

We, the People, Must Repay the Debt

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Soon it will be fifteen years since the situation in the Czech Republic was transformed. Of course, this transformation would not have taken place without the effort of the Czech people, yet I wonder whether we are yet able to define and understand the true nature of this change and all the transitional steps that have subsequently taken place since then. I think that there are a great number of questions that still remain open and undetermined, such as: 'what kind of regime did we have in the past?', 'what was the nature of the change of power?', 'were the events of November 1989 a revolution or not?', 'how much or how little have we managed to change our country since?', 'why are there so many disappointed people?', and 'why have the communists recently become stronger again?'

So far, we have been unable to agree on the answers to many of these questions, yet those of us who were part of the events of 1989, those of us who had been working towards those events for years, will certainly agree on one thing. We have obligations towards those people living in countries that still don't guarantee basic human, civil and political rights. This is also our obligation because residents and politicians of countries who have always considered these rights as given are often unable to comprehend the situation in countries like Cuba with the imagination and experience that we can. We feel an urgent need to repay somehow the solidarity the democratic world once demonstrated to us. We feel the need to pass on that solidarity, pass it on to those who today need solidarity.

Economically our countries have grown slower than many people expected, yet we have grown richer in our experience of transition to democracy. We know relatively well which roads should be avoided in that process. There are many things we would do differently today and with a different emphasis. After November 1989, I often felt more in accord with the Spanish than with Britons, with Estonians rather than with Belgians, with Argentineans and South Africans rather than Mexicans or Indians. This was because we all shared an awareness of how fragile democracy is, how difficult it is to establish and how easily it can be lost. New democracies, whether they were born of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, have extremely valuable experiences, experiences that, in my opinion, should be articulated and vocalized more boldly.

For example, we have all accepted the strategy of economic transformation under the name of the Washington Consensus backed up by respected institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. And I believe it was a grave mistake. These institutions never experienced transformation to a market economy, yet nevertheless they came up with a range of grave generalizations.

However, in our countries, there were people who knew from the very beginning that those forms and generalizations were incorrect. They were designed for the environment of strictly nationalized economies, rather than our gray economy with its so-called market relations unrestricted by any clear rules or regulations. We are beginning to open a discussion about how we can assist those Cubans who wish more freedom for their country. I do not want to anticipate the learned discussion on this situation in Cuba and on the potential assistance to Cuban opposition. I will only say that the road to freedom is not usually straight. The simplest goal on the road to achieving democracy is the organization of free elections. Democracy as an issue of minority rights, by rule of law, is a much more difficult task which nevertheless cannot be easily postponed. Without the guarantee of the rule of law, the first, second, or even third elections may be a risky venture. It might cause Cuba to stray from the road to democracy via some undesirable, unpleasant version of an authoritarian regime.

It is wonderful that we can repay our debt to someone who did not lend us anything and who will one day be able to repay it to someone else. This somewhat uneconomic behavior is our hope that the world may one day be a better place to live in.