keep everything under wraps for some time, because the first demonstrations were concentrated primarily in the capital. Nevertheless, the spirit of the citizens grew more radical

and their self-confidence increased. The regime responded with various restrictions, but those only elicited ever bolder steps by my fellow citizens. I recall for instance the importance of the decision of many artists including the world-famous Czech Philharmonic to refuse to perform in domestic media unless they provide scope for people with different political opinions. Several months before the collapse of the regime (which we obviously did not expect at that time) we wrote up a petition called "Several sentences", calling on the political leaders to initiate a dialogue with the opposition. Tens of thousands of people signed the petition without hesitation. I also remember the important role of the Voice of America broadcaster, a friend of mine, who every day in his broadcast to Czechoslovakia read out the names of the public figures who had added their signatures to the petition. The regime had no problems dealing with a handful of dissidents in its prisons, but it was taken by surprise by the new numbers of publicly declared opponents. Until then it tolerated different opinions expressed in private, while it would tolerate no opposition in public. However, in the new situation more and more fellow citizens gathered courage to step out of anonymity. The regime had a hard time responding in its usual way – by placing bans and criminalizing its opponents. Citizens' confidence grew and the previously concealed confrontation became omnipresent. In addition this was joined by a generational confrontation – children stood up against their parents' empty world of phrases.

The behavior of totalitarian regimes has been described many times – even I have attempted to do so. I remind these well-known facts here only because I see the Cuban society with all its manifestations, however specific they may be, precisely in this period. The Varela project, embodied by you, was inspired by our Charter 77. Even though it originally involved only a handful of opponents, it has gained in power recently. I was delighted to hear the news that a few weeks ago you handed over fourteen thousand more signatures calling on the regime to observe the civil rights granted by the constitution. This is a very respectable outcome of your activities. It is well known that an utter disrespect of any laws is characteristic of a totalitarian regime. Insisting on the observation of standards that it moreover adopted by itself can drive it mad.

What can one do in such a situation?

According to my opinion and experience international solidarity is important at this time. It should be expressed by each freely organized state as well as each individual. Democratic countries should condition their contacts with the political leadership by the release of prisoners of conscience and relaxation of the conditions for a free nationwide discussion. Democratic countries should consider as their partners all democratically minded people irrespective of whether they have or do not have any political functions. In this context I expect a lot from the founding of the international committee for the support of democracy in Cuba – preparations for its meeting are already under way, as far as I know. In addition there must also be economic solidarity. For that purpose I recently suggested the establishment of a "Cuban fund" for supporting families afflicted by repressions as well as supporting other activities of the democratic opposition. I strongly believe that mainly the European Union will come to an agreement on steps towards the practical support of Cuban democrats. I hope there is no need to assure you that I will do whatever I can, among other reasons to pay back the debt that I feel towards those democrats who helped my friends and me for many years or expressed their solidarity in various ways during their visits to communist Czechoslovakia.

I would like to draw your attention to an observation of mine: whatever your merits, however brave and respectable as dissidents you may be, even though you may have spent years in

prison or written clever books, in spite of all that there might be a suspicion in the eyes of pragmatic politicians of the democratic world that you are mere grumblers, invariable complainers, slightly crazy and constantly carping. Such a suspicion might lead to the following opinion: we may support them symbolically, but from the point of view of realistic politics there is no need to rely on them, they are not the right partners for us. However, the opposite is true. It is important to convince politicians in democratic countries about this, and I have been doing so already for many years.

Let me add a few more comments. Please accept them as hard-earned experience. You and your friends will surely know how to make use of them and whether they will or will not be applicable in Cuban conditions.

As you know, the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia caught us, dissidents, totally unprepared for taking over power from the hands of the regime, which collapsed within a couple of weeks. If I should emphasize one thing in particular, it is the following:

Each democrat and opponent of a totalitarian regime should behave today as if power were to be transferred already tomorrow!

We were caught by surprise how fast the exhausted communist system collapsed, and we were not prepared for an immediate takeover of power. We were thus forced to make all essential decisions under the pressure of circumstances in the course of days – sometimes even hours. But it was precisely the first moments of transfer of power that were the most important. At that time decisions were made about the fate of the country for years to come. Whatever we did not manage at the beginning we had to catch up on later with much greater difficulty. We ran up against the fact that we had not prepared a shadow cabinet, we ran up against the fact that we had not selected competent people whom we could have presented to the public as a credible replacement of the old dysfunctional parliament. It turned out that mainly we had not prepared the basic legislation for nascent democratic structures and securing the economy of the country during the upcoming months. Without such rules the fastest to come to the fore were the kind of people you mentioned in your letter – those for whom any system serves merely as a veil for their own ambitions, crooks capable of anything who have an economic advantage based on the functions they held previously. Last but not least, it is also worth considering with whom of the current politicians – in case such a situation does arise – it would be possible to negotiate about the handover and takeover of power.

The proximity of the United States of America is surely perceived as a threat by many Cubans. The media propaganda of the regime is very active in this respect. However, there is no need to worry to such an extent about such a world power – provided it remains democratic. One has to be apprehensive primarily about totalitarianism, whether near or far. Of course a sort of natural gravitation of a superpower, such as the United States, will always greatly influence its neighboring small countries. I believe I can understand these worries, myself being from a small Central European nation. The main thing, however, is for the Cubans to be able to decide by themselves about their future, and with whom and under what conditions they want or do not want to cooperate. This must be an un-manipulated decision by the Cubans alone, no country has any right to impose anything on you or hinder you from something.

Dear friend, I think that despite all difficulties it is worth treading this path. I firmly believe that in spite of the state communist propaganda a majority of Cubans do realize that the countries of Central Europe stepped out in the right direction fourteen years ago, and that it will be good to follow their example.

Yours sincerely,

Václav Havel