
Croatia - One Year After

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Přednáška chorvatského prezidenta S. Mesice, kterou proslovil dne 7. března 2001 v Karolinu

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There is no alternative to democracy and Europe

Mr. Rector

Pro-Rectors

Ladies and Gentleman

First of all let me express my heartfelt gratitude for the warm words that have been addressed to me here, and for the commemorative medal I have had the honour to receive. It is an honour that gives me pleasure, but also places me under a heavy obligation.

The invitation to give a lecture at Charles University, in the venerable Carolinum - an institution of scholarship and learning with a tradition dating back to the 14th Century - is something I regard not only as a mark of personal recognition but also as an acknowledgement of the Republic of Croatia and the path on which Croatia has embarked, irrevocably, since the parliamentary and presidential elections at the beginning of last year.

Throughout its long and rich history Charles University has been both a source of learning and also a symbol of Czech statehood. I am therefore particularly pleased that it is here that I have an opportunity to speak on the main characteristics of the journey that Croatia has taken since the declaration of an independent state ten years ago, and to outline the direction of its development today. This direction is well defined in the very title of the lecture: Croatia - a Year After - There is no alternative to democracy and Europe. In order to grasp why it is necessary to emphasise the fact that Croatia sees its future only and exclusively in democratic development and in a united Europe, we need to look not only at the international circumstances in which the independent Croatian state was established, but also at the first years of our independent life on the world scene - up to the beginning of last year.

Honoured ladies and gentlemen,

Croatia appeared as an independent subject on the international scene at the time of the general collapse of the communist system in Europe.

The factors allowing the withdrawal of our country from the Yugoslav federation were of two kinds. On the one hand the cohesive factors that had held Yugoslavia together disappeared, and on the other hand conditions developed in which the communist system collapsed.

Yugoslavia as a common state for the South Slav peoples was created twice in the 20th century. The first Yugoslavia was created as a monarchic state with the support of the victorious powers of the Alliance after the First World War, i.e. after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in which, like the Czechs, we had lived for several centuries. The second, socialist Yugoslavia, was created after the Second World War with the support of the victorious powers of the anti-Hitler coalition.

Like the first, the second Yugoslavia ended in a sea of blood. The Yugoslav idea, progressive in the historical context in which it had first emerged but in the long term simply impossible to implement, is today irrevocably past, a part of history. I am always saying that even if it occurred to someone on the territory of the former federation to try to revive Yugoslavia, the world has now learnt so much from experience that it would simply not permit it.

The Yugoslav federative community, the second Yugoslav experiment, was kept together by three cohesive elements. The first was Tito and his charisma, the second - the communist party which was multi-ethnic (multi-national), and the third was the Yugoslav army.

Tito died in 1980. In the following decade the communist party, largely as a result of Milošević's Greater Serbian policy, set out on a road that led to its disintegration into individual republican parties, and the army increasingly came to support Milošević.

All this occurred in the period of Gorbachev, glasnost and perestroika, the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the dissolution of the European communist system dominated by the Soviet Union. Thus at practically the same time we saw the disappearance of the external conditions that had made for the survival of Yugoslavia and had even made that state necessary in the world context, and from the internal point of view, as I have said, the disappearance of the cohesive factors that had held it together.

Yugoslavia's capacity to endure had been exhausted. It was ripe for retirement.

It was then that Slobodan Milošević seized the reins of power in Serbia, one of the republics of the then Yugoslavia, and subsequently in Montenegro as well. He was a politician who threw south-east Europe into unimaginable turmoil and tragedy, and who, I am convinced, will end his career in front of the International War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague. At this early stage Milošević was still playing the role of a convinced communist; under the pretext of holding Yugoslavia together he removed his political opponents without the least scruple or consideration, and conjured up the concept of Greater Serbia, and what is more an ethnically cleansed Greater Serbia. This concept was not originally seen for what it truly was, and Milošević gained at least tacit support both in the West and in the East, where sentimental attitudes to Yugoslavia were common.

Because certain doubts are still sometimes raised about this issue, especially abroad, it must be emphasised that Milošević merely used communism and nationalism, the card on which he was soon to stake everything, as the means to win power and hold on to it. He mobilised and homogenised the Serb nation on the basis of the theory that the existence of Serbs outside Serbia's frontiers gave Serbia the right to seize foreign territory.

He unleashed four wars - in Slovenia, in Croatia, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo. He lost all four wars. Yugoslavia collapsed in blood and flames, thousands and thousands of people perished or were massacred, and hundreds of thousands had to flee their homes. The disintegration of Yugoslavia will go down in history as a time of genocide and what came to be known as ethnic cleansing, that is for wartime horrors the like of which Europe had not seen since the Second World War, and did not believe she would ever see again.

Mr. Rector
Pro-Rector
Ladies and Gentleman

Last year Milošević was deprived of power in Serbia and I hope that this is the start of a process in which Serbia and the Serb people will be able to face up to the truth of the last decade and draw the necessary conclusions. This is because the departure of Milošević is not enough. His Greater Serbian, imperialist policy must also be abandoned. It should not be forgotten that Milošević was overthrown by a very variegated coalition, which includes both representatives of a pro-European Serbia, and people who regard Milošević's only sin as that of having failed to attain his war aims.

We in Croatia definitely welcome the changes that have been initiated in Serbia, since it is of course in our interests that Serbia, as a country with which we share a frontier, should be aiming towards democracy. Its gradual incorporation into integration movements will help to stabilise conditions not only in South-East Europe, but in the whole old continent.

In recent years Croatia has had to fulfil certain conditions, accept certain standards and go through certain procedures in order to gain entry to international organisations; it has gained entry to the Council of Europe and Partnership for Peace, has been accepted into the World Trade Organisation and opened the door to the European Union. We expect that Serbia will also take this path. To make myself completely clear: the fascination with the new rulers in Belgrade, which is sometimes evident abroad, is not and must not be a reason to allow Serbia too much leeway on some key questions. Ultimately this would not even be good for Serbia itself, not to speak of her relations with her neighbours.

I have considered it necessary to go over all this because without the wider context it is impossible to give an accurate picture of the birth of the new Croatian state, or its road to true democracy and to Europe - a road on which it started slightly more than a year ago.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

The 1974 Constitution of Yugoslavia included rights to self-determination for the federal units, the republics. Croatia, acting on the will of a huge majority of its inhabitants, claimed and used this right. The view to be heard in some circles, that the right to self-determination was used up at the moment when the Yugoslav Federation was formed, is mistaken and legally unsustainable.

Croatia was created with borders that were later acknowledged as its international frontiers on the basis of the decision of the Badinter Committee. I must, however, state entirely openly that the policy of Franjo Tuđman included aspirations

to foreign territories. Precisely as a result of scarcely veiled Croatian attempts to annex part of the neighbouring internationally recognised state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we ended up in practical isolation from the rest of the international community.

Moreover, because Croatia tried to realise these ambitions by force of arms as well, in the eyes of many it was transformed from a victim of aggression into an aggressor. As far as my own case is concerned, my disagreement with this policy led me to leave both high state office and the party of Franjo Tudjman, and take a different road. I cannot say that it was always easy, but I must say that it was the only road I could have taken.

I must also say the following just as openly. While it is true that part of the Serbian population of Croatia succumbed to the manipulations of Slobodan Milo_eviĉ and came out in open rebellion against Croatia with the help of the Yugoslav army, which was disintegrating and changing into a Serbian army, it is also true that Tudjman took many steps that necessarily aroused hostility among Serbians in Croatia, and exploited the wars to reduce their numbers in line with his idea that Serbians ought to represent no more than 3% of the population of Croatia.

In this context Croatia also had a very dubious attitude to human rights, and its co-operation with the War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague, to which it had committed itself by special law, began to falter the moment it became clear that there was a prospect of investigating and then trying war crimes committed by the Croatian side - whether in Bosnia and Herzegovina or in Croatia itself.

The war caused great devastation and consumed huge financial resources. These are not, however, the only causes of the difficult economic situation in which our country finds itself today. Over ten years a mistaken concept of privatisation was applied by the governments of the Democratic Croatian Community, which allowed a considerable amount of the capital that still existed simply to "flow out" of the country. For all these reasons Croatia today is a pillaged and impoverished country.

The number of unemployed is nearing 400,000 and for roughly every million people in employment, there are approximately a million pensioners. I do not have to emphasise that in the long term the situation is absolutely unsustainable. This means that in every speech I make abroad I appeal for help for Croatia, but I always underline the fact that we no longer need charitable aid. We need foreign investment on a profit basis - investment that will allow our economy to grow once again and will create new jobs.

Our journey to democracy, which also - logically - opens the doors of a united Europe, is sometimes hampered by outbursts from the right and forces defeated in the elections of the kind we have recently experienced in Split and some other towns, including Zagreb. This will not, however, confuse or undermine our efforts. Let me recall the thesis in the title of this lecture, a thesis embodied in the foundations of the new foreign and domestic policy of our country: there is no alternative to democracy in Europe. Rest assured that we shall not forget it.

Honoured Ladies and Gentlemen,

The parliamentary elections in January and the presidential elections in February of last year created opportunities for Croatia to set out on the road to genuine democratisation. The world has opened its doors, and it is now up to us not to disappoint either international expectations or the expectations of our voters, who gave us a mandate for political change.

And now that we speak of change, I would like to say first of all that in recent changes to the constitution we have limited the powers of the President of the Republic. This, by the way, was one of my pre-electoral promises. The previous system was usually referred to as semi-presidential, but in fact it was presidential, or even more than that. Franjo Tudjman decided on everything - on the new state emblem, on who would become a minister, and even on who would train the Croatian football team. Croatia was at the same time a strictly centralised state, in which the centre made the decisions on everything and everyone lived for the centre. The government was responsible to the president and not to parliament.

Now we have a parliamentary system, in which the President of the Republic is entrusted with the formation of a government on the basis of the election results. The government is confirmed by the parliament to which it is responsible.

The judiciary is being freed from political influence and we are implementing a thorough division of power into legislative, executive and judicial spheres.

We have not, however, reduced the functions of the head of state to the purely ceremonial. I shall explain why. We believed that we must have one firm point in the system, a support that will be able to fulfil its role in possible crisis situations. We are a democracy in the first stages of development, and so we must allow for such possibilities. For this reason, to state only the most essential points, the President forms the foreign policy of the state together with the government, is the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces in peace and war, and has a certain supervisory function in relation to the military intelligence services. This is the firm point in the system that I am talking about. If we were to have created a strictly ceremonial presidency, then there would be a danger that in a crisis attempts might be made to solve problems outside the institutional framework, and this would create new and insoluble problems. It is a danger that we simply wished to avoid.

We are investigating economic crimes, and some of those suspected of responsibility for such crimes are already facing trial. We are trying to get back some of the capital that was illegally exported from the country. I can say that I am not entirely satisfied with the speed of these developments. Many dubious affairs have been opened up, but none has yet been resolved.

I have already mentioned that in Tudjman 's time Croatia was a strictly centralised country. Now we are devolving decision-making in many questions from the centre to lower levels. And not only decision-making, but also funds. This means that the minister in Zagreb will no longer decide who shall be the director of a nursery school in some faraway village, or who will be director of a health centre in a small town in the far south of the country. This is becoming a matter for the local bodies and their decisions will definitely be better than decisions from the centre.

We are freeing the media from the dictates of the political regime. This does not mean, however, that our media are immune to the influence of everyday politics, and that influence is often extremely negative. We recently received an object lesson in this regard during the right-wing outbursts I have mentioned. At a time when serious public opinion surveys show that the right does not enjoy major support from the public, and that even the majority of veterans are in favour of the principle of individual legal responsibility in the case of those suspected of war crimes, some media have still depicted right-wing forces as the authentic representatives and interpreters of the mood of the majority of the electorate.

We have extended human rights to all citizens in practice. Earlier the selective application of laws had led to a situation in which these rights were enjoyed only by members of the majority ethnic group, and this - naturally - was not compatible with the ideal of a state based on law.

We have put our co-operation with the Hague Tribunal on a new footing. Although there are still certain hesitations and delays in this area, the government and I as president of the republic are determined to co-operate fully and in good faith with this institution established by the United Nations.

We are working on the reconstruction of all damaged houses and buildings. We would like to have completed this work by the end of this year. At the same time we want all the refugees and expellees to return. In this way we are confirming the maturity of our democracy. I do not speak only of the Croatians who fled or were driven out, but also of the Serbs in this position; I speak simply of all citizens of the Croatian Republic who left or were forced to leave their country. Anyone who wishes to return has the right of return and we must make it possible for this right to be fulfilled safely and with dignity. Once again I refer to the latest public opinion surveys, which show that this policy is approved by between 54 and 79% of the population, depending on the regions where the surveys were conducted.

War crimes, regardless of who perpetrated them, will be investigated, and we shall bring war criminals to justice - whether in Croatia, or in the Hague. We know that this will not always be easy. Those who are afraid of the consequences are prepared to exploit every excuse to undermine such a policy. This will not, however, sway us. Why? Because we know that there is no alternative to democracy and to Europe, and that we shall not build democracy, or enter a united Europe, encumbered by the mortgage of unresolved war crimes.

It is clear that only by insisting on individual responsibility for war crimes can we prevent the accusation of entire nations. Yet nations are never responsible and cannot be responsible for crimes. Crimes always have names and forenames, and crime has not nationality.

Finally, we shall carry out a policy of strict enforcement of the rights of minorities. I even hold the view that there should be positive discrimination for minorities, i.e. that in some areas their members should accorded more extensive right, in order that they should feel secure and protected in the ocean of the majority ethnic group. This too will not always be easy, and here too I must repeat: if we want Croatia to meet all the standards of a democratic society and gain legitimacy for entry into a united Europe, then there can be no deviation from this policy and we shall not be deviating from it.

We shall also take care of members of the Croatian nation outside Croatia, but shall regard them as lines of connection with the countries in which they live.

What is fundamental in relation to minorities is the following principle: we must never allow minorities to be used by anyone as an excuse for raising claims against the countries in which they live. That is our standpoint, but it is also, of course, a standpoint that we expect from other countries in the region, and given what has happened in the recent past, especially from Serbia.

We shall continue, I must emphasise again, along the road that will take us into a united Europe, and I should like to say in this regard that I am a strong supporter of what is known as the individual approach. It was an especial pleasure to me to see that this conception was approved by the Zagreb summit of the European Union, at which Croatia began to negotiate on an agreement on affiliation and stabilisation. I usually explain the individual approach in terms of the metaphor that countries aspiring to membership of the European Union must sail towards it like boats in a regatta, not in a convoy.

As you know, in a regatta the first to cross the finishing line is the one who knows how to make best use of the wind, but this in no way blocks the less skilful: these too reach the line, only later. In a convoy on the other hand the speed of

the whole flotilla is determined by the slowest, and so those who can sail faster must slow down in order that the whole group should reach port together. We have managed to establish the principle of the regatta, and that is a good thing. There is really not a single good reason why the tempo of the journey into the European Union should be dictated by the slower to those who are able to move faster.

This conception is in no way at variance with the development of regional co-operation. I would like to add that Croatia sees no problem in the fact that progress in regional co-operation represents one of the criteria "in play" for assessing the speed of convergence of individual countries with the European Union. As far as we are concerned we are striving for co-operation with all our neighbours and countries of the union, and we are doing so in our own interests as well, but we do not wish to be prisoners of the region, nor do we want regional co-operation to become an end in itself.

Honoured Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, a year after the elections, at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium, Croatia is emerging onto the world scene as a young state. We have only existed for ten years and we are burdened by the heavy mortgage of the last decade, but we are strong in our commitment to democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration movements.

These forms of integration represent our wishes, and our goals, but also our destiny.

I think I am not mistaken in saying that here the paths of our two nations converge. Croatia and the Czech Republic are countries in process of transition, and have the same strategic goals. A united Europe, whatever the complexities of our views on the subject, is our final goal, simply because no better goal exists. And for this reason it seems to me appropriate to end this speech with an appeal for even more intensive co-operation and mutual aid.

I deeply believe that the Czech and Croatian Republics have the power to help each other in the task of building a democratic society and a road to a united Europe, and that both can expect benefits from mutual aid. We expect your help, and we offer you our help.

This is precisely because we know that there is no alternative to democracy and to Europe! And precisely because we are sure that a democratic Croatia and a democratic Czech Republic can be partners in a united Europe - for mutual benefit and in the interests of both.

I hope that my visit to the Czech Republic will contribute to the creation of conditions for the building up of such a partnership and that my words here have helped you to a better understanding of the problems facing my country, many of them familiar to you in the Czech Republic as well. I also hope that I have managed to convince you of the resolve of Croatia to persevere on the course on which it has embarked and on which it will continue - despite all problems and potential opposition.

Thank you.

Introductory Address of the Dean of the CU Faculty of Arts

Doc. RNDr. Petr Kolář, CSc.
Mr. President,
Mrs. Mesic
Your Excellency,
Your Magnificence, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The university is an institution traditionally founded on the principles of academic freedom, which includes freedom in relation to politics and politicians, and independence of political parties and other forms of political influence. At Charles University, where we have gathered today in its historic centre, these principles have been cultivated for more than 650 years despite the authoritarian and totalitarian excesses of former times.

Nonetheless, this university has decided to award its silver medal to an active politician, the current president of the Republic of Croatia, Mr. Stip Mesic.

The president studied law in the 1960s at the university in Zagreb, and devoted himself to the service of law in the following 30 years. In this service he had a succession of roles: as lawyer, dissident, prisoner of the "Croatian Spring" of 1971, member of parliament, chairman of the executive council of the Croatian Democratic Community, prime minister, chairman of parliament, founder of the political party the Croatian Independent Democrats, later leader of the Croatian National Party, and finally president.

These positions all seem at first side remote from the rarefied atmosphere of university studies and lecture-rooms. Yet nonetheless we insist on the award of a silver medal to Stipe Mesic and we are honoured, Mr. President, to meet you on the occasion of the award.

The reason is that university autonomy in relation to politics does not mean a lack of interest in public matters or an indifference to the values that are at stake in politics. The university does not want to serve political ends, but the university 's mission and function also has a political dimension. The university did not develop only from the ideal of the independence of knowledge and learning, but also from the ideals that were the source of the human dream of democracy, justice and liberty, and which are always facing new threats in political practice. From this point of view Stipe Mesic is a man for whom the academic world can feel a close affinity.

The Croatian essayist Dubravka Ugrešić says that men and women in the Balkans sit in one great sadomasochistic cauldron. Stipe Mesic was and is one of those rare politicians who has been closely involved in events in this cauldron, but has never stoked the flames beneath it. On the contrary.

The moment Stipe Mesic gained sufficient authority, he took the only steps into the future that could provide his country, scourged in the recent past by war, lawlessness and propaganda, with an effective defence against the horrors that the former Yugoslavia had experienced in the past. He spoke out about the darkest pages of contemporary history and demanded that they be investigated. The postwar history of our own country, the Czech Republic, makes us particularly aware that liberation from a traumatic past does not, alas, bring only fine words about Europe, peace and independence.

Painful words are also necessary - and Stipe Mesic uttered them. The catharsis that makes it possible to look ahead with cautious optimism has been made possible, paradoxically, by the articulation of names than it might have seemed more pleasant to forget, Stipe Mesic 's courage has given genuine truth to the statement that he recently made in his speech for the 9th anniversary of the independence of the Croatian Republic, and which Czechs can understand well enough without an interpreter, "Mi smo ponovo zemlja šansi" - we are once again a country of hope".

As with many other words, the expressions for "crime", "nation", "law" and "defence" are identical in Czech and Croatian. The attitudes of Stipe Mesic have demonstrated how these linguistic signs may be applied in the most difficult circumstances. Once Stipe Mesic was director of an architectural studio. Today he is the architect of a new model of politics in which ethnic prejudices are not permitted to lead to the legalisation of hatred, and in which the head of state personally answers his supporters and opponents using the Internet, and ends his letters with the warm formula, "Regards, Stipe"

This model of politics makes it possible for universities to be the source not only of analysis and criticism of politics, but also of words of friendship and recognition. These words we offer today with pleasure, and we congratulate Stipe Mesic on the award of a silver medal of Charles University, which we see as an expression of sympathy and faith in shared ideals.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you