

Speech of the President of the Slovak Republic

His Excellency Michal Kovac

Central Europe Viewed From the Perspective of a New Nation—Forming a Civil
Society

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Ladies and Gentleman,

I am most honoured to be able to spend this special evening with you—distinguished representatives of Japan's cultural, social and economic circles.

I have come to your country, the Land of the Rising Sun, on the occasion of a wonderful event—the winter Olympic games in Nagano. It was also my great pleasure to accept the invitation of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation to address this very special forum. During Mr. Yohei Sasakawa's visit to Bratislava, the capital of the Slovak Republic, I had the opportunity to discuss with him the significant activities of this Foundation in Slovakia as well as the issues of civil society, democracy, and globalisation.

I am genuinely pleased with the extensive growth that has been taking place in the ties between Japan and the Slovak Republic. I am not only referring to political and economic co-operation, but to a wide range of contacts and exchange programmes in the areas of culture and education as well. In this age of new technologies, communication, and globalisation, geographical distance is obviously no longer an obstacle.

In my presentation today, I would like to focus your attention on a highly topical issue—the relationship between the citizen and the state in Europe, with particular focus on the role of the civil society in the process of European integration.

Three weeks ago, I played host to 10 presidents of the Central and South-Eastern European countries in the historical Slovak city of Levoca. We had an informal roundtable discussion on current problems facing our countries within the framework of my proposed theme: "Civil Society—Hope of a Unified Europe." The diversity in the approaches chosen to this topic by the presidents of the participating countries reflected to a great extent the varying states—and in many cases, the complexities—of their civil societies. Despite the differing, and in many cases difficult, circumstances in each of the Central and Eastern European countries, currently undergoing processes of transition, the positions expressed at the roundtable clearly indicated that full-scale and multi-faceted development of civil society is a necessary antecedent to further national advancement. We came to a common conclusion that our future as a prosperous, democratic, co-operating, and unified Europe is not achievable without a sovereign and self-confident citizenry.

European integration should, once and for all, help to overcome the very deeply rooted historic resentments and animosities that have for so long affected relations among the nations of the Central European region.

Modern civil society in Europe began with the transformation of the serf to the citizen. This change was sparked by the French Revolution and its Declaration of the Individual and Citizen's Rights. These principles had to gradually forge their "palace under the sun" in the face of the all-encompassing, authoritarian state, which had been built up in Europe over the centuries. This movement for individual and civil rights in Central Europe gradually came to include a process of national emancipation.

Central Europe has been, and continues to be, the motherland of many ethnic groups and nations, even though some have exited from Europe or become extinct over the course of centuries. Since the 16th century, however, this multi-ethnic region has been ruled by a succession of three very powerful empires, which dominated Central Europe even in the first decades of our century. In the very heart of the continent, there was the Austro-Hungarian Empire under the rule of the Habsbourgh dynasty. The West was a domain of the renewed German Empire, and the Russian Empire exercised its influence from the East. Those empires strove to maintain their rule over the smaller non-state ethnic nations, at a time of growing emancipation movements. Their efforts, however, met with little success, as the results of the First World War showed. The Austro-Hungarian Empire ceased to exist and the Russian and German Empires were so weakened by the war that they were unable to impede the creation of new states throughout Central Europe.

It is not possible to separate the national emancipation movements in Central Europe from the formation of the civil society. As in other parts of Europe, civil society in this region started to form gradually in the last century after the fall of absolutism—a regime that functioned without a freely elected parliament and transparent constitutional principles. The creation of the state under the rule of law presupposes the establishment of civil society. In the wake of World War One, however, the creation of civil society in Central Europe was limited by the remnants of authoritarian traditions as well as by the suppression of small non-state ethnic nations under the huge empires. These small nations, when compared with such countries as France, Great Britain and other West European nations, were politically underdeveloped. It was the weakening of the three empires, including the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, after the First World War that brought greater democracy, and, as a consequence, more space for civil society growth. This was especially the case with Czecho-Slovakia, which was founded in 1918 and which

preserved its democratic political system virtually throughout the whole period between the two world wars.

The defeat of fascism in the Second World War liberated Western Europe from totalitarianism. Temporarily suppressed, civil society has since the 1950s been undergoing a renaissance in this part of Europe. In the second half of the century, the principle of constitutionalism was strengthened, and this led to greater development and stabilisation of the democratic institutions of the state under the rule of law. Stricter rules for the division of power gave impetus to a process of decentralisation, which brought with it a new phase in the renaissance of Western European civil society.

However, Central and Eastern Europe were cut off by the lowering of the iron curtain from this postwar process of civil state and society re-vitalization. This curtain was ultimately eliminated in 1989 with the dissolution of the communist bloc. It was the masses who took the initiative to gather in the streets and squares and, in an enormous protest, reject and overthrow the totalitarian regimes. Those people were a manifestation of an awakened civil society—one that carried various symptomatic banners: "Solidarity" in Poland, "Civic Forum" in the Czech Republic, and "The Public Against the Violence" in the Slovak Republic. The civil society had demonstrated its stance in various civil initiatives and activities, which led to the eventual collapse of the totalitarian regimes in each of them. Examples of such initiatives are the establishment of the roundtable in Poland, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in East Germany, the forcing of the Hungarian government to allow opposition participation in elections, and the abolition of the principle of the leading role of the communist party in Czecho-Slovakia along with the creation of the Government of National Understanding.

It was the fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet bloc that facilitated the restoration and renovation and the development of the democratic political regimes and civil societies in the region. This was similar to the way in which the national emancipation movement culminated in the creation of new nation-states after World War One. True civil society, by its very nature, cannot confine itself within national or state borders; it must transcend such partitions and create a borderless community of equal and free citizens. Civil and human rights do not originate in a particular government or state, or even in a positive law, but are the universal, natural rights of all human being, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This Declaration, which defines the humanistic basis for relations among the states of Europe after World War One, celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this December.

I would like to stress the fact that even though the natural development of democracy in my country had been interrupted for a period of some 50 years, we did not start from scratch in 1989. From a historic perspective, our society retained its memory of a form of governance and a structure of society different from those we were tethered with for decades under the communist regime. This memory was perked in 1968, during the so called "Dubcek's Prague Spring," which was to a great extent initiated from today's Slovakia.

In spite of the concept of "civil society" being deeply rooted in European traditions, its practical implementation in Europe has only now just started. As many experts declare, the concept of a civil society may become a leading force in last years of this century.

The two overlapping ideas I'm about to mention have mutually influenced the process of European evolution. The first is the old European idea of civil society, which provided the inspirational impetus for the process of European integration after the

Second World War. The second is the gradual integration process of European nations and states, which is leading to the unprecedented development of a new trans-national, state-transcendent European civil society.

What are the core principles of such a society? They are those of the European citizen, a Europe of regions, de-centralised powers in the form of local and self-governments and of subsidiarity, and an extensive system of civil initiatives and civic self-help. The operation of an extensive network of NGOs is seated in the accomplishment of socially relevant objectives and the achievement of political goals through the use of non-political tools, such as self-help, charity, philanthropic work, the activities of associations, clubs and guilds, moral pressure, the enforcement, protection and monitoring of human and civil rights, coupled with the reporting and condemnation of human rights violations and abuses.

The existence of a relatively developed and stabilised civil society in the western part of Europe has and continues to significantly help facilitate the building of the foundations of the civil society—albeit after a 50-year delay—in the central and eastern parts of our continent.

European civil society has emerged in resistance to the old, authoritarian regime of the state. It had to win its place of vibrant existence within the gradual transformation of the old, authoritarian state into the modern, democratic state. The formation of this civil society is today being further stabilised through the process of integration of these modern democratic states into European supra-national structures and institutions lead by the European Union.

Countries in which the transformation from totalitarian to democratic societies is still incomplete and those with strong remnants of the authoritarian and patriarchal governance are holding the establishment of civil society in Central Europe to a weak

start. The institutions of civil society are not being provided with the matrix needed for their intensive development. Neither is there a sufficient vertical decentralisation of power to local and regional self-governments. Conversely, these states still reserve the right to control and manage all civil initiatives and self-help activities, which impedes the development of NGOs and the full range of their potential functions.

In this context, the democratic representatives of these states need to maximize their efforts to effect both vertical and horizontal decentralisation of political power, building such political mechanisms that will open up new possibilities and provide equal opportunities for existing and newly emerging nongovernmental organisations.

Czechoslovakia, like other Central European countries, promptly moved after the revolution to restore a pluralistic form of democracy by installing a multi-party system and free parliamentary and municipal elections. Such pluralistic democracy is a prerequisite and a basis for the free development and functioning of all civil society components. In turn, a well-established and functioning civil society will serve to strengthen a democratic political regime and pluralistic democracy.

Both the Slovak and the Czech Republics have, since their establishments on January 1, 1993, inherited large networks of nongovernmental organizations, associations, foundations, guilds and clubs, which are actively involved in practically all spheres of public life. Nine years after the epoch social changes of 1989, the activities of NGOs and an independent media and the work of the political parties have imbued in the Slovak public with a relatively high interest in current affairs. They have kept a keen eye on the political scene throughout their officials' elected terms. This high level of political interest is clearly revealed in the results of periodic public opinion polls.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During my 5-year term of office as the first president of the Slovak Republic, one of the youngest European states, I have come to the following recognition: In stabilising European democracy and achieving European integration, it is essential to create a balance between the state, state administration, and civil society. This inter-relationship must transcend from the classical stage of rivalry to a democratic stage of mutual complementation and mutually prosperous co-existence. The state must provide the conditions necessary for the full-scale operation of civil society, and, in so doing, relinquish many of its so-called "sovereign" powers to civil society. Civil society institutions should be allowed to operate in those fields where the state is unable to function effectively and to replace the state's stewardship where it is irrelevant or even harmful.

Building up this stable balance between the state and civil society is precisely the prerequisite for carrying out the democratisation process in Central and Eastern European countries. In this context, we must not forget one very important dimension of civil society, however: When we talk about the very notion of "civil," it connotes "cultural," "civilised," "well-bred," "tolerant," as opposed to "pre-civil" or the natural condition articulated in civil codes or civil law.

Civil society is thus a society of civilised and polite people who have a high awareness of civil issues and possess a high civil culture and who are able to transform these qualities in their civil lives into their political culture. Civil culture is a measure of one's political culture, which is expressed in all spheres of their political activities, and in the intra- and inter-relations of political parties, relations in the parliament and in the government, and relations among the president, government officials and other constitutional representatives.

I truly hope that through our joint efforts, we throughout the world will be able to successfully achieve a mature and fully developed civil society—this should be our goal and our commitment to the future.

Ladies and Gentleman, thank you for your attention.