

Chapter 8

Václav Havel and NATO: Lessons of Leadership for the Atlantic Alliance

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In 2019 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) celebrates its seventieth anniversary and twenty years since its first post-Cold War enlargement. As both sides of the Atlantic commemorate these historical achievements, NATO faces challenges to its security, cohesion and credibility.

Since 2014, NATO has been confronted with a significantly deteriorated security environment, marked by Russia's aggression in Ukraine and continued instability in Europe's southern neighborhood. In response, the Alliance has implemented the biggest reinforcement of its collective defense posture since 1989 and has recommitted to the fight against terrorism.

This adaptation has made NATO safer, but the world remains a dangerous place. Russia continues to disregard international law and treaties. It is testing NATO's unity and resolve, employing hybrid techniques against its neighbors and the Alliance itself. It is engaging in cyber-attacks against allies and interfering in their democratic processes. Moscow has continued its military build-up and has explicitly called NATO an "enemy."

In Europe's southern neighborhood there is little prospect for stability despite NATO's efforts at counter-terrorism, capacity building and regional partnerships. China is emerging as a strategic competitor to the United States and Europe. Diplomacy, commerce, and innovation, but also conflict, are happening in cyber-space.

Internally, NATO's credibility is under stress. Traditional gaps in threat perception persist among NATO allies. The transatlantic link, NATO's bedrock, is pressured by (not so) latent anti-Europeanism and anti-Americanism and occasional heated rhetoric by political leaders. A growing capability and technology gap between the United States

and Europe, and a lack of sufficient defense spending on the part of most European allies (well below NATO's agreed benchmark of 2% of GDP) are sources of friction and frustration. The renaissance of EU's defense dimension brings a powerful element of misunderstanding and potential rifts to NATO. Meanwhile, the Alliance is struggling to clearly articulate its role in the Middle East and North Africa and its approach to the partner countries in general. NATO continues to expand (with North Macedonia in line to become its 30th member soon) but there are no clear accession timelines for any other aspirant countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Ukraine).

These trends raise fundamental questions pertaining to NATO's very existence: is NATO fit for purpose to address the challenges of today? Is it still the relevant venue for America and Europe to work together? What can be done to rectify these problems and ensure that NATO remains the glue of the West?

We believe the answer can be found in the analysis of NATO's re-invention after 1989. Since 2014, the new cycle of NATO adaptation has happened "on the go" without much historical reflection. It might, therefore, be useful to analyze the previous major transformative period, which took place mainly in the 1990s.

Specifically, we will examine the relevance of former Czech President Václav Havel's policies and philosophy. Democratization and enlargement were central pieces of NATO's transformation process, and Havel was their key proponent. He was not alone in this quest, of course. but he was one of the most eloquent, widely respected and convincing protagonists. Through his persistence, Havel managed to give NATO enlargement almost spiritual meaning. His endeavors culminated in 2002 at NATO's summit in Prague, where he facilitated the largest wave of enlargement in NATO's history.

We acknowledge the visions put forward by other Western and Central European policy makers, including George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright, Volker Rühle, Lech Wałęsa and József Antall. The emergence of President Havel's leadership in this debate is a particularly fascinating phenomenon, and one that has not been fully appreciated. After exploring Havel's views on the transatlantic Alliance and the West, we shall present some ideas as to which lessons NATO can draw from these views today.

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With the end of the Cold War, NATO searched for a new purpose and identity within a changing European security order. This search for legitimacy emerged from the fog of geopolitical uncertainty between 1989 and 1992 and against the backdrop of two major geopolitical changes: the re-establishment of German unity and the break-up of the Soviet Union. The debate on NATO's future revolved around a number of scenarios, ranging from the dissolution of the Alliance (alongside the Warsaw Pact) to the conversion of the Alliance into a pan-European security organization, as Havel initially suggested, that could include Russia.¹

Over the course of the year 1990, the countries of Central Europe joined their Western counterparts in their quest for maintaining NATO beyond the Cold War. In June 1990, NATO invited leaders of the post-Communist countries to visit and establish liaison offices at its headquarters, confirming the end of an era of confrontation. Václav Havel was the first head of state from Central and Eastern Europe to take up the call, visiting NATO HQ in March 1991 and voicing his support for Alliance's preservation.²

For many leaders, including Havel, the Spring of Europe was at its height. Germany was now reunited and the Warsaw Pact had just agreed to dissolve itself. Soviet troops were withdrawing from the territories of the former Soviet satellite states. The Helsinki Process had been revived through the Charter of Paris.

By the summer of 1991, however, high hopes had been replaced by anxieties. Separatist and nationalistic tendencies around the former Eastern Bloc, the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, and the looming collapse of the Soviet Union demonstrated that there would be no "end of history."

The August 1991 coup attempt in Moscow was the final drop in Václav Havel's contemplation on NATO's relevance. It was utterly clear that Europe needed NATO as a stabilizing factor, and Havel was from then on determined to seek his country's membership in the Alliance.³

Initially, it seemed like an impossible mission. The scepticism of opening NATO to new members carried over from the Bush to the

Clinton administration. As late as spring of 1993, nobody in the United States was seriously considering enlargement.⁴

Havel's frequent public praise for the Alliance as a body contributing to the security of both its members and non-members, however, added a layer of legitimacy to the debate on NATO's continued existence and its potential expansion. His international reputation, combined with his insistence that the Alliance was fundamentally beneficial to European security and, therefore, in the interest of everyone, even the countries outside of it, helped to buttress the case for adapting and reinventing it.⁵

In April 1993, when Václav Havel, Lech Wałęsa and Árpád Göncz persuaded President Bill Clinton at the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum to start considering NATO expansion to Central Europe, the Alliance's survival as a physical institution was no longer in question. However, there was a considerable and growing risk that, without an updated purpose responding to the new realities of and challenges to Euro-Atlantic security, it would gradually lapse into irrelevance and, as a consequence, lose support of both the American public and its elected representatives. A NATO that continued to exist formally but had been hollowed out would then be increasingly unable to provide the vital institutional framework for the West as a political community.⁶

This gloomy scenario was something that both President Clinton and his Central European counterparts wanted to prevent. For Havel in particular, seeking NATO membership was not primarily about the narrow national interest of his "rather insignificant country" but about contributing to the security, stability and general well-being of Europe and the West as a whole.⁷ In line with his lifelong devotion to the principle of individual responsibility for the broader world, he believed it was his and the Czech Republic's obligation to facilitate the establishment of a new security order benefiting the entire continent and beyond. Everyone was to be a responsible stakeholder in the future of Europe, the West and the humanity: "As I have said many times, if the West does not stabilize the East, the East will destabilize the West."⁸

Clinton's solution for saving NATO's relevance was to go "out of area"—both in the sense of enlarging the Alliance and moving to engage in peace-enforcement and stabilization operations beyond its

territory. This formed the basis of the “new transatlantic bargain.”⁹ President Havel embraced this approach as he believed in the necessity of both elements. His April 1993 conversations with Clinton in Washington were not just about pitching NATO membership but, in equal measure, about convincing the U.S. president to intervene in Bosnia to stop the ethnic violence.¹⁰

The inception of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the “anatomy of the decision” to enlarge are well documented in literature and in this volume.¹¹ Václav Havel’s leadership on NATO continued after March 1999. The same month that the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined the Alliance, NATO launched a military operation without U.N. authorization against Slobodan Milošević’s rump Yugoslavia to prevent further violence in Kosovo.

For new members like the Czech Republic and its leadership, the Kosovo campaign was “baptism by fire.”¹² Václav Havel was one of very few Czech politicians who supported the operation; others, including in the cabinet, were reluctant if not openly against. To Havel, however, the air campaign made sense. In addition to the principle of allied solidarity, Havel emphasized the humanitarian aspect of the intervention:

If it is possible to say about a war that it is ethical (...) it is true of this war. [The Alliance] is fighting in the name of human interest for the fate of other human beings. It is fighting because decent people cannot sit back and watch systematic, state directed massacres of other people. (...) This war gives human rights precedence over the rights of states. (...) The Alliance has not acted out of licence, aggressiveness or disrespect for international law. On the contrary, it has acted out of respect for the law, for the law that ranks higher than the protection of the sovereignty of states. It has acted out of respect for the rights of humanity, as they are articulated by our conscience as well as by other instruments of international law.¹³

His view of the Kosovo campaign was by no means utilitarian. Rather, it was an expression of his principled opposition to appeasing evil.

Havel’s stellar moment came in 2002, when Prague hosted the first NATO summit behind the former Iron Curtain. The summit, short before the end of his tenure as president, was the culmination of his NATO efforts. Havel did not stop advocating for further NATO en-

largement once his own country joined. Already in April 1999, when addressing the U.S. Congress, he named Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and the three Baltic countries as potential new members.¹⁴ In Prague in 2002, NATO invited these seven countries to become members in the largest wave of enlargement in its history. It was this decision that solidified NATO's Open Door policy as we know it today.

But merely one year after the September 11 terrorist attacks, Prague was equally adamant about the need for NATO to transform to face new threats. Earlier that year, NATO and Russia had established the NATO-Russia Council, marking a new era of cooperation in Europe. For Václav Havel, the mission he set out in the early 1990s was accomplished.

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Václav Havel was among the leaders who saw the historic opportunity to “do for Europe's East what NATO had helped achieve for Europe's West” after the Second World War, namely consolidate democracy, economic and political integration, de-nationalize defense, and make war unthinkable.¹⁵ Their aim was to safeguard NATO's continued existence through transforming its mission, ultimately through extension of its membership.

Havel spent much time and effort thinking about NATO, its purpose and its mission, as demonstrated in a number of his essays, speeches, interviews and newspaper articles. He never approached NATO as a utilitarian military alliance but always as something much bigger, broader and more important.

He identified several important roles of NATO that stay relevant today. First, NATO as an institutional embodiment of the West, and a political, and even spiritual, community based on shared values. Second, NATO representing a distinct “civilization” that must be aware of the geographical limits of its expansion. Third, the Alliance as an indispensable vehicle for continued transatlantic cooperation and for American engagement in European affairs. Fourth, the West and NATO as promoters of international norms, particularly in the area of human rights. And finally, NATO as a community of friends based on mutual trust and a strong sense of responsible leadership.

The West as a spiritual community based on shared values

Havel regarded NATO as something more than just a practical military instrument to protect a piece of territory. For him, NATO was a tangible embodiment of the Western community of values.¹⁶ He and his Central European colleagues were not ashamed of praising the virtues of Western values defined, in a rather conservative fashion, as an amalgamation of classical philosophy and law, Christian spiritual heritage and Enlightenment rationality. NATO membership was to be, among other things, a badge of honor confirming Central Europe's "return" to Western values after a long period of forced separation.¹⁷

In Havel's mind, the primary reason for Central Europe's membership in NATO was, therefore, not pragmatic geostrategy but the fact that the region now shared the allied countries' values and aspired to establish democratic political systems. Not admitting them as members would not only be unjust and unfair, it would also be self-defeating: rejecting newly democratic countries eager to join would undermine NATO's legitimacy as representative and protector of the Euro-Atlantic community of democratic nations. As he remarked to Allied foreign ministers at the NATO Headquarters in March 1991:

We feel that an alliance of countries united by a commitment to the ideal of freedom and democracy should not remain permanently closed to neighboring countries which are pursuing the same goals. History has taught us that certain values are indivisible; if they are threatened in one place, they are directly or indirectly threatened everywhere.¹⁸

Havel believed the West was morally responsible for the fate of post-communist countries precisely because it had waged (and won) the Cold War: "From [Western support for democrats in the Soviet Bloc] arises a great responsibility for the West. It cannot be indifferent to what is happening in the countries which, constantly encouraged by the Western democracies, have finally shaken off the totalitarian system."¹⁹

Three years later, at the time when Central Europeans were anxious about what they believed to be the sluggish progress of the NATO enlargement process, and when the Bosnian war was still raging, Havel wrote, rather angrily, that Western failure to create a new stable and durable order in Europe would "demonstrate that the democratic West

has lost its ability realistically to foster and cultivate the values it has always proclaimed and undertaken to safeguard and to which end it has built its arsenal of weapons. Such a state of affairs would be far more than just a crisis of the East; it would also be a crisis of the West, a crisis of democracy, a crisis of Euro-American civilization itself.”²⁰

Havel was not ignorant of NATO’s and the West’s fair share of internal problems and challenges. After all, his lifelong oeuvre as playwright and essayist focused on the universal issues of the corruption of power, the dehumanizing impact of modern technology, the alienating nature of bureaucratic structures, and the resulting loss of human identity. His response to this modern human condition was an everyday quest for authenticity, responsibility and “living in truth.”²¹

A number of lessons for today’s NATO can be derived from these simple rules. First, reducing relationships among allies to mere transactionalism is an anathema to how Havel saw the Alliance. Transactionalism does not provide sufficient basis for NATO’s long-term viability and relevance. What is needed is a clear sense of purpose, rooted in a set of values and principles that extend beyond today—and beyond bookkeeping.²²

Second, NATO being a community of nations based on common Western values meant that it could play an important role in consolidating Central Europe’s newly established democratic political systems. Havel regarded the conditionality required to achieve membership as one of key benefits of the enlargement process, to the point of actually wishing for a stricter enforcement of membership criteria.²³

In the same vein, Havel expected that NATO and other multilateral Western institutions would keep playing an active role in further cultivating new members’ democratic systems as well as their sense of responsibility. He would thus expect a stronger effort by both NATO and the EU to mitigate democratic backsliding in their member countries.

Unlike the EU, NATO does not have formal instruments to exert pressure on its members to change their policies. This stems from the fact that the Alliance is a strictly intergovernmental organization based on the principle of consensus, with each ally holding a veto power over every decision. Thus, the disciplinary power that works well before accession diminishes once membership is gained.

On the other hand, NATO possesses informal mechanisms to discipline its members. First, there is peer pressure, exercised first and foremost by the United States as the chief contributor of military assets needed for Alliance's deterrence and defense. Second, the very nature of NATO's collective defense "guarantees" requires that allies behave themselves and demonstrate adherence to NATO's core values. The language of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is deliberately vague and, for all intents and purposes, the execution of a collective defense operation depends on the political will of Allied governments at the given moment. This means that all NATO members must systematically work to maximize other allies' motivation and goodwill to come to their assistance when subjected to an attack. Thus, it can be argued that allies grossly disrespecting Alliance values in times of peace invite a breach of allied solidarity in times of crisis and war.

From Havel's perspective, there is just one way to make these corrective mechanisms work: responsible leadership on the part of all Allied countries that puts collective good over narrow political interests and stems from the urge to live an "authentic" life based on the identity of one's moral impulses, words and deeds.

NATO as a distinct "civilization"

The polarization of Western societies that has become a norm over the past decade flattens Western political discourse to the point of meaninglessness and reduces policy options to an artificial binary choice between progressivist transnationalism and protectionist nativism. Our discursive landscape used to be much richer. Debates were less about two extremes and more about fifty shades of grey. Václav Havel's thinking represented one such shade of nuance.

On the one hand, Havel's persistent criticism of ethnic nationalism, his principled internationalism and his advocacy of humanitarian intervention turned him into a hate figure for nativists in his own country and abroad. On the other hand, his philosophy included a number of rather conservative elements that would make some of his progressivist admirers blush.²⁴

These two approaches mix nicely in Havel's concept of "home" (*domov*). He regarded the sense of belonging to be indispensable for the

true expression of one's identity and authenticity. This applied to him personally, too. He never considered himself a cosmopolitan in the conventional sense and his identity as a Czech, shaped by his country's history and intellectual traditions, was a crucial factor in developing his worldview and his policies. In other words, Havel was far from rejecting the notion of national identity or denying its importance.²⁵

His idea of belonging to a "home," however, was much more complex and inclusive than that of conventional ethnic nationalists. For him, the individual was at the center of a structure consisting of concentric layers, each adding an element to one's overall identity. Ultimately, all these layers were important to one's fullness of being. They included family, profession, an immediate social circle, national community and language, Europe, Western civilization, and, eventually, humankind.²⁶

National identity is thus important but not exclusive, since it always is, or should be, complemented by all those other layers, and should not be exerted in a hypertrophied way that suppresses them. At the same time, this approach means that Havel saw culturally and historically defined civilizations, broadly in the Huntingtonian sense, as important frameworks for respective national identities, providing them with coherent value systems.²⁷

This is how he perceived the West and NATO. He gradually came to see the Alliance as an institutional expression of Western civilization. This meant that Russia could not become a member, due to obvious geostrategic reasons and, equally importantly, because of the fundamental incompatibility of Western and Russian values. This conviction of his only grew stronger as Russia's democratization faltered and ultimately stalled, and as the country reverted to some of the traditional patterns of behavior inherited from its imperial and Soviet past.²⁸

This does not mean that Havel regarded Western civilization to be perfect. Rather the opposite was the case. From the very beginning of his intellectual endeavor, he had critically reflected upon Western modernity and the unintended (and sometimes intended) negative consequences of some of its key features for both individuals and the environment, leading to the loss of authenticity in life and damage to the cherished idea of "home."²⁹ After all, he regarded the communist regimes of Eastern Europe to be just more extreme, brutal and primitive versions of Western modernity, or simply its uglier siblings.³⁰ In this,

Havel followed in the footsteps of such complex thinkers as Reinhold Niebuhr (whom he most probably never read) and, for that matter, George Orwell.

From the notion of civilization as an element of one's "home" stemmed Havel's clear idea of NATO as a political community of nations bound by shared values and framed by a shared cultural outlook. This means NATO should not be regarded as an all-inclusive, universal organization. It was to remain a fundamentally Western body with a clear sense of where its borders should be. As he argued,

Historical experience shows that vague, indistinct or disputed frontiers are one of the most frequent causes of wars. Every political entity must know where its territory begins and where it ends. (...) Where is [NATO's] frontier then? In my personal opinion, it starts with the border between Russia and the Baltic States and follows the Russo-Belarusian and Russo-Ukrainian border down to the Black Sea. This is absolutely obvious from the map, and it has more or less historical and cultural basis too.³¹

For Havel, civilization was a precious component of one's identity, and NATO was to be an institutional framework of the Western civilization, providing it with clear borders.³² At the same time, Havel's view of civilization was clearly not as culturally deterministic as that of Huntington. It was Russia's political tradition hampering democratization and its imperial idea that were incompatible with NATO membership, not its orthodox religious affiliation *per se*.

Moreover, at no point in his life was Havel a Russophobe. As his biographer observes, he actually never developed a "concept of the enemy." Not even Communist Czechoslovakia's authorities who jailed him unjustly were "enemies" in his view. Rather, he tried to analyze their motivations and understand them.³³ Likewise, he did not hate Russians and often pleaded for a cooperative relationship between the West and Russia.³⁴

Indispensability of transatlantic cooperation

For Havel, the fact that NATO was a transatlantic institution (or rather *the* transatlantic institution) was by far its most appealing fea-

ture. He wholeheartedly subscribed to the notion that the Alliance's chief purpose was to "keep the Americans in." The crucial challenge of the 1990s was how to secure this goal in the long run.

A part of the answer was to be, of course, the enlargement and the new sense of purpose it would generate for NATO. This was precisely the area where Central Europeans could contribute to the future relevance if not survival of the Alliance: not primarily through their limited defence capacities but by playing a role of responsible stakeholders in Western security architecture and by providing the U.S. administration with the opportunity to transform the Alliance to make it relevant for the new era.³⁵

Havel's strong Atlanticism was obviously driven by a mix of motivations, both practical and philosophical. As for the practical side, he understood perfectly well that the United States was the only relevant actor capable of and willing to invest in the stability and security of Europe through its continued leadership in NATO. As he put it, "In the 20th century, it was not just Europe that paid the price for American isolationism: America itself paid a price. The less it committed itself at the beginning of European conflagrations, the greater the sacrifices it had to make at the end of such conflicts."³⁶ After all, as Ron Asmus and Alexandr Vondra noted, if there was one largely positive historical experience that Central Europe has in common, it has been with the United States.³⁷

When it came to his philosophical motivations, the starting point is the fact that he was born and raised in a deeply Atlanticist cultural and political milieu, whose underlying tenets he retained throughout his life. The Havels were among the most prominent families in interwar Czechoslovakia, which, for all intents and purposes, was a creation of American Wilsonianism. Its democratic public philosophy, including some of its constitutional principles, was inspired by American Jeffersonianism. This came about, of course, mainly thanks to President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who adopted his American wife's Unitarian faith and made an unashamedly Jeffersonian case for Czechoslovak independence during the First World War.³⁸

The Havel family was devoted to Masaryk and shared his public philosophy, including his admiration for the United States and the American values of republican virtues and civic responsibility. In a sense,

Masaryk and the Havels were Atlanticists long before this concept was invented as a practical political doctrine in the 1940s.

Havel, though aware of great-power interests, identified a powerful streak of selflessness and idealism in American foreign policy, generally conducive to the well-being of smaller European nations. As in earlier periods, in the 1990s the United States could and would, through its deep political and military engagement in European affairs, contribute to the taming of European powers' darker impulses, or so Havel believed. While Havel and other Central European Atlanticists fully trusted the United States, they were at least occasionally wary of their fellow Europeans.³⁹

Havel's approach to the transatlantic link was again heavily civilizational, informed by his understanding of Western culture and history. As he put it in 1991,

Europe is deeply bound, through shared civilization, with North America, its younger brother. Three times throughout the twentieth century, America saved Europe from tyranny; three times it helped liberty and democracy prevail in Europe. It cannot keep saving Europe forever (...), however, it is so essentially linked to it—through its culture, values and interests—that not even Europe's integration and certain emancipation should break this natural bond. To the contrary, the peaceful linkage of these two continents could be of the principal stabilizing factors in the global context.⁴⁰

For all these reasons, the transatlantic bond was supremely precious to Havel. He regarded it as a value in itself and worth preserving at considerable cost, as exemplified by his support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which tainted his reputation in the eyes of the war's opponents in both the United States and Europe. He was aware, however, that a value-based and durable transatlantic bond was conditioned upon practically demonstrated responsibility of all allies and the unity of their words and their deeds.

The West as a promoter of international human rights norms

When it came to NATO's preservation and transformation in the 1990s, Havel never focused solely on the issue of enlargement. Above

all, he strongly believed that a crucial purpose of the Alliance was to be an international norm entrepreneur, particularly in the area of human rights. That is why he invested as much effort in convincing President Clinton to intervene in Bosnia as he did to put NATO enlargement on his policy agenda.

Havel's motivation to embrace humanitarian interventionism was deeply rooted in both Czechoslovakia's history and its intellectual traditions. "Munich" in particular provided a lesson in the sense of both moral unacceptability and practical foolishness of trying to appease evil. As he declared in March 1993, "We must accept our own share of responsibility for peace and justice in Europe. As people who once became the victims of a shameful concession to a bully in Munich, we must know even better than others that there must not be concessions made to evil."⁴¹

Michael Žantovský argues that this is the core belief of the "Havel Doctrine" of humanitarian intervention understood as "shared responsibility of people to stand up to evil (...) and the unacceptability of appeasement, inaction or indifference in the face of evil."⁴²

At the same time, Havel was acutely aware of humanitarian intervention's moral and practical difficulties. Contrary to his contemporary reputation in some circles as either naïve do-gooder or cynical facilitator of American imperialism, he frequently spoke of the pitfalls of humanitarian intervention: "One must constantly and carefully scrutinize such humanistic arguments to determine that it is not a pretty façade concealing far less respectable interests."⁴³ He did not shy away from juxtaposing the Czechoslovak experiences of 1938 and 1968. While "Munich" led him to the conclusion that evil must be resisted at the very beginning, the suppression of the "Prague Spring" alerted him to the need to consider thoroughly the declared motives for an intervention and to "ask ourselves (...) whether it is not some version of the fraternal assistance."⁴⁴

Havel's emphasis on NATO's role (and, indeed, its indispensability) in preventing or ending gross violation of human rights again illustrates his ambitious view of the Alliance's mission. He did not want the Czech Republic and other Central European countries to join a mere collective defence pact. Just as he expected responsibility for the world from individuals and from countries, he expected it from NATO as well.

“Alliance” as a community based on trust and responsibility

As we have established, “responsibility” was a key element of Havel’s lifelong moral outlook, closely linked to the concepts of “identity” and “authenticity,” and a prerequisite for “living in truth” in the sense of unity of conscience, words and deeds.⁴⁵

In his own case, this was exemplified not only by his principled opposition to Czechoslovak communist authorities in the 1970s and 1980s to the point of sacrificing his health and even risking his life. In his presidential career he also showed remarkable courage and leadership by becoming an early advocate of causes not entirely uncontroversial.⁴⁶ Dissolving the Warsaw Pact and pressing NATO to open up to the East are obvious examples but there are many more: his early support for German reunification, meeting the Dalai Lama, pushing for U.S. military interventions in the Balkans, and promoting Russia’s democratization.

His emphasis on assuming responsibility led him to advocate for an active role of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic in international security. To gain membership in the Alliance, his country was to be a shining example of mature, responsible behavior. In other words, Central Europe was to be security provider and not just security consumer.⁴⁷ An early example of this approach was Czechoslovakia’s military contribution to Operation Desert Storm and, later, the Czech Republic’s significant military deployments in peacekeeping missions in Croatia and Bosnia.

In 1991, Havel explained this attitude explicitly:

This is why we have a heightened sense of obligation to Europe. Our wish to become a NATO member, therefore, concerns more than international security guarantees, it grows out of a desire to shoulder some responsibility for the general state of affairs on our continent. We don’t want to take without giving. (...) Too often, we have had direct experience of where indifference to the fate of others can lead, and we are determined not to succumb to that kind of indifference ourselves.⁴⁸

Needless to say, such a principled stance also bore practical fruits in helping the Clinton Administration make a more credible case for

NATO enlargement. By making practical contributions to international security and demonstrating their sense of responsibility, the Central Europeans could counter accusations that by seeking NATO membership “all they wanted was a security umbrella for a rainy day with the Russians.”⁴⁹

This emphasis on the need of his own country being responsible and mature stemmed from Havel’s firm belief that even the smallest countries have agency in international affairs, precisely because if they are courageous and authentic they can exert moral and thus also political influence. Again, this notion stemmed from Havel’s understanding of Czechoslovakia’s history and his refusal to see it as a mere victim of foreign powers but as an actor at least partially responsible for the bad things that happened to it.⁵⁰

Havel’s thinking on the concept of responsibility, however, went further. His ultimate ambition, at least in the early 1990s, was to turn his own country into a sort of “spiritual state” and a model to follow not only by fellow post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe but other parts of the worlds as well. Very much in the Masarykian tradition, he regarded Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic as a “project” rather than a mere piece of territory.⁵¹

Of course, such a view bears a close resemblance to the American self-image going back to the Pilgrim Fathers. This thinking was adopted and reshaped by Masaryk and his disciples as early as in the 1880s and later turned into an official doctrine of Czechoslovakia. In other words, the ultimate goal of the dominant tradition of Czech political thought stretching from Masaryk to Havel was finding “meaning” and “purpose,” defined in moral terms, of the very existence of Czechs and their country.

Their answer was that unless Czechs assume their share of responsibility for the well-being of Europe and, even more ambitiously, unless they contribute to the cause of humanity as a whole, there is not much of a point in their existence as a distinct national community. This peculiar intellectual tradition explains the strong emphasis Havel put on responsible behavior of individuals as well as countries.

Moreover, he stressed that executing responsibility requires ability to make sacrifices: “We came to understand (...) that the only genuine

values are those for which one is capable, if necessary, of sacrificing something.” Faced with what he perceived as Western wavering in its determination to expand NATO, he asked “Why has the West lost its ability to sacrifice?” He accused Western leaders of lacking imagination and courage and being overly fond of the status quo.⁵²

Implications for today’s NATO are obvious. NATO’s future is in peril unless all allies start behaving responsibly, which means, among other things, demonstrating solidarity with and providing assistance to every member feeling threatened, delivering on their solemn commitments (including investing in defense and capability development), contributing their fair share to NATO’s operations, and refraining from rhetoric that may undermine the credibility of Alliance’s deterrence.

Conclusions

Václav Havel’s contribution to the transformation of NATO in the 1990s was fundamental. Through his leadership and talent, Havel was able to project his values and convictions into the largest effort to bring peace and stability in Europe after the Cold War: NATO enlargement. He managed to do so in a fluid period of history when old systems ceased to exist and new ones were being born. In such times of uncertainty, Havel’s example demonstrates that value-based leadership has a stabilizing effect.

As we stressed, Václav Havel was not the sole contributor to NATO’s transformation and there is certainly not one single ideal type of leadership for NATO. But he represented a type of leadership that would benefit the Alliance today. Here are five reasons why.

First, Václav Havel was the embodiment of political and moral courage, stemming from his lifelong effort to “live in truth.” These personal qualities gained him respect long before he became the president of Czechoslovakia. Havel also stuck to principles of morality while in office, regardless of consequences to his political standing and popularity. For example, his staunch support for NATO’s intervention in Yugoslavia was contrary to the widespread popular beliefs at the time of the operation (and also to date). In the era of rising populism, virtues such as morality and courage are counter-intuitive and antagonistic to the mainstream, post-truth politics.

Second, Havel skillfully blended morality and ideas into practical politics and decision-making. He believed that it was his “responsibility to emphasize, again and again, the moral origin of all genuine politics, to stress the significance of moral values and standards in all spheres of social life.”⁵³ His campaign to support the enlargement of NATO, a very practical project, had a strong moral component from the very beginning, but so too did his domestic endeavors. This connection between morality and practical politics is mostly absent today. International politics is polarized: on the one hand, we see *realpolitik* downgraded to transactionalism or zero-sum games; on the other hand, fundamentalism and radicalism leave no space for practicality.

Third, Havel’s sense of strong responsibility for community shaped his attitude towards NATO and the West. Havel believed in a direct link between morality in politics and the mission to serve. Genuine politics, Havel wrote in 1992, is “simply a matter to serve those around us: serving the community.”⁵⁴ In this spirit, he served throughout his life: in the theater, as a dissident, during the Velvet Revolution, as the President of the Czech Republic, and as the head of state of a NATO ally.

Fourth, Havel saw in NATO a tool for Europe’s transformation, integration and democratization, an institution allowing Europe to help itself and to contribute to international security beyond its borders. He saw NATO not just as an alliance of collective defense but also as an organization of collective security focused on stabilizing what is within its territory. This is in line with NATO’s current mission, including its effort to build a credible defense in Europe.

Fifth, Václav Havel sought a larger goal for NATO. Enlargement was a core element of his NATO policy, but only in the sense of being a vehicle to achieve a redefinition and transformation of the Alliance. In May 2002, prior to the Prague Summit, he outlined two objectives of NATO’s redefinition: first, identifying the Alliance’s approach not only to Russia but also to China, India, Africa, and other parts of the world; and second, opening NATO’s door, “while at the same time setting a definite limit on its possible future enlargement. Otherwise, no future enlargement will make sense.”⁵⁵

All of this was to be undertaken in the context of an accelerated internal transformation. On the eve of the Prague Summit, Havel added:

If the Alliance is to be meaningful today it must be an organization equipped with a large quantity of information processed promptly and professionally; an organization capable of taking split-second decisions and, wherever this becomes necessary, of immediately engaging either its permanent rapid deployment forces, perfectly trained and constantly ready, or specialized forces of various armies that will be capable of confronting modern dangers.⁵⁶

Almost two decades later, these principles of NATO transformation still apply.

Notes

1. Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 7-17. See also Václav Havel, Speech to the Assembly of the Council of Europe, May 10, 1990.

2. Václav Havel, Speech at NATO Headquarters, March 21, 1991.

3. Alexandr Vondra, "Václav Havel: Remembering the Big Little Man," *NATO Review*, 2012.

4. James M. Goldgeier, "NATO Expansion: The Anatomy of a Decision," *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 1998, pp. 86-92; Asmus, op. cit., pp. 18-25.

5. For an early example of Havel's public praise for NATO as a useful building block of the European security order and how this was appreciated by the U.S. government, see the declassified memoranda of conversation between Havel, Czechoslovak Minister of Defense Luboš Dobrovský and U.S. Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in Prague on April 27, 1991. This particular "transitional" phase in Havel's evolving view of NATO, of course, succeeded his early-1990 idea to dissolve both the Warsaw Pact and NATO as relics of the Cold War and preceded his later policy of openly seeking Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic's membership in the Alliance.

6. Asmus, op. cit., pp. 25-26.

7. "If we appeal to the West not to close itself off to us, and if we demand a radical reevaluation of the new situation, then this is not because we are concerned about our own security and stability, and not only because we feel that the security of the West itself is at stake. The reason is far deeper than that. We are concerned about the destiny of the values and principles that communism denied, and in whose name we resisted communism and ultimately brought it down." Václav Havel, "A Call for Sacrifice: The Co-Responsibility of the West," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1994, p. 4.

8. Václav Havel, "NATO's Quality of Life," *New York Times*, May 13, 1997.

9. This principle was first articulated in Senator Richard G. Lugar's speech delivered in June 1993. See Richard Lugar, "Out of Area or Out of Business: A Call for U.S. Leadership to Revive and Redefine the Alliance." Speech to the Overseas Writers' Club, Washington D.C., June 24, 1993. Lugar's ideas, including the notion of the new transatlantic bargain, were expanded in Ronald D. Asmus, Richard L. Kugler, and Stephen F. Larrabee, "Building a New NATO," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1993, p. 28-40.

10. See Michael Žantovský, *Havel: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), pp. 435-436. For other accounts of the April 1993 meetings between Clinton, Havel, Wałęsa and Göncz in Washington and their impact on Clinton's thinking, see

James M. Goldgeier, *NATO Expansion: The Anatomy of a Decision*, op. cit., pp. 87-88; Ronald D. Asmus, op. cit., *Opening NATO's Door*, pp. 23-25.

11. Ibid.

12. Vondra, op. cit.

13. Václav Havel, Address to Members of the Senate and the House of Commons, Ottawa, April 29, 1999.

14. Václav Havel, Speech to the Congress of the United States, Washington, DC, April 23, 1999.

15. Madeleine K. Albright, NATO Expansion: Beginning the Process of Advice and Consent, Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, October 7, 1997.

16. This notion appeared in a number of Havel's speeches and articles on NATO, European security and Czech foreign policy. An early example is his speech to NATO foreign ministers at the Alliance's headquarters in Brussels on March 21, 1991. A later example is his op-ed published in the *New York Times* in 1993 (Václav Havel, "New Democracies for Old Europe," *New York Times*, October 17, 1993). A mature version can be found in Václav Havel, *NATO's Quality of Life*, op. cit.

17. Again, this is a recurring theme in Havel's writing. See, for example, Václav Havel, "New Democracies for Old Europe," op. cit., "*We have always belonged to the western sphere of European civilization, and share the values upon which NATO was founded and which it exists to defend. We are not just endorsing such values from the outside: over the centuries, we have made our own contribution to their creation and cultivation. Why then should we not take part in defending them?*"

18. Václav Havel, Speech at NATO Headquarters, op. cit.

19. Ibid.

20. Václav Havel, "A Call for Sacrifice: The Co-Responsibility of the West," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1994, p. 3.

21. Žantovský, *Havel: A Life*, op. cit., p. 99; Václav Havel, *Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, 1978 (Routledge 2009).

22. Throughout his life, Havel portrayed "*political (and economic) matters as phenomena secondary to cultural and moral questions. The latter define the frame against which the former acquire their concrete form and meaning.*" David S. Danaher, *Reading Václav Havel* (Toronto 2015), p. 40.

23. "*Be strict with us before our entry into NATO! We are a nation of talkers!*" Havel's letter to Madeleine Albright, December 7, 1998, quoted in Michael Žantovský, *Havel: A Life*, op. cit., pp. 483-84.

24. James De Candole, "Václav Havel as a Conservative Thinker," *The Salisbury Review*, December 1988.

25. Václav Havel, *Letní přemítání (Summer Meditations)*, Prague 1991, pp. 19-20. See also Martin C. Putna, *Václav Havel: Duchovní portrét v rámu české kultury 20. století (Václav Havel: A Spiritual Portrait in the Context of Twentieth-Century Czech Culture)*, Praha 2011, *in toto*.

26. See Kieran Williams, "Václav Havel," in Jonathan Wright and Steven Casey, eds., *Mental Maps in the Era of Détente and the End of the Cold War 1968-91*, p. 157. "Even if the imagery might imply an order of receding intensity, each layer of domov was considered essential to a robust identity." For Havel's definition of "home" and the concentric circles forming one's identity, see Václav Havel, *Letní přemítání*, op. cit., pp. 18-20. See also Martin C. Putna, *Václav Havel: Duchovní portrét v rámu české kultury 20. století*, op. cit., pp. 283-84.

27. Havel, *Letní přemítání*, op. cit., pp. 19-20.

28. See Havel's increasingly critical opinions on Russia after 2000, such as in Václav Havel, "Five Points on the Issue of NATO," *The New Presence*, Summer 2008, p. 27. ("A dictatorship of a fairly new type is coming into existence to the east of the area under NATO protection. All basic human and civic freedoms are gradually and quietly being suppressed under the banner of aggrieved ideology that everybody is doing Russia wrong.")

29. See Kieran Williams, op. cit., pp. 156-57. "Havel (...) diagnosed a crisis of all forms of industrial society, a crisis outwardly manifested in impersonal, oversized bureaucratic states, soulless consumerism, ecological ruin and the nuclear arms race, but at root a crisis of modern man's ability to vouch for a truth and be consistent in an identity in his relations with others."

30. Putna, *Václav Havel*, op. cit., pp. 151-153. For a complex account of Havel's critical view of the West and the East as two versions of humanity's existential crisis, see David S. Danaher, op. cit., pp. 138-49. As put by Danaher, Havel considered the (post)totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe to be "grotesquely exaggerated forms of the late twentieth-century consumer industrial society that has been perfected in the West."

31. Havel, "Five Points on the Issue of NATO," op. cit., pp. 25-26.

32. Havel, "NATO's Quality of Life," op. cit., "The alliance should urgently remind itself that it is first and foremost an instrument of democracy intended to defend mutually held and created political and spiritual values. It must see itself not as a pact of nations against a more or less obvious enemy, but as a guarantor of Euro-American civilization and thus a pillar of global security."

33. Žantovský, *Havel: A Life*, op. cit., pp. 108-109.

34. Ibid. "An enlarged NATO should consider Russia not an enemy, but a partner."

35. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, pp. xxv, 18.
36. Havel, "New Democracies for Old Europe," op. cit.
37. Ronald D. Asmus and Alexandr Vondra, "The Origins of Atlanticism in Central and Eastern Europe," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Volume 18, Number 2, July 2005, p. 204
38. Putna, *Václav Havel*, op. cit., pp. 55-63. For Jeffersonian influences on Czechoslovakia's founding, see the "Declaration of Independence of the Czechoslovak Nation by its Provisional Government," also known as the Washington Declaration, which was drafted in Washington, D.C. and published in Paris on October 18, 1918.
39. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, op. cit., pp. 12, 23.
40. Havel, *Letni premitani*, op. cit., p. 64.
41. Havel's address on the occasion of the unveiling of a monument to T.G. Masaryk, Olomouc, March 7, 1993, quoted in Žantovský, *Havel: A Life*, op. cit., p. 434.
42. Ibid.
43. Václav Havel, To the Castle and Back, quoted in in Žantovský, *Havel: A Life*, op. cit., p. 435.
44. Havel's opening speech at the conference "The Transformation of NATO," Prague, November 20, 2002, quoted in in Žantovský, *Havel: A Life*, op. cit., p. 492. "Fraternal assistance" was the euphemistic expression used by Soviet propaganda to whitewash the motives behind the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.
45. See, for example, in Žantovský, *Havel: A Life*, op. cit., pp. 99, 191, 450; Danaher, op. cit., pp. 145, 171, 193. The themes of living in truth and the sense of responsibility for things higher than one's own personal survival are key messages of Havel's most famous essay, "The Power of the Powerless," written in 1978.
46. Williams, op. cit., p. 160. "*What made the words of Socrates, Jesus, Giordano Bruno or Jan Hus convincing (...) as expression of truth was not so much their content as the willingness of the speakers to provide their personal guarantee (...) by dying rather than recanting. This language of avouching by one's words and actions, including self-sacrifice, as a guarantee of truth (...) recurred throughout Havel's writing.*"
47. Žantovský, *Havel: A Life*, op. cit., p. 444.
48. Havel, "New Democracies for Old Europe," op. cit.
49. Ibid, p. 443.
50. Williams, op. cit., p. 168. "*Havel refused to see Czechoslovakia's history and location as grounds for either fatalistic submission to foreign armies or passive pining for foreign rescue.*" This attitude of his can be traced back to 1969, when Havel engaged in a

fiery dispute with Milan Kundera on the interpretation of the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968. While Kundera romanticized Czechoslovakia as a noble and hapless victim of its unfortunate geography and aggressive neighbors, Havel provided a sober analysis of events and argued that “*Our destiny depends on us. The world does not consist (...) of dumb superpowers that can do anything and clever small nations that can do nothing.*” Quoted in Žantovský, *Havel: A Life*, op. cit., p. 120.

51. Putna, *Václav Havel*, op. cit., pp. 283-84, 329-35. Havel, of course, failed. As Putna puts it, “*Havel’s attempt from the early 1990s to turn his homeland into something more than just a “regular” small country, to make it a spiritual, intellectual and moral center of European and global significance, in effect failed. The Czech Republic remained to be precisely just one of the “regular” small states.*”

52. Václav Havel, “A Call for Sacrifice,” op. cit., pp. 4-5.

53. Havel, *Letní přemítání*, op. cit., p. 94.

54. *Ibid*, p. 98.

55. Václav Havel, “Quo Vadis, NATO?” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2002.

56. Václav Havel, Opening speech at the conference “The Transformation of NATO,” Prague, November 20, 2002.