

Miloš Vystrčil, the President of the Czech Senate: Deeds are the best words

31st August 2020, National Chengchi University, Taiwan

Dear ladies and gentlemen, dajia hao!

I am really glad I've got the opportunity to visit your Formosa, your beautiful islands, your Taiwan together with my colleagues.

Therefore, I would like to cordially greet especially you, all people living in Taiwan, all Taiwanese and I want to say how much I admire your strength, courage and energy you invest in developing your beautiful islands, your freedom and democracy.

At the same time, I want to mention one more thing at the very outset of my speech – something I very much regret. I feel sorry that any President of the Czech Senate did not visit Taiwan much earlier. I am sorry that the President of the Czech Senate is visiting Taiwan and your university as late as 16 years after the visit and speech of our first democratic president Václav Havel.

However, I compensate for this Czech delay partially by visiting as an active politician with the support of the Czech Senate, the upper chamber of our Parliament, i.e. an institution that is the safety element of Czech democracy. An institution I personally consider to be the most democratic and most free in the Czech Republic.

At the same time, I am convinced that the other high-ranking political representatives of European democratic countries and the European Union itself will gradually start to realize their own “democratic delay” and will also visit Taiwan soon.

Despite of the fact that Václav Havel was no longer in the President office back in 2004, when he visited this university, he still is and always will be our Czech President and the father of the Czech modern democracy and freedom just like president Lee Teng-hui was the father of the origins of your democracy and freedom.

Speaking of Havel's family, let me stop here for a moment. It was Václav Havel's wife, Mrs. Olga Havlová, who visited your country much earlier than the President himself.

Olga Havlová visited Taiwan on invitation of Taiwanese charitable organisations as the chairperson of the Committee of Good Will back in 1990, i.e. already 30 years ago. One of the reasons I mention this is the fact that we men should realize the women sometimes know better and sooner what is good compared to us men and they are also more courageous every now and then.

Let me add within the framework of my strictly personal association not related to this fact at all, that while we have a President in the Czech Republic who did not recommend me to visit Taiwan, to my pleasure you have recently re-elected a female President here in Taiwan. I am

very much looking forward to my meeting with her being aware she supports my trip as well as co-operation of democratic countries. I appreciate this very much indeed.

And this gets me to the first issue or the first topic I would like to talk about today. I want to elaborate on the fact that in my opinion one cannot successfully take care of democracy successfully without a certain pain and without courage.

You know that both our countries, Taiwan and the Czech Republic, have gone down a difficult path to win their freedom and democracy. Our paths to democracy are similar in some respects, while they differ in others. Hence allow me to say a few words about our perhaps never-ending Czechoslovakian and later Czech path to full democracy and responsible freedom. I think it can be of use to all of us and maybe even enlightening.

We gained freedom and democracy in the Czech Republic after more than 40 years of oppression back in 1989 in so-called Velvet Revolution.

We won our freedom and democracy in November 1989 despite of the fact that a whole lot of us – and I would even say the overwhelming majority of us – did not protest against oppressive totalitarian communist regime in the Czech Republic or against the communist government in a substantial way. We kept going to work, waited in long lines to get goods in short supply, used to go to the cinema to watch mandatory Soviet movies and we participated in obligatory communist celebrations. We were dissatisfied, we were unfree, but with the exception of domestic criticism in matters that were safe to criticise, we remained silent. Somehow, we did not have the courage in majority to change anything. I would even dare to say it was even worse. With some notable exceptions, we were afraid, afraid to protest, afraid to strive for change, afraid to oppose the totalitarian regime and voice our disagreement aloud. As we commonly say, almost everyone just shut up and kept up the pace.

Yes, there were islands of brave and free-thinking individuals, so called dissidents, who did not just shut up and kept up the pace, but in return they were persecuted and under constant surveillance by the state secret police. The others usually had very little interest in these individuals. We lived our unfree lives and ran away from them to Czech pubs to drink Czech beer or we just hid behind the fences of our gardens and walls of our houses.

Those more attentive and active obviously noticed that the mood among the Czech public was changing quickly especially in 1988 and in 1989 and that the discontent with the communist regime and the longing of the Czech nation for freedom was growing stronger. Still, the Velvet revolution of November 1989 was a surprisingly fast victory of freedom for many of us. In a symbolic way on the International Student's Day on 17 November 1989, young people and students in particular found the courage and together with a handful of dissidents, among which was the most famous of all named Václav Havel, gave us all the energy and strength that allowed us to gain our freedom in the Velvet Revolution and we started the never-ending process of building – as I say – the full democracy.

I am not sure if this comparison is accurate enough, but according to my knowledge of history of Taiwan and its path to democracy, the Czech students were equally courageous back in 1989 and played a very similar role as the Taiwanese students did play in March 1990. At that time, your students and the citizens organised in so-called Wild Lily movement sat-in the square close to the Presidential palace and demanded truly democratic parliamentary election as well as direct presidential election, which was a breaking point for Taiwan in terms of pursuing democracy, just like the November 1989 was for the Czech Republic. So, there you go, students in both our countries - November 1989 in our country, March 1990 in your country. And some would still claim we have very little in common. Quite the opposite!

Being an academic and a teacher myself, it is both a great honour for me and also very symbolic that I can remind us of the fundamental role of Czech and Taiwanese students in our common fight for freedom and democracy here at the prestigious National Chengchi University while vocally expressing our thanks and gratitude for their courage and credit in bringing democracy to our countries, the Czech Republic and Taiwan.

Thank you very much once again and let me remind all of us that the academic freedom and the free academic ground constitute the pillars of democracy. We shall never forget about this!

I mentioned all this not only to allow us to think more about what we have in common, but also to make a confession.

In the years preceding November 1989 I was an integral part of the majority of Czechs who did not like communism and longed for freedom, but who were on the outside sort of reconciled with their fate and who basically said nothing in public.

When November 1989 brought along the real opportunity to gain freedom thanks to the courage of students and dissidents and equally important support of democratic forces namely from western Europe and the United States of America, I promised myself I shall actively fight and try hard to make use of this opportunity. So, this was at the end of 1989 and in 1990 I joined the politics as a city councillor and the candidate of the Civic Forum in our small, but beautiful town Telč.

At the very beginning of my political career I made a vow to myself not to be passive and resigned ever again. I promised myself I would never admit losing our freedom without a fight and – as ever important today – I would never obey or accept a recommendation even if presented by the highest ranking and the most powerful representatives (even if from the President himself) that would weaken our independence, sovereignty and distinctiveness while damaging freedom and democracy anywhere in the world. And let me repeat that, anywhere in the world!

Well, a vow is a vow and a deed is the best word, so here I stand in front of you here in Taiwan! Thank you for your invitation to your beautiful, free and democratic country!

Ladies and gentlemen, all true democrats apparently know that democratically thinking countries respect the same values and they should stick together. Democratic countries should also support each other while supporting other countries that are actually fighting for their democracy or that may be threatened by the strong and the powerful. Thus, it is our obligation to jointly support Hongkong, it is our duty to jointly support free Belarus!

My predecessor, the late President of the Czech Senate Jaroslav Kubera, decided to visit your beautiful country Taiwan following the natural logic of co-operation of democratic countries. Subsequently he was exposed to a strong pressure not to go ahead with the trip. He was under pressure both from the Embassy of the People's Rrepublic of China and unfortunately from the rest of our top constitutional representatives. Nevertheless, Jaroslav Kubera never gave up on his intention to visit Taiwan, although he had to cope with a great deal of pressure, strain and stress.

Regrettably, we will never know to what extent this pressure and omnipresent stress contributed to his unexpected and sudden departure.

We were all heavily struck by his death, his family suffering the most. I wish his beloved wife Věra Kuberová could be here with us today. As much as she wanted to join us and visit Taiwan, her doctor basically prohibited her from travelling due to her current state of health. Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to send her a message: Dear Věra, greetings from Taiwan wishing you best of health and life power. Jarda was a great guy, a wonderful husband, dad and grandpa! Hang on there!

For us it was Mr. politician, President of the Senate Jaroslav Kubera – a brave and free man of a character. Personal freedom and democracy were the world to him. He was a human politician who stood behind his opinions and never changed them. He taught me and others a lot. Thank you, Jaroslav. We honour your memory.

The second topic I want to mention pertains to the present day and the clash of values we all have to resolve. There is a lot taking place and the risk is that if we do not react accordingly, our future is not really bright.

Let me do something I don't do very often – let me praise. I have to admit I tend to be rather critical and demanding when it comes to young people, but they rather make me happy these days. They make me happy both back home in the Czech Republic as well as here in Taiwan. They make me happy by showing interest in current social issues.

Back home in the Czech Republic we have a group of young people named Million Moments for Democracy. Those people are concerned by the fact that the economic, political and media powers are being interconnected, which is very dangerous for freedom and democracy. Here in Taiwan, the Sunflower Student Movement 318 recently drew the attention to the non-transparent negotiation of trade agreements with the People's Republic of China. Good on you, young people and thank you!

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic constitutes an integral part of our everyday lives now. You have managed it very well here in Taiwan. The world shall learn a lesson from you. This is yet another reason why we came to visit. At the same time, we noticed the very strange behaviour of the World Health Organisation and I am personally not satisfied with the attitude of the international community to Taiwan in this matter.

You know, in our Czechoslovakian history we experienced an event that is commonly known as the Munich Agreement. To cut the long story short, four European superpowers agreed in Munich in 1938 they will sacrifice a small country in the middle of Europe – our Czechoslovakia – to protect the European peace and save the world from Adolf Hitler and from the World War II.

We all know how this one went. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill later described it as follows: “The government of Britain and France had to choose between shame and war. They choose shame. They will get war too.”

I want to believe this was a sufficient lesson for the world.

Let me now briefly mention the possibilities of our economic, research, development, cultural and other types of co-operation as detailed discussions on these matters will be held in other forums.

Almost 40 Czech businessmen came to Taiwan with me. Their companies are in possession of state-of-the-art technologies in the majority of cases. There is a great urge among our business community and scientists to lay foundations to smart and mutually advantageous co-operation. You know, when I was thinking about what else I shall say about this matter I decided to pose a rhetorical questions rather than elaborating and justifying how advantageous the co-operation between the Taiwanese and Czech is.

„Do you know what you get when a Taiwanese girl decides to co-operate with a Czech girl?” The No. 1 tennis double in the world. I am talking about Wimbledon 2019 winners Hsieh Su-wei – Bára Strýcová. And now try to imagine what can be achieved when a Taiwanese businessman starts to co-operate with a Czech businessman.

I have already mentioned a number of times that your islands are really beautiful and hospitable. After all, the Portuguese seafarers were so much enchanted by the beauty of your island they decided to call it Ilha Formosa, i.e. Beautiful Island. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that this is one of the other attributes we have in common. Our country is also very nice and hospitable. And I am not talking about Prague only. I already mentioned my native Telč – a UNESCO listed town. The enlighten citizens prevented the redevelopment of the square in Telč while preserving this worldwide recognized historical gem for future generations. Similarly, we have managed to preserve the historical core of Kutná Hora or the Jewish quarter in Třebíč. I could spend a really long time talking about the beauty of our nature. When the

COVID-19 pandemic comes to an end, which it will most certainly do, come to the Czech Republic, you are cordially invited. It is my sincere wish you can use the direct flight between Taipei and Prague in the nearest future.

I can't help it, but I want to get back to what we have in common and what I consider to be extraordinary. When I attempted to understand what the cause of the Taiwanese miracle is, I talked to many people who know your country very well. I asked them many questions and I've tried to read texts they recommended to me. As always, I also read the texts not recommended to me. Sometimes it is advisable not to follow blindly. However, it is always good to listen to wise people carefully.

It was very interesting for me to find out that your Taiwanese identity has admirable and healthy roots formed by many influences and imprints. I was pleased to find trails of European seafarers, among others. Of course, I have also discovered many other traces and influences, which I will certainly not enumerate here.

I have to admit I very much admire your ability to connect and plait your identity roots in a way that results in a prosperous, strong, free and democratic country that has to take care of its freedom and democracy on daily basis in a much more intensive and attentive way than we do in Europe. Believe me when I say that we know very well in the Czech Republic what is it like to live with a Big Brother behind your back. Because the Big Brother never forgives weakness and mistakes.

There you go, yet another experience we do have in common. We understand you and we stand by you!

Although I have said many things already I have to mention one more common trait that I consider to be the most important of all. I am convinced the most important common denominator of the people of Taiwan and the Czech Republic and their biggest strength at the same time is the fact they both chose to live in democracy freely and voluntarily.

I believe the democracy with freedom, truth and justice stemming from it, constitute our most treasured common values that are an imperative condition for a satisfied and fair life.

Therefore, let me finish on a similar note I started with. You live on beautiful islands. You live in democracy you have to foster and protect on everyday basis.

Please, be reminded that the freedom, truth and justice are your best sword.

Please, be reminded that the freedom, truth and justice are your best armour.

I beg you, take the best care of your sword and armour.

Let me wish you a free, true and just future.