

Laudatio for Martin Bútorá
Czech and Slovak Transatlantic Award Gala Dinner,
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by Jiří Šedivý, Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic to NATO

Esteemed Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure and immense honour for me to introduce this year's laureate of the Czech and Slovak Transatlantic Award – Mr. Martin Bútorá.

This is a crucial year for the Atlantic community and our Alliance for many reasons – and I will briefly touch upon them later. Just two weeks ago, the Wales summit reflected on the new and fast-emerging set of risks and threats we face. In view of these, our HOSGs adopted (among many other documents) The Wales Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond. Its short text – in sort of a “strategic nutshell” – concentrates on who we are and what values and principles we stand for. It identifies our main challenges and hints at how we will cope with them.

Martin Bútorá was one of the two “wise men” from our region – the other one being Poland's Marcin Zaborowski – whom the NATO SG invited to join a group of senior policy experts with a task of presenting ideas to inform the Declaration. When the list of their names – including Martin's – was made public in April, I received a rather frustrated phone call from Prague from a high government official. He suggested that the Czech Delegation to NATO had somehow missed the train, as there was a Slovak -- but no Czech name in the group. My answer was straight and quick: “could we think of anyone better than Martin Bútorá”? The long silence on the other end of the line was eloquent enough.

This anecdote speaks volumes and it might perhaps end up this laudatio. But that would indeed make a sheer dishonour to the laureate's remarkable career and impressive achievements.

In a way, Martin's life has been typical of a Central European public intellectual of his time. Yet, it should be highlighted, that unlike many of his generational peers, Martin never flirted with communism. As his biography is included in the Award brochure, allow me just a few general remarks.

Martin was always visible and active at his nation's historic crossroads -- be it in the late 1960s Czechoslovakia, around the end of communism in late 1980s, or in the context of the state and democracy building in the independent Slovakia during the decade afterwards. Throughout all these situations he demonstrated a remarkable stability of character. Even during the most difficult times of the so-called normalization in the 1970s and 80s Czechoslovakia, Martin not only managed to protect his moral integrity and human dignity, but also remained active and vocal in what was then called a parallel polis, the alternative to the official world characterized by public lie, oppression and ideological manipulation.

After all, the theme of a human being struggling for a decent existence lived in truth and dignity under totalitarian conditions is prominent in both, his short stories and his sociological or philosophical essays. Similarly, in his public and political activities during and after 1989, Martin always promoted the vision of his nation as an open and self-confident society, cultivating democracy and rule of law. This worldview, amplified and reflected in his everyday life, had inevitably brought him very close to Václav Havel whom he advised on human rights in early 1990s.

Just a couple of years following her independence, Slovakia had lived through a difficult period that tested Martin's vision of his country's future. Quite naturally, he became yet again one of the most influential public figures that mobilized the Slovak civil society with one overarching objective – to protect – or perhaps even preserve – democracy in his country. The Institute for Public Affairs he co-founded in those times became one of the hubs of this movement. Soon after, something rarely seen in history happened: a surge of citizens' awareness of democratic responsibility supported by a vibrant web of independent NGOs, managed first to regain the public space and then to achieve a critical political mass that pulled Slovakia back on her democratic trajectory.

The invitation to the North Atlantic Alliance that followed in a few years, was perhaps the most expressive international recognition of the success of the country's democratic transition. And, indeed, Martin was again instrumental in that achievement, having steadfastly lobbied for Slovakia's NATO membership as her Ambassador to Washington.

Martin has been a prolific author and translator. He has mastered an incredibly wide span of forms and genres. What is even more unique in that respect, is his capacity to critically reflect on social and political developments in which he was engaged as a politician or public activist. In this context, one cannot omit mentioning the 2010 collection of Martin's political and sociological essays published under the title *The Second Wind*. How should one find new energy in times of fatigue penetrating across the society after twenty years of demanding changes, lined with numerous false hopes and failed expectations? How should one catch a second breath? These are the bottom-line questions of the book. Martin remains a "social optimist" arguing that the capacity to mobilize and generate new strength, the ability to recreate oneself, is natural to individuals as well as societies, and is usually triggered from within or by a crisis.

I believe that this view and belief is also most relevant to the Atlantic Community today. The West is, more than ever since the Cold War, confronted by forces of revision and oppression that reject liberal democracy and rules-based international order. In our region and with our recent historical experience, we should be especially sensitive to what is happening just several hundred kilometers to the east of NATO borders, where a ruthless revisionist power once again conducts a campaign of aggression against her neighbour, challenging the very principles of the post-Cold War European security architecture.

No less alarming is the sharp polarization of national debates in Central Europe. Equidistance in the conflict is often presented as a balanced (thus allegedly virtuous) assessment and approach. Anti-liberal forces of the extreme left are meeting those in the extreme right on the platform of accusing the West for all what is happening and, at the same time, absolving the aggressor of all responsibility. The power of self-comforting nihilism and the ability of some to quickly forget the lessons of the past seems stunning.

Ladies and gentlemen:

The 2014 is a truly pivotal year for the Alliance. On one hand, we celebrate a number of anniversaries and all the success of peace and democratic transitions related to them: 65 years of the Washington Treaty, 25 years of the fall of the Wall, 20 years of the PFP, 15 and 10 years since Czechs and Slovaks respectively joined NATO. On the other, this is the year, as the Wales Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond stated, when "our vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace faces multiple challenges."

This duality deserves both reflection and action. We need to reflect on our core values, to remind ourselves who we are and what we stand for. And action is needed to reassure and reinforce our resolve to defend these values -- if the worst comes to the worst.

We can only be happy to have Martin Bútora amongst us in these difficult times. He has proven several times in his life that vision combined with action can change the path of a nation and, by extension, make the world a more just and freer place. And, if need be, it might come useful that he knows how to inspire a second wind.

Thank you.
