

# Kosovo and the End of the Nation-State

Speech by Václav Havel

Václav Havel is President of the Czech Republic. He was one of the main leaders of the dissidents who overthrew the communist rulers of Czechoslovakia a decade ago after being persecuted and imprisoned by that regime for a long time. Their victory, known as the 'Velvet Revolution,' is an important example of how a democratic and peaceful movement with a strong human rights base can combine a humane vision with an unrelenting opposition to tyranny. He is also a major playwright, creative writer and essayist.

We are reproducing the address given by President Vaclav Havel to the Canadian Senate and the House of the Commons in Ottawa on April 29, 1999. Havel is one of the few world leaders who has tried to turn the lessons of their country's experience with totalitarianism into a moral force in the post-cold war world. He makes a clear distinction between "national interests" and the higher principle of human rights. When support for human rights is seen as subservient to "national interests" - usually a euphemism for the geopolitical interests of the ruling elite - the result is often a very serious erosion of respect for human rights. For Havel, the war in Yugoslavia is a landmark in international relations: the first time that the human rights of a people - the Kosovo Albanians - have unequivocally been put first. The issues he discusses have serious implications for India as well.

**T**HERE is every indication that the glory of the nation-state as the culmination of every national community's history, and its highest earthly value - the only one, in fact, in the name of which it is permissible to kill, or for which people have been expected to die has already passed its peak.

It would seem that the enlightened efforts of generations of democrats, the terrible experience of two world wars - which contributed so much to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - and the evolution of civilization have finally brought humanity to the recognition that human beings are more important than the state.

In this new world, people - regardless of borders - are connected in millions of different

ways: through trade, finance, property, and information. Such relationships bring with them a wide variety of values and cultural models that have a universal validity. It is a world, moreover, in which a threat to some has an immediate impact on everyone; in which, for many reasons, chiefly the enormous advances in science and technology, our individual destinies are merging into a single destiny; in which all of us - whether we like it or not - must begin to bear responsibility for everything that occurs. In such a world, the idol of state sovereignty must inevitably dissolve.

Clearly, blind love for one's own country - a love that defers to nothing beyond itself, that excuses anything one's own state does only because it is one's own country, yet rejects everything else only

because it is different - has necessarily become a dangerous anachronism, a source of conflict and, in extreme cases, of immense human suffering.

In the next century, I believe that most states will begin to change from cult-like entities charged with emotion, into far simpler and more civilized entities, into less powerful and more rational administrative units that will represent only one of the many complex and multileveled ways in which our planetary society is organised. With this transformation, the idea of noninterference - the notion that it is none of our business what happens in another country and whether human rights are violated in that country - should also vanish down the trapdoor of history.

But what will become of the many functions now performed by

the state? Let us look first at the emotional role the state plays in our lives. In my opinion this should be redistributed among the other areas that shape our identity. By this I mean the different levels of what we perceive to be our proper home and our natural world: our families, the companies we work for, the communities we live in, the organisations we belong to, and our region, our profession, our church, all the way to our continent and ultimately our earth, the planet we inhabit. All of these are the different environments in which our identities are formed and in which we live our lives. And if our bond to the state, which has become so hypertrophied, is to weaken, then it must be weakened in ways that benefit all these other levels of our identity.

The practical responsibilities of the state - its legal powers - can only devolve in two directions, downward or upward: downward, to the non-governmental organisations and structures of civil society; or upward, to regional, transnational, and global organisations. This transfer of powers has already begun and, in some cases, it has come a long way. In other areas, it is less advanced. But clearly this process is underway, and it must continue to advance in both directions.

If modern democratic states are usually defined by qualities such as their respect for human rights and liberties, the equality their citizens enjoy, and the existence of a civil society, then the condition toward which humanity will and, in the interests of its own survival, must move will

probably be characterised by a universal or global respect for human rights, by universal civic equality, by the rule of law, and by a global civil society.

One of the greatest problems in the creation of nation-states was their geographical definition and the determination of their borders. Many factors went into this - ethnic, cultural, geographic, and military. The creation of larger regional and transnational communities will sometimes be burdened with the same problems, some of which will be inherited from the participating nation-states. But we must do everything we can to ensure that the evolution away from the dominance of the nation-state will not be as painful as the creation itself of those nation-states has been in our history.

Countries must learn to re-define themselves in this new multi-cultural and multipolar world. They cannot continue to substitute megalomania, or self-regard, for a

natural self-confidence, but must also understand where they begin and end.

I have tried to demonstrate that the world of the twenty-first century - if humanity succeeds in withstanding the perils it has concocted for itself - will be a world of ever closer and more equitable cooperation between larger, mostly supranational, entities, sometimes embracing entire continents. For such a world to come into being, each individual entity and sphere of culture and civilization must be clearly aware of its own identity, must understand what makes it distinct from the others, and accept that its difference is not a handicap but merely a highly specific contribution to the richness and variety of the global community. Of course, the same thing must be understood by those who, on the contrary, have a tendency to regard their own "otherness" as grounds for feelings of superiority.

One of the most important organisations in which all states and all large supranational entities can meet for debate and discussion on equal terms, and which makes countless important decisions that concern the whole world, is the United Nations.

I feel that if the UN is to carry out the tasks the next century will impose on it, it must undergo significant reform. The Security Council, the most important body in the UN, cannot continue to preserve the status it was accorded when the UN was created. It must now reflect more accurately today's multipolar world. We have to reconsider whether it is still appropriate, even



hypothetically, that in the Security Council one country can outvote the rest of the world. We have to reconsider which of the large, powerful, and populous countries should now be permanently represented in it.

Most important of all, we must ensure that all the citizens of the world see the UN as their organisation, an organisation that truly belongs to them, and not as an elite club of governments. After all, what this organisation does for the inhabitants of our planet is more important than what it does for individual countries as states. This is not a matter of abolishing the powers of the member states and establishing something like a world-wide superstate. It means ensuring that not all issues shall forever be handled exclusively by individual countries or their governments. In the interests of humanity, its freedoms, its rights, and its very life, more channels need to be created through which the decisions of UN representatives flow back to citizens, and through which citizens may let their will be known to their representatives. This would mean more balance, and broader mutual accountability.

I hope it is clear that I am not against the institution of the state as such. I'm talking about something else, about the fact that there exists something of higher value than the state. That value is humanity. As we know, the state exists to serve people, not the other way around. If an individual serves his or her country, then he or she should be expected to serve it only to the extent necessary to allow the state to serve all its citizens well. Human rights are superior to the rights of states. Human freedoms represent a higher value than state sovereignty.

International law protecting the unique human being must be ranked

higher than international law protecting the state. Individual countries must gradually abandon a foreign policy category that, so far, has usually been critical to their thinking: the category of "national interests." "National interests" are more likely to divide us than bring us together. Clearly, each country has its own particular interests, and it is by no means necessary to abandon those interests that are legitimate.

But we must acknowledge that there is something beyond these interests: the principles we espouse. Principles, in any case, unite us more often than they divide us. It is through principles that we measure the legitimacy or the illegitimacy of our interest. It is not, I think, proper when a country proclaims it to be in the interests of "the state" to uphold a particular principle. Principles must be honored and upheld in and for themselves – on principle, as it were. Only then can our interests be derived from the I have often asked myself why human beings

have any rights at all. I always come to the conclusion that human rights, human freedoms, and human dignity have their deepest roots somewhere outside the perceptible world. These values are as powerful as they are because, under certain circumstances, people accept them without compulsion and are willing to die for them, and they make sense only in the perspective of the infinite and the eternal. I am deeply convinced that what we do, whether it be in harmony with our conscience - the ambassador of eternity - or in conflict with it, can only finally be assessed in a dimension that lies beyond that world we can see around us. If we did not sense this, or subconsciously assume it, there are some things that we could never do.

Allow me to conclude my remarks on the state and its probable role in the future with the assertion that, while the state is a human creation, human beings are the creation of God. □

**Translated from Czech by Paul Wilson, for *The New York Times*.**

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