

Václav Havel

Advocate of an undivided Europe

SUMMARY

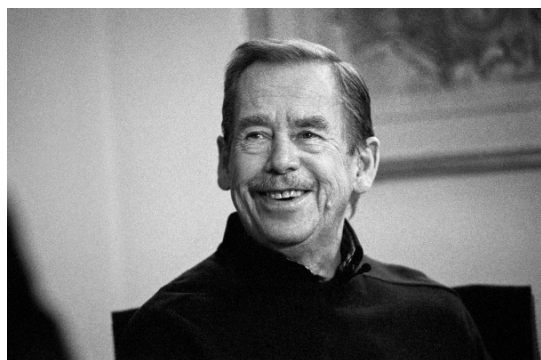
Despite a 'bourgeois' family background, which was a disqualification in communist-led Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel rapidly became an internationally acclaimed playwright. However, his unequivocally proclaimed ethical principles soon put him at odds with the communist regime, resulting in several prison sentences. Havel nevertheless held fast to his belief that moral integrity was a question of necessity, not choice, and attempted to live up to this ideal.

The 1989 collapse of the regime made Havel a hero and, shortly after, an unlikely President. During his years in office, he managed to drive his country through the challenges of moving to a free market democracy, while maintaining his personal moral convictions and tirelessly advocating for larger issues of human rights, peace and democracy, underpinned by an active civil society.

While Havel and his collaborators recast the foundations of today's Czech and Slovak democracies, his achievements in foreign policy have perhaps been even more important. Reminding Western countries of the dangers of a Europe that continued to be divided even after the removal of the Iron Curtain, Havel was instrumental in anchoring the new Czech Republic in western Europe, through its membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). He both recognised and emphasised the importance of closer European cooperation based on shared values, which for Havel constituted the core of relations among European countries. A firm advocate of the Euro-Atlantic alliance, he supported the United States of America, even on occasions when some other western European countries were reluctant to do so.

With his political writings reaching far beyond the circumstances in which they were written, Havel is considered one of the most important intellectuals of the 20th century. He has received numerous honours and awards. One of the European Parliament's buildings in Strasbourg has borne Václav Havel's name since 2017.

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Early life (1936-1959)

Václav Havel was born into a family that led an active public life in the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938). His father and grandfather were successful entrepreneurs in the construction industry, while his uncle was a leading film producer. His mother, a visual artist and designer, was the daughter of journalist and diplomat Hugo Vavrečka, the first Czechoslovak Ambassador to Hungary.

After the 1948 putsch, when the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, with Soviet backing, took control of the country, launching four decades of communist rule, Havel family members were persecuted and their property confiscated. Due to their class background, Václav and his younger brother Ivan were not allowed to study. Upon completing an apprenticeship, Václav worked as a chemistry laboratory assistant, passing his school leaving examinations by correspondence.

Following his first writing experience with poetry, Havel gradually established contacts with a number of personalities from an 'alternative' Czech cultural scene that was not supported by the communist regime. Having published several texts about literature and film, he applied to enter a film school, but was rejected. Havel's first encounter with theatre came during his two-year basic military service, at the end of which he applied to the Academy of Performing Arts. Rejected once more, he nevertheless managed to complete theatre studies years later, by correspondence course.

Theatre years (1959-1969)

Havel entered the world of theatre in 1959, being engaged consecutively by three Prague theatres. Working first as a stagehand and later as a dramaturge and assistant director, he also co-authored several plays. In his first plays,¹ *Zahradní slavnost* (The Garden Party, 1963) and *Vyrozumění* (The Memorandum, 1966), Havel used absurdist style and the empty language of communist discourse to mock the governing regime. Widely acclaimed, they resulted in their young author becoming known both on the Czech cultural scene and abroad. In 1964, he married Olga (née Šplíchalová).

Becoming increasingly more active in public life, Havel joined the editorial board of the open and critical literary monthly *Tvář* (The Face, 1965) and voiced the need for creative independence at the fourth congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers in 1967. During the 1968 'Prague Spring' citizen movement that sought a renewal of Czechoslovak society, Havel was among those arguing that merely reforming communism was not enough and engaged in activities pushing for change towards political plurality. The year was also marked by the premiere of his third play and travel to the United States of America and around western Europe. This brief period of reformist activities was crushed by the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968. Havel first encouraged resistance in his texts, read on the radio by a friend, and later warned against acceptance of the situation, becoming involved in student strikes and public polemic. Having rejected the 'normalisation' policy (restoring the conditions prevailing before the Prague Spring), he was investigated concerning allegations of sedition. As many other artists, Havel was subsequently excluded from official Czechoslovak culture. While others left for exile, Havel was among those who stayed.

Dissident (1969-1989)

While Havel's plays were performed around the world and his essays translated and published, he nevertheless remained a banned author at home. Cut off from international culture for several years, he underwent a crisis as an author. With money from the theatre royalties running out, he worked as an unskilled labourer in a brewery. In 1975, he set up a *samizdat*, circulating copies of texts by banned authors and wrote an open letter to Czechoslovak President Husák making a critical analysis of the regime. Fostering closer ties in the cultural underground, Havel organised protests in support of the band *The Plastic People of the Universe*, who were tried and received exemplary prison sentences.

In January 1977, the manifesto of 'Charter 77', a civic initiative, was made public. The Charter, an informal initiative involving several hundred citizens, criticised the Czechoslovak government for its non-respect of the human and civil rights to which it had signed up in the 1975 [Helsinki Declaration](#). Havel co-authored the text and became one of the Charter's first spokespersons. This led to his arrest, time in custody and a suspended sentence. The following year, together with other signatories to the Charter, Havel founded the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted, to monitor and draw attention to persons unlawfully prosecuted by the Czechoslovak regime.

Having established contacts with Polish human rights activists, Havel wrote his best-known essay *Moc bezmocných* (The Power of the Powerless, 1978), analysing societal conditions in a totalitarian regime and proposing to cease 'living in a lie' and attempt to 'live in truth' (which was also Solzhenitsyn's motto). This resulted in six months of house arrest. Later, while once again in custody, he was offered a one-year stay in New York, a *de facto* offer to emigrate, which he declined. In 1979, together with other members of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted, Havel was sentenced to four and a half years in prison. International support for Havel grew during this imprisonment. In 1983, his prison sentence was suspended due to a case of severe pneumonia and Havel was released for care at home. In the following years, collections of his essays were published by Czechs in exile. Despite ongoing police harassment, he continued to write plays, defend the unjustly oppressed and give interviews to the Western press, which progressively came to regard him as an unofficial speaker for Czechoslovak dissent.



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In early 1989, during commemorations for Jan Palach (who died in 1969 following self-immolation in protest against the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia), Havel was again taken into custody and sentenced to nine months in prison. In the meantime, his supporters organised a petition demanding his release. As well as being supported by the 'alternative' cultural scene, a number of artists active in 'official' culture also joined the petition. Released on parole in May 1989, Havel initiated another petition calling for the democratisation of society, entitled *Několik vět* (A Few Sentences). Quickly collecting tens of thousands of signatures, including from the wider public, not only among dissidents, the petition's success was a clear sign that the regime was collapsing. Havel was arrested once more in October 1989, this time for only a few days.

On 17 November 1989, a week after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a peaceful student demonstration was suppressed with brutal police intervention, raising a flood of protest. In the aftermath, the *Občanské fórum* (Civic Forum) platform was spontaneously established, aimed at initiating a dialogue with representatives of the regime. Havel soon became a leading figure in the non-violent Czechoslovak transition to democracy, known as the 'Velvet Revolution'. In this position, Havel led the negotiations with the communists in power over the new terms of the state arrangement in the country. As a result, the Czechoslovak Constitution was amended to remove the article on the leading role of the Communist Party, and a non-communist government was set up to run the country until early elections could be held. On 29 December 1989, Václav Havel was elected President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic by the Federal Assembly.

President

Early presidency (1989-1993)

Having started his first presidential address by acknowledging that 'our country is not prospering', Havel then put all his energy, influence and international renown into renewing democracy, revitalising civic freedoms and returning Czechoslovakia to the map of democratic states, a position it had very much held between the two world wars. One of his first actions as President was granting a very generous amnesty, as a sign that a clear line had been drawn under the 'communist justice' of the past and in an attempt to reduce the pressure in overcrowded prisons. This move however sparked criticism and fear of an upsurge in criminality.²

Havel's personality and his status as an undisputed moral authority opened the door to contacts with many prominent international figures and institutions. Among the important contacts he made in the first months of his presidency was his official visit to the United States in February 1990, where he met President George Bush and addressed both houses of the US Congress. He also invited a number of acclaimed personalities to Prague, among them Pope John Paul II and his Holiness the Dalai Lama. A man with no political or diplomatic training and little appetite for protocol and formalities, the beginnings of Havel's presidency saw some endearing unorthodoxy. His secretaries were known to ride a red child's scooter along the vast corridors of the Prague Castle, the historic seat of Czech monarchs and modern-day presidents. He appointed Frank Zappa as Honorary Cultural Attaché, and received the Rolling Stones at Prague Castle.

Upon entering presidential office, Havel's views on the future functioning of Czechoslovakia and the country's place in Europe were those which he had formed during his time as a dissident. In his early addresses, he explained his idea of 'apolitical politics'. He was persuaded that politics should not be just a technology of power, but rather an expression of applied morals, based on the responsibility of each individual for the whole of society. Suspicious of political parties in general, he believed that individual personalities can have more influence on citizens than any parties and only much later accepted political parties as an inevitable tool of democracy. Nor was he convinced that the country, when leaving communism behind, should take the direction of capitalism, but for some time spoke of 'a third way', a kind of social democracy.

As regards international relations and structures, Havel initially suggested abolishing both the Warsaw Pact and NATO and was not particularly impressed by the then European Communities either, pointing out that 'spiritual Europe' was lagging behind the economic version. Havel strived to establish a good regional climate by improving relations with neighbouring countries. On his initiative, Czech-German relations, fragile for centuries, warmed significantly. Starting with Havel's November 1989 letter to German President Richard von Weizsäcker and his visit to Prague Castle the following March, the two presidents developed very good relations. The reopening of heavy past injustices, including Nazi persecution on one side and the subsequent expulsion of the Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia after the Second World War on the other, was perceived as bold by some and as inappropriate by others. It also raised apprehension on the Czech side as to possible demands for

On the city hall balcony, Liberec, Czechoslovakia



© Oldřich Škácha / [Václav Havel Library](#), 1990.

property restitution.³ Havel also initiated a meeting between representatives of Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia in Bratislava, a first step towards closer cooperation among central European countries, which later evolved into the Visegrad group. Initially, Havel also went along with François Mitterrand's idea of the proposed European Confederation, which however lost political momentum following the first Prague Assembly in June 1991.⁴

After the first free elections in July 1990, the Parliament re-elected Havel as President of the country, in the meantime renamed the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic. With the new democratically elected government, societal transformation in all areas of life was set in motion, adherence to democratic principles renewed and the country embarked on the road to becoming a market economy. Havel adapted to the practical challenges of the presidential office and, in parallel, continued to advocate larger worthwhile causes. His plays were performed once more, his essays, articles and speeches published. Wishing to open Prague Castle to the public, Havel launched large-scale restoration work. The renewed premises then welcomed a series of highly praised exhibitions. Meanwhile, his wife Olga Havel founded the [Committee of Goodwill](#), a foundation helping disabled, abandoned and discriminated people to integrate into society.

Despite his dissident past, as president, Havel opposed efforts to collectively punish former communist officials, fearing disproportionate measures spurred by a desire for revenge. In addition, after the 1990 elections, Havel also nominated a former communist official, Marián Čalfa, as Prime Minister. Havel felt indebted to Čalfa, who had helped to push him into presidential office and then guided dissidents in the daily running of the country. However, to the country, this meant that a clear line under the communist years was not drawn, a burden that is still felt today.

International esteem for Havel's persona and the appreciation of the non-violent transition of power considerably raised respect for the country. In March 1991, Havel gave an address at NATO headquarters – the first president of a country from behind the former Iron Curtain to do so. He apologised for past lies about NATO, spread as communist propaganda, and proposed to set up a system of cooperation and exchange of information between Czechoslovakia and NATO.⁵ By then, Czechoslovak troops had already participated in the international coalition that drove Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, as a sign that the country wanted to bear its share of responsibility for world peace. In July that year, as the head of the presiding country and to his great personal satisfaction, Havel announced the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact.

During 1990-1992, Slovak claims for independence intensified. A number of Czech politicians, considering that the then economically weaker Slovakia was holding the Czechs back, did not express strong objections. Havel, in contrast, backed by public opinion polls, was persuaded that the common state could and should be saved and continued to propose laws and meetings of political representatives of both countries. An agreement on any future form of cohabitation of the two nations, however, proved beyond reach. By then, Slovaks were keen to establish their own state. When the July 1992 parliamentary elections produced two incompatible political representations, and the Slovak National Council issued a Declaration of Independence of the Slovak nation, Havel resigned from the office of president. Czechoslovakia ceased to exist and on 1 January 1993, two new states came into being. Shortly after, Havel was elected the first President of the Czech Republic.

First term as Czech President (1993-1998)

One of the defining features of the country's political direction in this period was the polarity between the positions of Václav Havel and those of his political rival Václav Klaus (who served as Prime Minister between 1993 and 1997 and replaced Havel as President in 2003). The two disagreed both on the economic reforms needed and the role of the Czech Republic in the world. Havel repeatedly criticised Klaus for his neoliberal approach and was sceptical regarding Klaus's use of the doctrine of 'the invisible hand of market forces'. He urged Klaus and his government not to neglect the necessary market regulatory framework, warning that a market economy not based on the rule of law would lead to corruption. While Klaus regarded 'civil society' as an artificial construct,⁶ Havel believed that without the involvement of civil society, the economic reform would produce

economic crime. While Klaus's views on the European Union were critical at best, Havel rapidly recognised the potential to anchor the country in the West and strived to persuade others likewise.

Under the Czech constitution, the president's role is limited and most of the power is attributed to the prime minister. Nevertheless, the president can veto laws that have been passed on to the Chamber of Deputies. Havel made use of this power almost 30 times in his 10 years in office as Czech President.⁷ In his veto reasonings, he systematically argued in favour of safeguarding the rule of law, political plurality and a just, humane society. He also helped to reinforce civil society and pushed for the establishment of a senate, constitutional court and ombudsman's office.

Havel repeatedly emphasised the shared responsibility of citizens to stand up to evil wherever and whenever it is committed.⁸ When the situation in the former Yugoslavia deteriorated in the early 1990s, he warned that, whatever happens on European soil concerns the whole of Europe. Together with Polish President Lech Wałęsa, Havel urged US President Bill Clinton to see that NATO needed to enlarge to prevent further wars in central Europe. Havel played a key role in the security negotiations on the accession of the Czech Republic and other central European countries to NATO, as well as in initiating the country's membership negotiations with the EU. In parallel, he travelled the world and addressed the wider developments in society, culture and religion in his speeches. He spoke out against breaches of human rights and voiced his support for those who have been politically persecuted in Burma, Belorussia, Cuba or Ukraine, often at significant political cost.

In January 1996, Olga, Havel's wife of 32 years, died of cancer. Havel lost a friend, moral supporter and the first critical reader of his works. Several months later, Havel, a long-time chain smoker, was diagnosed with lung cancer and underwent surgery. The following year, he married actress Dagmar Veškrnová.

In 1997, the Czech Republic was going through a crisis, a number of scandals surfaced and a right-wing extremist party was igniting hatred towards minorities. After a financial scandal in Klaus's party, both the party and the government disintegrated and Klaus was forced to step down. Havel, speaking to the Members of the Czech Parliament⁹ criticised the moral conditions within Czech society, as well as the conduct and outcome of the economic transformation. His proposed solutions emphasised the role of civil society, the rule of law and mutual respect.

Towards the end of the presidential term, Havel seriously hesitated over whether to accept the nomination for a further term. While Czech party politicians did not like his influence, they were unable to find a better candidate and the Parliament re-elected Havel by a narrow margin.

Second term as Czech President (1998-2003)

With his strongly pro-European views, Havel significantly influenced party politicians in pushing for the country's EU membership. The country began accession negotiations in March 1998.

Soon after the Czech Republic joined NATO in March 1999, the Alliance engaged in the conflict in Kosovo. Havel, the first statesman to visit heavily bombed Sarajevo and Mostar, was also one of the few politicians to openly support the US-led military intervention, as an action necessary to save lives and prevent bloodshed similar to Bosnia in 1995. This, however, made him unpopular with many Czechs.¹⁰ On the same grounds, he also supported the allied attacks against the Taliban in 2001 and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, albeit with reservations. Havel also continued to advocate further NATO enlargement, which was confirmed at the Prague NATO summit in November 2002.

In domestic politics, Havel's influence weakened, as the distance between his idea of a functioning democracy and the practices of Czech political parties widened further. The fact that he saw his presidential role as detached from the activities of political parties also meant that, without having alternative political influence, his ideas were not substantiated in any party's programme. In a country where numerous supporters of the previous communist regime had found themselves a place in the new structures, Havel's emphasis on ethical principles was at times perceived as morally superior posturing. His continued international success contrasted palpably with his diminishing

presidential authority, in the atmosphere of a society disillusioned with the outcomes of radical economic reform. In the private sphere, Havel released his collected works and, with his wife Dagmar Havlová, set up the [foundation VIZE 97](#) to support projects in the area of culture and health.

Post-presidential years (2003-2011)

Having completed his second presidential term, Havel stepped down from office on 2 February 2003 and returned to his original occupation as a dramatist and writer. He continued to devote his time and energy to the activities of Forum 2000¹¹ and its annual conferences, which have attracted many prominent thinkers and leaders to an open dialogue on democracy, human rights and tolerance.

In the June 2003 referendum,¹² all major Czech political parties, including some traditional Eurosceptics, but with the exception of the Communists, endorsed joining the EU. Consequently, the Czech Republic, with Slovakia and eight other countries, entered the Union on 1 May 2004.

Havel authored a book of reflections on his presidential days and a play about a statesman who finds it hard to accept the loss of office and the resulting reduced social standing. He also made his debut as film director, adapting the play to the screen. Never a member of a political party, Havel sympathised with the green political movement and from 2004 on supported the Czech Green Party. His chronic respiratory problems deteriorating, Václav Havel died on 18 December 2011, at the age of 75 years.

For his literary and dramatic works, for his lifelong effort, opinions and advancement of human rights, Havel received a number of state decorations, honorary doctorates and international awards, including the International Charlemagne Prize for his contribution to European unification.

Václav Havel and the European Parliament

Havel visited the European Parliament and met with several of its Presidents: Enrique Barón Crespo (1991), Egon A. Klepsch (1994), Nicole Fontaine (2000), Hans-Gert Pöttering (2008) and Jerzy Buzek (2009). On several of these occasions, he also addressed the Members in plenary.

The European Parliament 'recognised Havel as a reference in the defence of freedom and citizens' rights, as the Senate of the United States did'.¹³ The Parliament commemorated the first anniversary of Havel's death with a giant pink neon heart. A symbol of Havel's commitment to human rights, peace and democracy, it was also a reminder of the miniature heart that he used to place after his signature.

When the Parliament acquired an additional building in Strasbourg in 2012, Parliament's Bureau decided to name it after Havel, for his contribution to the European integration. The restored building was inaugurated on 5 July 2017.

A press conference in the European Parliament



Source: European Parliament Archives, 1994.

The Parliament has also joined in the public art project [Havel's Place](#) that creates a series of [meeting places](#) all over the world inviting people to democratic dialogue. The installation, known as the 'Havel bench' consists of two garden chairs by a round table with a tree growing through its middle, with the rim of the table bearing the Havel quote, 'truth and love shall prevail over lies and hatred'. With one such Place already installed close to the Parliament premises in [Brussels](#),¹⁴ the Parliament is to inaugurate another bench in June 2022 near the Jean Monnet House in Bazoches, France.

FURTHER READING

Garton Ash, Timothy, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*, Vintage Books, Paperback, 2019 (originally published in 1993).

Havel Václav, Hvižďala Karel, *To the castle and back*, Portobello, London, 2008.

Žantovský Michael, *Havel: A life*, Atlantic books, 2015.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Given its focus and scope, this text does not do justice to Havel as an author, mentioning only several defining works. A detailed bibliography including speeches he wrote himself, is accessible on the [Václav Havel Library website](#).
- ² Havel's first ('big') amnesty released about 23 000 prisoners. It did not apply to persons having committed murder, rape, robbery and several other crimes, nor to prisoners sentenced as exceptionally dangerous recidivists. Havel later granted two further amnesties, each time he was elected President, these concerned 130 persons in 1993 and 955 in 1998. *Před 25 lety vyhlásil Václav Havel nebyvale rozsáhlou amnestii*, Ceska justice, 2014.
- ³ This effort culminated in the approval of the 1997 [Czech-German declaration](#), which laid the foundations for modern German-Czech relations. See Vladimír Handl, 1997, [Czech-German declaration on reconciliation](#), pp.150-167.
- ⁴ [François Mitterrand, Architect of the Great Europe: The European Confederation Project \(1990–1991\)](#), Musitelli J., *La Revue internationale et stratégique*, 2011/2 (No 82), pp. 18-28 (text in French).
- ⁵ Speech at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 21 March 1991.
- ⁶ Desai R.M., [Václav Havel's Economic Legacy](#), Brookings, 19 December 2011.
- ⁷ Havlík V., Hrubeš M., Pecina M., For Rule of Law, Political Plurality, and a Just Society: Use of the Legislative Veto by President Václav Havel, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, Volume 28, Number 2, May 2014.
- ⁸ Žantovský M., [In Search Of Allies: Vaclav Havel and the Expansion of NATO](#), *World Affairs*, Vol. 177, No. 4 (November/December 2014), pp. 47-58.
- ⁹ The Rudolfinum speech (known also as the 'ugly mood speech'), 9 December 1997.
- ¹⁰ Gabal I., Helsiusova L., Szayna T. S., The impact of NATO Membership in the Czech Republic: Changing Czech Views on Security, Military & Defence, RAND Corporation, 2002.
- ¹¹ Founded in 1996 as a joint initiative by Havel, Japanese philanthropist Yohei Sasakawa and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel, the [Forum 2000](#) Foundation's aim is to support the values of democracy and respect for human rights, assist the development of civil society, and encourage religious, cultural and ethnic tolerance.
- ¹² With a 55.2 % turnout, 77.4 % of voters were in favour of Czech membership of the EU.
- ¹³ Written declaration in support of the memory of and in recognition of Václav Havel, former President of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic and defender of human rights, 0018/2012, 17 April 2012.
- ¹⁴ A joint initiative of the Czech Embassy to Belgium, the Belgian Parliament, the city of Prague and the city of Brussels.

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