

## Inspired by the Velvet Revolution

Written by Vincent Chen 陳文

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Disregarding China's reaction, a large delegation of 89 members led by Czech Senate President Milos Vystrcil arrived in Taiwan on Aug. 30, in an unprecedented formal exchange between the two nations.

As the delegation had a tight schedule, Vystrcil's two public speeches — at National Chengchi University on Aug. 31 and at the Legislative Yuan on Sept. 2 — received much of the spotlight.

At the university, Vystrcil referred to the Velvet Revolution, which began in November 1989, and said that "the Czech students were equally courageous back in 1989 and played a very similar role as the Taiwanese students did in March 1990," during what is known as the Wild Lily student movement.

He then briefly spoke about what he knew about the student movement and the democratic reform process that followed in Taiwan.

He said that the democratic reform movements pushed by university students in Taiwan and the Czech Republic highlight their nations' shared history of democratic struggle, creating a connection between them that transcends history.

What Vystrcil suggested is quite an interesting connection. As a member of the Wild Lily movement, I would like to provide some food for thought on this connection, as well as on the causal relationship represented by this umbilical cord.

Academics studying the history of Taiwan's contemporary democratic development generally agree that the movement happened due to a combination of internal and external factors.

Taking a rather parochial perspective, few Taiwanese mention an important external factor: the series of democratic movements in eastern European countries from 1989 onward. Later known as the Revolutions of 1989, this revolutionary wave, which ended authoritarian rule in

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central and eastern Europe, deeply moved Taiwanese students and gave them courage to take action.

It should be noted that Taiwanese students had at that time seen media reports of the Chinese People's Liberation Army's cruel, bloody suppression of the Chinese student movement in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

On account of the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) authoritarian nature and the White Terror era, young Taiwanese feared that they would face a similar tragedy if they participated in a democratic movement.

The Tiananmen Square Massacre created a tremendous sense of uncertainty in the minds of young Taiwanese as to what approach the KMT's conservative faction would adopt to suppress student movements pursuing democracy.

The wave of democracy movements that swept through Eastern Europe included one launched by Poland's Solidarity trade union in June 1989, the peaceful transition to a democratic regime in Hungary in October 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9, 1989, the mass demonstrations in Bulgaria in November 1989, and the culmination of the Velvet Revolution triggered by student demonstrations in what was then Czechoslovakia.

These events not only encouraged Taiwan's students, they also instilled bravery in us like a series of shots in the arm. Among these movements, the Czech students' Velvet Revolution was the most inspiring.

The Velvet Revolution forced the Czech Communist Party to announce on Nov. 28, 1989, that it would relinquish power and end its authoritarian one-party rule. In a democratic election of the Czech Federal Assembly on Dec. 29, the poet Vaclav Havel was elected president.

The peaceful transition of power ignited hopes among many young Taiwanese, and university students in campus clubs associated with social movements were reading every news article about the democratic movement in central Europe. The thought of following their example was

born.

Seeing the avaricious expansion of power by the National Assembly, which had never face full re-election after 1947 and was dubbed the “10,000-year congress,” and the intense infighting between the KMT’s factions, students could bear it no longer.

Organized by campus clubs across universities, students launched the demonstrations and sit-ins that later became known as the Wild Lily student movement. Young Czechs who congregated in the streets of Prague when the first snow fell in November 1989 would never have thought that their courageous actions would not only end the rule of the Czech Communist Party, but also give hope to many young people on an island in the Far East.

Taiwan should thank the young people of Prague for establishing the silent revolution model 31 years ago. Their romantic ideals and beliefs were delivered across national boundaries to every one of us who longed for democracy and made us more determined to overthrow the authoritarian KMT regime.

Even though we speak different languages, this chapter of history effectively established a durable and sympathetic connection between Taiwan and the Czech Republic.

Today, the two nations share not only a similar experience of the road toward freedom and democracy, they also face a common potential threat in the globalized world: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its attempt to use “rise as a great power” to infiltrate every other country in the world.

Even though Czech President Milos Zeman’s attitude is to avoid angering Beijing, it was gratifying to see that Vystrcil was willing to extend the sense of justice of his predecessor, Jaroslav Kubera, and insist on making friends with Taiwan.

Unafraid of Chinese pressure, Vystrcil led a delegation to Taiwan on the grounds of safeguarding the Czech Republic’s autonomy and national dignity.

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Neither Taiwan nor the Czech Republic are large nations, but they share a firm belief in freedom, democracy and human rights. These beliefs are helping the two join hands to establish a confident and proud partnership as the world is opposing China's wild ambition, a partnership that will continue to inspire and encourage many other nations still striving toward democracy.

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Translated by Chang Ho-ming

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