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Contents

FOREWORD	9
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PATRISTIC INSPIRATIONS IN RUSSIA AND EUROPE

ALEKSEY KAMENSKIKH	
The Image of the Second Rome through the Prism of the Third	13
JANNA VOSKRESSENSKAIA	
The “Other” Person. The Reception of Russian Neo-Patristics in J. Zizioulas’ Theology	23
JUSTYNA KROCZAK	
Saint Theophan the Recluse’s oeuvre and reception of his thought in Poland	37

RUSSIAN WRITERS IN THE WEST

OLGA KHVOSTOVA	
Varngagen von Ense’s reception of Pushkin’s thought and Russia	57
SERGEI A. KIBAL’NIK	
On Dostoyevsky’s Anti-Rationalism, its European Philosophical Parallels and its Followers	73
ILYA LEVYASH	
Semantics of the European Discourse of Dostoyevsky – Nietzsche	93
MARINA SAVEL’EVA	
Dostoyevsky and Thomas Mann on the “Twilight of the German Spirit”	109
JÓZEF BREMER	
Romano Guardini’s interpretation of figures in Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky’s novels	119
ANDRZEJ GIELAROWSKI	
A lie as a way of having control over a human being. Tischner’s interpretation of the character of Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment.	137
SVETLANA KLIMOVA, IRINA BARDYKOVA	
Modern Slavistics outside Russia in Quest of “the Real Dostoyevsky”	161
IRINA SALMANOVA	
Leo Tolstoy’s Integrity in Western Philologists’ Perception	173

RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHERS' OUTPUT IN EUROPE

VICTOR CHERNYSHOV

Quest for the Catholic Church. Between Constantinople, Russia and Rome:
William Palmer's Response to Alexis Khomyakov's Letters185

VICTORIA KRAVCHENKO

Vi. S. Solovyov's oeuvre reflected in foreign philosophy205

TATIANA POLETAEVA

On V. Solovyov's gnoseology and some aspects of its comprehension by Western
philosophers in the context of West – East dialogue229

MAREK URBAN

In quest of aesthetics. Hans Urs von Balthasar's reading of Vladimir Soloviev243

OLGA ZAPROMETOVA

The Conceptualization of Religious Experience: From Solovyov to Moltmann.257

GENNADII ALIAIEV

S. Frank and M. Scheler: by the Source of the Twentieth Century
Philosophical Anthropology.277

ALEXEI GAPONENKOV

European Context in the Correspondence between Nikolai Berdyaev
and Semyon Frank295

VALERY PAVLOV

Personalism of Nikolai Berdyaev's Philosophy and French Personalism307

NADEZHDA ILYUSHENKO

The reception of Berdyaev's philosophical ideas in Mounier's personalism319

KIRILL VOYTSEL

Comparison of the Ontology of the "Humanity of God" in Nikolai Berdyaev's
and Karl Barth's Thought.327

DMITRIY GUSEV

Ideas of Active-Creative Eschatology in the Dialogue between Russian
and European Philosophical Thoughts of the 20th Century: Nikolai Berdyaev
and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin347

ANATOLIY SALIY

Lev Shestov's philosophic solitude and his influence on the European philosophy
of the 20th century365

DIALOGUE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND EUROPE IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

OLGA POPOVA

Two parts of the one whole: a problem of interaction between the Russian and German
cultures in the first half of the 20th century375

TATYANA SUCHODUB

"Logos" as a European Project of Development of Philosophy of Culture.383

VLADIMIR BELOV	
Russian Neo-Kantianism and Europe: apprenticeship or cooperation?	397
NATALIA DANILKINA	
Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University (Kaliningrad, Russia)	
Sergey Hessen in Czech Republic: an émigré philosopher as a phenomenon of European culture	411
OKSANA DOVGOPOLOVA	
The Paradoxes of Reception of the Russian Emigrant Thought in Bulgaria	423
ANDREI BRONNIKOV	
Russia in Rilke	433
TERESA OBOLEVITCH	
Russia in Étienne Gilson	451
ALEXANDER USACHEV	
The Mainstream Influence of Russian Thought on European Philosophy	467
MAXIM MANUILSKY	
Institute of Human Research. Historical Reminiscences	473
TADEOUCH ADOULO	
The Ontological Basis and Humanistic Potential of V. I. Vernadsky's Social and Anthropological Projects	481
INA NALIVAICA	
The Role of Mikhail Bakhtin in the Formation of Contemporary European "Philosophy of Everydayness"	497
VIACHESLAV MOISEEV	
The logic of all-unity as a form of reception of Russian philosophy of all-unity in Europe	513
YULIYA SERADA	
A. Kojève's philosophical heritage in the context of the European intellectual space of the 21 st century	525
ANDREY MAIDANSKY	
The Dialectical Logic of Evald Ilyenkov and Western European Marxism	537
JANUSZ DOBIESZEWSKI	
Russian Issues in Alain Besançon's Perspective	551
TOMASZ HOMA	
Solzhenitsyn-esque inspirations in the philosophy of European dissidentism of the latter half of the 20 th century. Philosophical-cultural sketches	569
ANDREI ROSTOSHINSKY	
The Semiotic Concept of the Russian heraldic system at the end of the 20th century and its reception in the West. Sources, History, Problems of Modernization, Prospects	581

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Solzhenitsynesque inspirations in the philosophy of European dissidentism of the latter half of the 20th century. Philosophical-cultural sketches

The latter half of the 20th century in Central and Eastern Europe was the time of the birth of dissident thought searching for social and political formulas capable of facing up to the doctrine as well as the binding forms of Leninist-Stalinist versions of Marxism in their totalitarian and post-totalitarian shapes. Possible conditions for these formulas, as well as their more or less crystallised propositions were worked out by thinkers and activists of the democratic opposition in the Eastern Block countries; by the people striving to rebuild the subjectivity of the individual and the society, as well as the areas of autonomous activity which are due to them, and which constitute the basic attributes of the civil life – the prerogatives consistently destroyed by the totalitarian and post-totalitarian system.

Within the circle of thus articulated dissident thought, we will also be dealing with the consideration of philosophical nature, though its expression forms and the appropriate language will usually take on the form remote from university treatises and disputations, namely the essayistic, theatrical and columnist form.

In the present sketch, not intending to take up an analysis of the philosophical aspects of all the trends of the Central-European dissident thought of the 1970s, which differently formulated both the issue of the subjectivity of the individual and society as well as the issues of the space of civil involvement in the sphere of public life – the problems which are the subject of our research – yet coincident with the issue of the role and import of ethical dimension – and within it particularly *truth* – and with the activities aimed at changing the social-political status quo, we intend

to make the subject of this sketch an attempt at capturing, in a comparative manner, some of the aspects of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's thought, which seem to have made an inspirational contribution to the development of the European dissident thought of the latter half of the 20th century within the above-delineated scope of our research.

Among these, we will in particular reckon the issues concerned with *living within the truth*, the issue of *acceptability of the Western society from the viewpoint of liberal-democratic system solutions as a model for the Eastern Bloc societies*, according to which they might be reformed, as well as the issue of *the new anthropological turn*, and the idea of *self-limitation* within the context of the changes called for. In this sketch, we will undertake a tentative analysis of only the first two issues of the above-addressed ones, that is the issues of *living within the truth*, and *the acceptability of the Western society model*.

1. Lie *versus* living within the truth

In the appeal *Live not by Lies*, published on 12 February 1974, picturing the atmosphere of social helplessness in the face of the totalitarian system in the USSR at the beginning of the 1970s, and pondering over the logic of *violence* and its nature, which ruled that system, Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes: "When violence intrudes into peaceful life, its face glows with self-confidence, as if it were carrying a banner and shouting: 'I am violence. Run away, make way for me – I will crush you.' But violence quickly grows old. And it has lost confidence in itself, and in order to maintain a respectable face it summons falsehood as its ally--since violence lays its ponderous paw not every day and not on every shoulder. It demands from us only obedience to lies and daily participation in lies – all loyalty lies in that."¹

At the same time, in the very same appeal, reflecting on the popular helplessness- and passivity-marked conviction that in the Soviet system of power based on violence and lie, "gags have been stuffed into our mouths. Nobody wants to listen to us and nobody asks us,"² he challenges a thus formulated opinion that paralyses all civil activity, and takes a different view on this issue; namely, the view whereby there is a possibility of overcoming both the *helplessness* marked by the sense of powerlessness, as well as

¹ A. Solzhenitsyn, *Live not by Lies*, <<http://www.douban.com/note/218292096/>>.

² Ibidem.

the civil passivity justified by it, owing to the existential *willingness to be honest*. To his understanding, everyone “who wants to be honest” is a man who – while heeding this axiologically-articulated *willingness*, which is an existential response to and advice on the universally declared *helplessness*, and which renders him *a powerful man* with the power of that very *willingness* – is called, as thus *endowed with power*, to go beyond the passivity circle of *us* who are weak and helpless in the face of *their* totalitarian omnipotence. He is called to the *going beyond*, the stake of which as well as the aim of which will be a possibility of recovering the lost human face, staunchness, pride and enthusiasm.³ A factor that makes this kind of undertaking possible, and which causes a breach in the seemingly closed circle of passivity and helplessness; a breach that paves the way for the freedom of living within the truth will be, in his opinion, a *choice* – a spiritual self-defining act of decisions, which come to be expressed in the sphere of private and public life in the undertaken steps leading towards “either truth or falsehood: Toward spiritual independence or toward spiritual servitude.”⁴

Hence, in the text under analysis, while formulating the *key to liberation*, which Solzhenitsyn expresses with the statement that “our path is *not to give conscious support to lies*,”⁵ he concurrently questions the passivity that justifies the lack of civil action and that has a dehumanising effect, for it loses the “human face,” and calls people to the liberating and soul-defending⁶ as well as collective and unanimous joining those who “live with truth.”⁷ He does it, arguing that “this opens a breach in the imaginary encirclement caused by our inaction. It is the easiest thing to do for us, but the most devastating for the lies.”⁸ The path “most moderate of all methods of resistance,” and at the same time the most dangerous in its effect on the system.

In the context of searching for Solzhenitsynesque inspirations, capable of being traced in the philosophy of European dissidentism of the latter half of the 20th century, the above diagnosis:

a) by revealing *the correlatedness of violence and lie* in the statement that “violence has no other shield but falsehood, and falsehood can hold out only thanks to violence,” and articulating *the essence of their mutual*

³ Cf. *ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Cf. *ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

reference, that is the constitutive necessity of their simultaneous, mutually supporting co-existence and co-action – the necessity that is the *sine qua non* of their standing,

b) by bringing to light *the dialectic of continuous co-presence* of these, according to which “violence lays its ponderous paw not every day and not on every shoulder. It demands from us only obedience to lies and daily participation in lies,”⁹ as well as its *aim* and concurrently *the criterion of effectiveness*, namely “subservience,”

c) by recognising the Achilles’ heel of a thus constructed system of subservience in the above-mentioned *lies*, since it is in it – in Solzhenitsyn’s opinion – that one should discern “the most perceptible of its aspects,”¹⁰

d) and finally, by bringing the Author of the appeal *Live not by lies* to formulate, on the basis of the above reflections, a conception of liberation from the violence- and lie-based Soviet system of subservience by the manifold expression of both private and public “personal non-participation in lies,”¹¹ will become a key inspiration for one of the main strategies of civil action characterising the European dissident thought of the 1970s, that is for the strategy of “living with truth.”

This strategy is expressed, in a way representative of the dissident movement that rejects both forcible and dilatory solutions, by Václav Havel in his 1978 essay entitled *The Power of the Powerless*, whose central theme is constituted by Solzhenitsyn’s very idea of *living within the truth*. Stil, the echo of this idea seems to reverberate, among others, in Leszek Kołakowski’s reflection reaching as far back as 1975, which is included in the text *On Ourselves* (1975), and which distinctly states that “if all of a sudden the majority of people stopped lying and helping the lie, the system would vanish into thin air in the blink of an eye.”¹²

In Havel’s approach, Solzhenitsyn’s idea should be both elaborated and developed. Indeed, the author of *The Power of the Powerless* elaborates it, taking into account its political dimension. It is thus, for in his opinion, “in the post-totalitarian system (...) living within the truth has more than a mere existential dimension (returning humanity to its inherent nature), or a noetic dimension (revealing reality as it is), or a moral dimension (setting an example for others). It also has an unambiguous *political* dimension. (...) In the post-totalitarian system, truth in the widest sense of the word

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² L. Kołakowski, *O nas samych*, in idem, *Kłopoty z Polską*, Warszawa 1983, p. 32.

has a very special import, one unknown in other contexts. In this system, truth plays a far greater (and, above all, a far different) role as *a factor of power*, or as *an outright political force*.¹³

At the same time, this idea has its inherent community-creative aspect developed. This is because, the moment that living within the truth ceases to be only an individual negation of living within the lie, it becomes, in Havel's opinion, "the point at which something is born that might be called the '*independent spiritual, social, and political life of society*'"¹⁴ and ultimately takes on the shape of civil society. It becomes a community, wherein having shed make-believe living within the lie, one can actually "become proud and responsible members of the polis, making a genuine contribution to the creation of its destiny."¹⁵

Nota bene, it is noteworthy that Solzhenitsyn's "simplest and most accessible *key to our liberation*," which so inspires European dissident milieus, namely the "personal non-participation in lies,"¹⁶ will make its own contribution not only to the development of the European dissident thought, but also to the development of the issue of civil disobedience, which goes beyond the boundaries of Europe, and which is one of its alternative forms. Indeed, this kind of "non-participation," as a publicly articulated civil attitude founded on the *inner act of freedom*, which in turn consists in a *personal decision to refuse to agree to* "say that which we do not think," and, as a result, in the *refusal to participate in the reign of lie allied with violence*, in accordance with the principle "let them embrace everything, but not with any help from me,"¹⁷ seems to be a kind of civil disobedience.

Indeed, it is to this interpretation of the principle of personal non-participation in lies that the Author himself seems to authorise, stating that "this is our path, the easiest and most accessible one which, given our inherent cowardice, is much easier – it is dangerous even to say this – than the sort of civil disobedience Gandhi advocated,¹⁸ as well as presenting a catalogue of ways of evading lies.¹⁹

¹³ V. Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, <http://robinlea.com/pub/The_power_of_the_powerless/The_power_of_the_powerless.html>.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ A. Solzhenitsyn, *Live not by Lies*.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Cf. ibidem.

¹⁹ Cf. ibidem.

2. Democratic West versus Totalitarian East

Taking into consideration the second of the issues present in Solzhenitsyn's thought, and mentioned in the introduction, that is the issue of the acceptability of the Western society from the viewpoint of its liberal-democratic system solutions, as a *model* for Eastern Bloc societies, with the aid of which they could be reformed, and analysing this issue from the perspective of the possible influence of Solzhenitsyn's solution of this dilemma on the European dissident thought, it should be noted that such reflections as the one by the Russian thinker are also present in Václav Havel's views on the same issue. Their reception can be traced in his reflections, which exerted their influence particularly on the Czech and Polish dissident milieus. For them, as Adam Michnik observed, Havel was a symbol and one of the spiritual architects of "a certain kind of thinking and lifestyle, generated by our part of the continent (...). This part that Timothy Garton Ash calls *Europe of the Middle*."²⁰ Let us quote the main premises of both these stances.

2.1. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's reflections

On 8 June 1978, at a Harvard University alumni meeting, Alexander Solzhenitsyn concluded his speech on his experience of the Western world and the spiritual crisis afflicting it by stating the following: "On the way from the Renaissance to our days we have enriched our experience, but we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility. We have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life. In the East, it is destroyed by the dealings and machinations of the ruling party. In the West, commercial interests tend to suffocate it. This is the real crisis. The split in the world is less terrible than the similarity of the disease plaguing its main sections."²¹

According to Solzhenitsyn this disease is that which he earlier calls *a common foundation stone* of both "stale humanism" of the contemporary

²⁰ A. Michnik, *Polityka i marzenie*, in V. Havel, *Thriller i inne eseje*, transl. by P. Gódlowski, Warszawa 1988, p. 3.

²¹ A. Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart. Text of Address by Alexander Solzhenitsyn at Harvard Class Day Afternoon Exercises, Thursday, June 8, 1978*, <<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/solzhenitsyn/harvard1978.html>>.

Western world – an epigone of the Renaissance-Enlightenment rationalistic humanism,²² and of “any type of socialism,” as well as of communism, defined by Marx as naturalised humanism, namely: “endless materialism; freedom from religion and religious responsibility (...); concentration on social structures with a seemingly scientific approach. (This is typical of the Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century and of Marxism).”²³

Solzhenitsyn concludes this kind of diagnosis of the one and the same *disease* that afflicts both the West and the East, and which deprives man both in the East and the West of his inner life with a dramatic observation: “At first glance it seems an ugly parallel: common traits in the thinking and way of life of today’s West and today’s East? But such is the logic of materialistic development.”²⁴ Hence, as he asks himself the rhetorical question whether he would “indicate the West such as it is today as a model to [his] country,” the West with its social and political understanding, the West whose most representative form of expression is Western democracy with its typical legal-procedural mode of action, he unhesitatingly answers: “No, I could not recommend your society in its present state as an ideal for the transformation of ours,”²⁵ arguing that “it is true, no doubt, that a society cannot remain in an abyss of lawlessness, as is the case in our country. But it is also demeaning for it to elect such mechanical legalistic smoothness as you have.”²⁶

The meaning of the latter statement seems to be well supplemented with his reflection on: a) the rationalistic humanism-based formula of the existence of Western society, which he calls *legal form*, and which in statutory law is the only criterion of the normativity of individual and collective activity, and on b) its consequences for the human being and the society.

In the said reflection, he emphasises the fact that “a society without any objective legal scale is a terrible one indeed,” but with no less determination does he claim that “a society with no other scale but the legal one is not quite worthy of man either.” It is not, since the *legalism* that governs it unavoidably creates “an atmosphere of moral mediocrity, paralyzing man’s

²² The characteristic trait of rationalistic humanism, according to Solzhenitsyn, is anthropological reductionism stripping man of Transcendence as a result of the absolutisation of his autonomy, affirmation of Matter and disparagement of the Spirit, which turn such a conception of human being into “the center of everything that exists.” Cf. *ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

noblest impulses.”²⁷ Still, he sees the ultimate reason justifying his refusal to hold up the Western society as a model on the basis of which one should reorganise the social life of one’s country in the fact that this society appears to be powerless and helpless in the face of its real problems, namely various forms of evil that are destructive to it.²⁸ He expresses it, laconically summing up his experience as an outside observer of the Western society with the following statement: “Life organized legalistically has thus shown its inability to defend itself against the corrosion of evil.”²⁹

2.2. Václav Havel’s reflections

A few months later, Václav Havel makes a statement in a similar vein, reflecting in Chapter 20 of his essay entitled *The Power of the Powerless* on the *crisis of the contemporary technical civilisation as a whole*, in the face of which man stands helpless, as someone who “have no idea and no faith, and even less do we have a political conception to help us bring things back under human control.”³⁰

Starting out with the Heideggerian analysis of this phenomenon, and stating that “the intellectual, moral, political, and social misery in the world today: all of this is perhaps merely an aspect of the deep crisis in which humanity, dragged helplessly along by the automatism of global technological civilization,” at the same time he advances a thesis that “The post-totalitarian system is only one aspect – a particularly drastic aspect and thus all the more revealing of its real origins – of this general inability of modern humanity to be the master of its own situation. The automatism of the post-totalitarian system is merely an extreme version of the global automatism of technological civilization. The human failure that it mirrors is only one variant of the general failure of modern humanity.”³¹ That is why in his opinion “this planetary challenge to the position of human beings

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Cf. ibidem. According to Solzhenitsyn, among the various aspects of evil thus conceived one should reckon: law or information manipulation, loss of civil courage, legalism of action accepted by the Western society and based on the criterion of its operation, that is the *legal form* that acts *only* on statutory law, thus having no other norms apart from it, and in this sense being also a kind of hostage to human arbitrariness, passion and irresponsibility.

²⁹ A. Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart. Text of Address by Alexander Solzhenitsyn at Harvard Class Day Afternoon Exercises, Thursday, June 8, 1978.*

³⁰ V. Havel, *The Power of the Powerless.*

³¹ Ibidem.

in the world is, of course, also taking place in the Western world, the only difference being the social and political forms it takes.”³² To Heidegger’s understanding – as Havel points out – in the Western world this crisis takes on a form of *the crisis of democracy*.

Sharing this kind of Heideggerian diagnosis of the crisis of the contemporary technological civilisation, in the opinion of the author of *The Power of the Powerless*, “there is no real evidence that Western democracy, that is, democracy of the traditional parliamentary type, can offer solutions that are any more profound.” It is quite the opposite, for in the democracy thus conceived Havel sees an essentially inherent paradox in which “the more room there is in the Western democracies (compared to our world) for the genuine aims of life, the better the crisis is hidden from people and the more deeply do they become immersed in it.”³³

Hence, taking all the above into account, Havel deems the following statement well-founded: “It would appear that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer no fundamental opposition to the automatism of technological civilization and the industrial – consumer society, for they, too, are being dragged helplessly along by it. People are manipulated in ways that are infinitely more subtle and refined than the brutal methods used in the post-totalitarian societies. But this static complex of rigid, conceptually sloppy, and politically pragmatic mass political parties run by professional apparatuses and releasing the citizen from all forms of concrete and personal responsibility; and those complex focuses of capital accumulation engaged in secret manipulations and expansion; the omnipresent dictatorship of consumption, production, advertising, commerce, consumer culture, and all that flood of information: all of it, so often analyzed and described, can only with great difficulty be imagined as the source of humanity’s rediscovery of itself.”³⁴

The above statement, essentially inferred from the Heideggerian reflection on the crisis of the contemporary technological civilisation, seems to be significantly of a piece with the Solzhenitsynesque analysis of the Western society; the analysis which in its own way reveals the crisis that afflicts it, and whose characteristic symptoms, according to the author of the *Harvard University alumni meeting speech*, are: the observable *disap-*

³² Ibidem.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Ibidem.

*pearance of civil courage*³⁵ and of an individual's *accountability* to God and society.³⁶

Havel characteristically makes the Solzhenitsynesque analysis a part of his own conception of "automatism" of the contemporary technological civilisation, commenting on his address at the Harvard University alumni meeting with the following words: "In his June 1978 Harvard lecture, Solzhenitsyn describes the illusory nature of freedoms not based on personal responsibility and the chronic inability of the traditional democracies, as a result, to oppose violence and totalitarianism. In a democracy, human beings may enjoy many personal freedoms and securities that are unknown to us, but in the end they do them no good, for they too are ultimately victims of the same automatism, and are incapable of defending their concerns about their own identity or preventing their superficialization or transcending concerns about their own personal survival to become proud and responsible members of the polis, making a genuine contribution to the creation of its destiny."³⁷ Hence, taking into consideration the above analyses of the spiritual condition of the contemporary civilisation and its social-political solutions, Havel – despite seeing the undoubtedly positive aspects of the *traditional democracy* from the viewpoint of the reconstruction of the essential aspects of the civil spirit eroded by the totalitarian system – will not award it a status of an adequate and long-lasting solution capable of facing up to the diagnosed spiritual crisis of both the Eastern and Western society. He will do it in line with the Solzhenitsynesque idea of the necessity of an anthropological turn.³⁸ He writes: "to cling to the notion of traditional parliamentary democracy as one's political ideal and to succumb to the illusion that only this tried and true form is capable of guaranteeing human beings enduring dignity and an independent role in society would, in my opinion, be at the very least shortsighted."³⁹

³⁵ Cf. A. Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart. Text of Address by Alexander Solzhenitsyn at Harvard Class Day Afternoon Exercises, Thursday, June 8, 1978.*

³⁶ Cf. *ibidem*.

³⁷ V. Havel, *The Power of the Powerless.*

³⁸ Cf. A. Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart. Text of Address by Alexander Solzhenitsyn at Harvard Class Day Afternoon Exercises, Thursday, June 8, 1978.*

³⁹ V. Havel, *The Power of the Powerless.*

3. Instead of conclusions

Conceived by Havel, and shared by the milieu of “Charter 77,” the ethical civil society, whose essence would be characterised by being, or rather becoming *the space of self-discovery* in the social dimension, as well as the inherent *culture of living within the truth*, as D. Gawin observes, was originally intended to be “a conscious alternative to both *totalitarianism* and the unauthentic and alienation-generating *Western liberal democracy*.”⁴⁰ It was to be an alternative, within the framework of which a human being by way of *existential revolution* could “discover himself” and “take possession of his lost self,” and as a result, in the political order, could “become proud and responsible members of the polis, making a genuine contribution to the creation of its destiny.”⁴¹ He could become a citizen who, having rediscovered himself in the truth and having become free, as V. Tismăneanu remarks, has thus regained his due and inherent essence – being a genuine subject of politics.⁴²

Concurrently – which is in keeping with Józef Tischner’s opinion – he has also discovered the road to his humanity. Indeed, as the author of *Thinking In Values* observes, “the humanity of man emerges and remains in direct relation to the inner freedom of which he feels capable”⁴³ – the freedom whose original form Alexander Solzhenitsyn expressed encapsulating it in the principle of living within the truth.

Transl. by Łukasz Malczak

⁴⁰ D. Gawin, *Europejskie społeczeństwo obywatelskie – projekt obywateli czy eurokratów?*, in P. Gliński, B. Lewenstein, A. Siciński (eds), *Samoorganizacja społeczeństwa polskiego: III sektor i wspólnoty lokalne w jednoczącej się Europie*, Warszawa 2004, pp. 28-29. Emphasis mine – T.H.

⁴¹ V. Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*.

⁴² Cf. V. Tismăneanu, *Wizje zbawienia, Demokracja, nacjonalizm i mit w postkomunistycznej Europie*, transl. by H. Jankowska, Warszawa 2000, p. 296. For more on this subject see T. Homa, *Filozoficzno-kulturowe koncepcje obywatelskości. Studium historyczno-hermeneutyczne. Wybrane ujęcia europejskie*, Kraków 2013.

⁴³ J. Tischner, *Myślenie według wartości*, Kraków 1982, p. 413.

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