

Introductory speech by the director of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes

Ladies and gentlemen, dear guests!

In connection with marking the 20th anniversary of 17 November 1989, which is associated with the fight for freedom and democracy, we have decided to present a commemorative medal of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, called the “Václav Benda Award.”

The expert committee, which prepared the source materials and chose suitable award-winners, approached its selection process from several points of view.

First of all, it focused its attention on people who had not yet been honoured for their contribution to the fight for freedom and democracy as well as the restoration of freedom and democracy in Czechoslovakia, and who have been overlooked to some extent. This includes important representatives of the anti-Nazi and anti-communist resistance or members of foreign forces who supported the restoration of democratic principles in our country.

The committee then concentrated on people who lost their freedom or even made the greatest sacrifice of all by laying down their own lives in resisting and defying communist totalitarian power. Our intention in the first year of awarding these commemorative medals is to pay tribute to all the heroic victims of the anti-occupation demonstrations in August 1969, who succumbed to bullets fired by the ranks of the State Police (Veřejná bezpečnost – VB), the People’s Militia and the Czechoslovak People’s Army, and whose resistance to the Communist repressive apparatus unfortunately remains anonymous to this day.

An attempt has also been made to pay respect to representatives of our émigré community, who for the entire duration of the existence of the communist totalitarian regime represented the continuity of Czech and Slovak democratic tendencies, and who not only took their lead from the period before 25 February 1948, but perhaps above all the period before 1 October 1938.

Last but not least, we would like to pay respect to selected people from the Czech and Slovak dissident movement, not only for their defiance of the so-called “normalisation” regime, but also for subsequently beginning the process of coming to terms with and overcoming our common totalitarian past. This includes remembering the irreplaceable contribution made by the women who supported the civic and political anti-totalitarian activities of their husbands which actually could not have been implemented without them.

We would like the presentation of the commemorative “Václav Benda Award” to gradually become an august tradition, which, like the other extensive activities of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, will document the fact that we are not nations without personalities or even without history. On the contrary, we want to publicly subscribe to the idea that we honour our historical memory, just like the other nations of Europe.