

Pavel Fischer
Together for Europe Meeting
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Dear friends,

You came to Prague to work together on the topic of how to live and engage “Together for Europe”.

What country have you come to? And what is the state of Europe today, one hundred years since the First World War?

You have come to the Czech Republic, a country that declared itself a republic a hundred years ago.

During the celebrations of this year’s centenary, I was intrigued by the ideas put forward in his speech by the President of the Constitutional Court. He heads the institution whose task is to ensure that the most basic rules are adhered_to in this country. Its president, Pavel Rychetský, attempted to diagnose the state of our contemporary society. Let me paraphrase his basic thesis.

In his opinion globalisation has intensified the feeling of loneliness and hopelessness among people. People feel that they are becoming lost in the global world. There has been a blurring of the contours of their identity, and they are sinking into anxiety and fear. Indeed, fear has become a breeding ground for those who create for them an image of the enemy. The enemy might be a richer neighbour, an immigrant, or a person with a different skin colour. In this country, sometimes the European Union itself is identified as the culprit.

In their despair, people are now looking for change, and better still, for some sort of messiah because traditional political parties no longer represent them effectively. Is it even possible to stop such toxic development? And how do you redress a distorted value system?

The president of the Constitutional Court sees hope in a greater degree of emancipation of civil society, awakening its self-confidence and restoring the principle of citizen sovereignty. Citizens who stand up for themselves because political representatives are there to serve the general wellbeing of the nation or they should not be in power at all.

Let us take another look at the key terms he used in his speech. Loneliness, hopelessness, identity, fear, enemy, general wellbeing, self-confidence, sovereign citizen.

If we look to the best references to European thinking, based on the wisdom of Jewish scholars, Christian mystics and rational thinkers, we can find a spiritual dimension for each of them which could put them in a different light.

When articulated in this way, the diagnosis of contemporary society has great information value. But I also believe that we can all see these phenomena in a hopeful light too. And that we can endeavour to do something ourselves.

So where should we start? What should we do first and what, on the contrary, should be left as it is?

Let us now take a brief look at the three challenges facing Europe today.

The First Challenge: Emotion

People are equipped to experience emotion. And not only their own emotions, but also to be emotionally connected to others. So even though we can tell ourselves repeatedly that people are

rational and sensible creatures, we would eventually come up with a whole range of examples that would illustrate how often we behave irrationally. And that's actually a good thing.

To understand some of the situations in European politics, it is important to admit that emotions are crucial. Let us remind ourselves of the struggle to solve the eurozone crisis, which manifested itself in finding a solution to how to draw up Greece's state budget when the economy was in a critical condition.

If we work on the basis that a human being is not only a homo economicus, i.e. he/she is not only a consumer or a market player but also a citizen bestowed with dignity and freedom, then the struggle that led to the so-called Greek crisis was very significant.

While citizens were forced to tighten their belts and literally did not have any money to spare, some banks managed to safeguard their earnings relatively well throughout the entire crisis.

While in Brussels the solution to the crisis was handled by the implementation of austerity measures, citizens in Greece saw this as rubbing salt into their wounds. Emotions ran high, disgruntled citizens turned against the government, the European Commission and the bankers. And, for instance, against Germany, and even Chancellor Angela Merkel herself.

This atmosphere of intense emotion was something the Greeks primarily experienced among themselves. It was inaccessible to others in terms of language. From a cultural point of view, it was connected to their history, to images from history, and this meant that other European citizens often lacked not only the tools to understanding the Greeks and sympathizing with them but also to helping them in some way: perhaps in retrospect we could have offered a holiday to Greek children in our homes. This would have given their parents a break, and we would have forged links that would also make sense in the future.

Similarly, we could remind ourselves of the emotions experienced by the citizens of other EU member states. It is as if our own political and social struggles have remained limited to the territory in which our mother tongue is spoken. There is a shortage of strong media, a lack of intermediaries which means we have remained somewhat alone with our emotions.

And nonetheless, I am convinced that even the best journalist, the most skillful diplomat or the most interesting politician would not be fully able convey the misery, the fear or the hope and expectations we experience in our linguistic communities. Because it is true that those who have a common mother tongue can very quickly understand one another.

When I was younger, I played violin and traveled for many years around Europe with an orchestra. Time and time again I can see that experience as a musician before my very eyes. Even today, I must admit that musicians are more able to communicate and convey a message among our nations than the best political speeches. Indeed, art and emotions work hand in hand. With pictures and expressions, for which we often cannot find words.

And this means that in today's world we not only need new institutions, but also artists so that they can communicate to us the issues that are possibly only just raising their head now but are nonetheless urgently preoccupying the minds of the people and causing them to worry. Artists can escape the trap of the translator. Artists can work with what would otherwise be cut by the censors who monitor politically- correct words.

Looking back again at the sad legacy of the big crisis that began in US banks in 2008, we will see that in many instances the budgets of cultural institutions also had to be cut.

But if the world we live in today is so emotionally disconcerting or unnerving, perhaps now is the time to do the exact opposite. Return art to public spaces. Help the public to figure out what they

are experiencing with the help of artists. And give children the tools they need to understand art, otherwise every one of us will remain a little bit alone with his/her emotions, keeping them bottled up inside. Or everybody will remain a little bit alone, if we are talking about the atmosphere in the country as a whole.

The second challenge. Citizen or consumer.

Sooner or later we have to ask ourselves the question – what do we understand by the term 'human being'? Whether we take it to mean an actor in the economy, a market participant, a consumer or a citizen.

From the very outset, European cooperation has placed an emphasis on economic cooperation, and this was certainly the most effective and sensible thing to do. At the time, it helped to establish collaborative processes without having to talk about some issues or even have them decided by referendum. The founder of European integration based the method on real life experience. Frenchman Jean Monnet, who worked in London during the war, saw with his own eyes the inability of the Allies to coordinate among themselves the supply of troops.

However, the emphasis on the economy cannot only be observed within the EU today, but also in our individual countries. But once again we have to ask ourselves what we actually understand by 'human being'. If we understand a human being to be a consumer, then our goal will be to provide the highest quality at an affordable price. But we can also understand human beings differently. And by this I mean as an individual graced with dignity, as a free being, as a person with individual responsibility who has the need to form relationships with others.

However, a free independent person, living in isolation, cannot be our ideal. After all, loneliness is one of the phenomena of contemporary living, which greatly weakens our society. Loneliness means a poverty of relationships. And there is an abundance of it around. And if individuals remain alone, they can also fall victim to various predators, be it disseminators of information and misinformation, or even economic predators, who sell them things they don't need at all.

An individual cannot be happy without solidarity and without community and companionship. And at society level, we can see that it is those societies that are capable of living together, engaging in dialogue, coming together to find solutions to problems, and, at local level, forming relationships which involve helping others, solidarity and reciprocity. Such a society is ultimately more resilient. In the face of a threat, people can help themselves and others, find their place in society, provide assistance to those most in need.

But we're not going to allow ourselves to be deceived. We have been at this crossroads many times before, and not just during the elections. The economy is most certainly of utmost importance for the management of our countries. And without rational and responsible national economists, we would not even be able to draw up the state budget. But let us also ask ourselves how those who want to make the decisions understand the individual. Perhaps they understand the individual as a consumer, that is, for one-time use and until the next election. But, by contrast, it could also happen that they regard the individual as a partner, a teammate, a citizen. So let us put our trust and confidence in that kind of politician.

The Third Challenge. Community or crowd.

The third challenge we observe in today's societies is the expansion of social networks. Information technology has connected us in such a manner that we often now know more about ourselves than we want.

Our privacy is in jeopardy. But so also is our ability to live as a society.

In this era of social networking, the community's need for mutual awareness, consensus, dialogue, or to patiently find solutions to complex issues, may well take a bad thrashing.

This is not because social networks are somehow fiendishly dangerous in themselves. It is because their economic model is not based on social utility but on seeking out the highest possible profits. And to this end they use a variety of smart algorithms.

But when we allow clever algorithms to start teaching themselves and looking for where profits are highest, then it shouldn't come as a surprise to us that our world is starting to resemble ones and zeros. Where there is a conflict or a clash, tensions rise and consumer interest increases. And advertising revenue also goes up.

As a result, it cannot come as a surprise to us that some debates on social media resemble mob scenes.

People do not have to have their own opinion when part of a mob. Instead they wait for some incitement from outside. When someone gives them the impetus to act, the mob is then capable of seeing that person as a leader. And in their masses, they take to the streets and they don't think twice about hunting somebody down. Discussion falls by the wayside. There is no time to find a compromise.

And yet without the ability to reach an agreement, society will never be able to come up with solutions to the complex issues of the day, let alone survive.

If we call to mind the mob, then who is standing on the opposite side? It is a free human being, a person bestowed with his/her own ideas, a person who endeavours to find the motivation to make something of him/herself and not to remain deaf to others. And also a person to whom it matters what world his/her children will grow up in.

Such an individual is open to creating a community.

A community does not wait like a mob for something to happen from the outside. It has got enough of its own drive, its own energy, what it considers sacred or valuable, and then acts accordingly. It has no need for ever more detailed rules. It sees the point of its actions and of adhering to unwritten rules.

I don't want you to feel as if I'm in some way biased towards social networks. They bring a lot of good. They connect people who have long been out of touch. They help spread ideas for which the market was never able to make space.

But if we have surrendered to them mindlessly and failed to notice the first warning signs, we might soon be surprised to find what kind of world we are waking up to.

Dear friends,

You have come to Prague to think about how to help each of us, our families and our societies to work together in a better way. And not only within our own countries but also within Europe. We may be feeling somewhat powerless.

You came to Vaclav Havel's city. Thirty years ago, he published a book that is still being translated into many world languages today. His essay is called *The Power of the Powerless*.

He wrote this pivotal text shortly after signing Charter 77, a fundamental political document whose signatories no longer wanted to remain silent about how the Communist regime humiliated citizens, broke their backs and ravaged civil society.

The reaction of the Communist leaders and the state police to Charter 77 was ruthless. Those suspected of knowing about its preparations, those who were signatories or who did not condemn it loudly enough were persecuted. People lost their jobs, their children were expelled from school, and citizens were imprisoned and persecuted daily. Society suffocated in fear, and in fear of what might come next. Censorship was heightened. Harsh punishments were handed down for every contact with the free world.

The people were overcome with a feeling of absolute helplessness. The propaganda nonsense hurt like a wound caused by a blow to the head with a blunt instrument. But then out of this sense of devastation, came one bright light. That was the day Polish Cardinal John Paul II was elected as Pope. And with it, a sense of joy felt predominantly by the underground. Official Christian circles lived in fear of harsh repression by the regime.

And this was the situation when Václav Havel wrote his essay. With self-indulgence, he diagnosed the regime which lied and forced every free person to lie too. What was the way out of this vicious circle? Havel proposed a way. To try and find a way out of the lie to the truth. Because it is only when people have the courage to seek out and pronounce the truth that the way is opened up for the enormous energy associated with the search for and discovery of the truth. Only life with truth creates an environment in which people can discover their dignity and take on their responsibilities. And they also took a bit of a gamble. Their approach did not necessarily have to "pay off". They were threatened with severe persecution. But this just made their stance make even greater sense.

Václav Havel also thought about the importance of freeing oneself of traditional political categories. The essential shift in attitudes does not happen by itself, nor does it happen by merely signing up to a political agenda. Real change can only be made if it comes from within a person who realizes that it is simply no longer possible to go on like that, i.e. a person who wants to change him/herself. Havel believed that the only way to create a better system is for each one of us to strive to live a better life and live more responsibly.

The subject of human responsibility stayed with Václav Havel even in his years as president of a free country. He also reflected on responsibility in his latest texts. What does responsibility mean for Havel?

For Havel, responsibility means answers. It is the reaction of a person to a certain need. It is a reaction to a personal appeal. To an invitation that is almost metaphysical in nature. This invitation is supremely personal. Each one of us receives it. And each one of us is tasked with discovering it within ourselves. And it is only up to us whether we hear the call and want to understand it.

So, what should I say by way of conclusion of today's meeting and in the context of your discussions?

I wish that each of you has the courage to seek, listen, discover, think, and respond to the call to take personal responsibility, absolutely individually.

Only then can we share in the hope that *Together for Europe* can change something. It's not about a new political agenda. Nor is it about holding another huge conference, the impact of which is derived from the number of participants or the number of times it appeared on the evening news on television.

It will be about more than that.

Perhaps a real workshop where everyone discovers themselves. And where people are also willing to come together to create. Where we are not afraid to admit that we cannot do it alone. Where we try to promote our attitudes even in the public domain that so very much needs to experience a real community with free dignified people, rather than a mob.

Perhaps we will find that the fastest way for us to transform our world is to start in the place we are currently living.

Thank you for your attention.