

Ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to thank you for the nomination to this very prestigious prize bearing the name of Václav Havel, a great freedom fighter, writer and philosopher. Of course, in such a short statement I cannot do justice to his texts. You will admit the absurdity of the situation on this occasion, because I cannot be present in this hall to receive the prize, but I hope that my friends and colleagues will be able to read out this statement to you. It turns out, in fact, that this is something of a tradition. Three of the Havel prize-winners of previous years who did me the honour and put the trust in me to nominate me for the prize could not come personally to receive the prize because they were also in prison at the time. I think that Václav Havel is smiling wryly to us from beyond the grave.

I was arrested in January this year by Chechen police officers and charged with owning drugs – which had been planted, of course. The leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, was sending a message that people who try to say anything that is not accepted by the authorities are enemies of the people. Now, in court, dozens of police officers are acceding to the will of the authorities and are giving false testimony against me, an enemy of the people. In trying to convince the court of their false testimony, most of them are obviously uncomfortable, but some are doing this with pleasure. They get confused; they contradict one another and even themselves. It is an absurd spectacle that I think Václav Havel would rather enjoy. In fact, all of you can come and participate in this spectacle in the courtroom of a small Chechen city called Shali every Monday and Tuesday. The courtroom is not very large, but I invite you all to come and enjoy the absurdity of the performance.

But turning away from my own personal situation, let me now move on to the last 18 years and my work at Memorial – a group of people who do not just call themselves rights defenders but try to act. In my homeland of Chechnya, it has been standard for a long time now to arrest people illegally and to fabricate criminal cases against them. My case is an example of that, but it is not the worst; such fabricated cases take place very frequently against journalists and civil society activists. My drugs case in Chechnya is not the first such case. The falsification of criminal cases has become systemic, and the conditions in the Russian penitentiary system are such that even those who are guilty do not deserve them.

When I was still free, we tried to collect information about this and to help the victims of falsified criminal cases and torture. All of this is not something that Chechen police officers and the authorities have done on their own, although they have approached the task with a lot of creativity. Fifteen years ago, full powers were delegated by the centre to Chechnya so that victory in the war would be possible. That war in the mid-1990s resulted in tens of thousands of Chechen residents dying and many more thousands disappearing. “Disappearing” means, of course, that they became victims of death squads set up by the authorities. They were illegally arrested, placed in secret prisons, subjected to torture and beaten, and their bodies were then hidden away in nameless graves. According to our estimates from 1999, there were some 3 000 to 5 000 such cases. The search for them was a job taken up by my colleague, Natalia Estemirova, and she introduced me to Memorial. Only four people have been brought to trial for such cases, so that is an impunity rate of 99.9%. In Strasbourg, the results are a bit better: some 250 Chechen disappearance cases have been investigated, but the European Court of Human Rights does not identify the guilty parties – the perpetrators. All they can do is call on the State to do that and of those 250 cases, not a single person has been brought to trial.

One of our main problems is the absence of justice and any respect for the law, be that the European Convention, Russian law, Sharia or Hadith – the unwritten laws of Islam. Today, all that counts are the decisions of the leaders. In Chechnya and in Russia, it is not just a system of impunity; I would go so far as to call it an infinite chain of impunity. Those who are not punished for their crimes

committed in one war participate in new wars and commit new crimes. Even today, people who are detained in Chechnya are sometimes disappeared. The winter before last, a few dozen such people disappeared. We are convinced that they were secretly tortured and killed. The authorities claim that they went off to participate in the war in Syria.

Much of Václav Havel's writing came after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet tanks to put down the Prague spring. My small country has been traversed by Russian tanks twice over and we continue to suffer because of that. My office has been closed down. The Memorial office in neighbouring Ingushetia was burned down a week and a half after I was arrested, and the leader of our Dagestan office was beaten up on the street. However, I am convinced of one thing: this work to protect human rights in Chechnya and in Russia must continue, and international solidarity can help us with that. Today in the courtroom, I see dozens of faces of my comrades and colleagues who fly in from far away to offer me moral support. They are all moved by the slogan, "For your and our freedom", which is the same one that moved Soviet dissidents half a century ago when they were demonstrating against the military intervention in Czechoslovakia. Something must be done to find those who disappeared so that everyone can be properly buried and that there can finally be freedom for the innocent.

I have one last point – everything apparently comes to an end. I read somewhere that in Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel's homeland, there was a saying about the Communist rule: for ever and ever, but not one day more. I hope that that will be the case in Chechnya as well and that someday I will be able to appear in this Chamber to thank all of you.