

Parallel Polis

Václav Benda

1978

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Foreword

If you are already familiar with Václav Benda, Charter 77, and the history of dissident thought in Central Europe, you may wish to proceed directly to the translation.

If you are new to this material, the following foreword provides essential historical context, background on Benda and his era, and an overview of the essay's significance and structure. We encourage unfamiliar readers to review it before proceeding to the translation itself.

On the Circulation of Dangerous Ideas

In May 1978, sixteen months after the founding of Charter 77 - the human rights movement that had emerged in the wake of the Soviet-led invasion that crushed the Prague Spring - and fourteen months after the death of philosopher Jan Patočka, Václav Benda sat down to write a discussion paper for the human rights movement's internal strategy meetings.

The proposal Benda offered would become one of the most influential texts of Central European dissidence. He called it "Paralelní polis" — The Parallel Polis.

Czechoslovakia was deep in the "normalization" that followed the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion — a period of systematic repression, cultural suffocation, and the slow strangulation of dissent. The regime no longer bothered to publicly denounce Charter 77; it had shifted from public denunciation to quiet strangulation: Job loss, travel bans, the isolation of families, and the constant pressure of State Security officers who knew your children by name.

Instead of merely opposing the totalitarian system or attempting to reform it from within, Benda proposed creating alternative social structures — a "parallel polis" that would exist alongside the official order. This parallel polis would encompass everything: Law and culture, education and information, economics and even foreign policy. It would not be a ghetto of like-minded activists but a genuine community, a *polis* in the classical sense — a space where citizens could live with dignity and truth.

This foreword introduces the first freely available complete English translation of Benda's essay — a text that speaks not only to a particular historical moment but to the enduring question of how free people can live under unfree systems.

A Note on This Translation

This translation aims to make Benda's complete argument freely available to English readers for the first time. The only previous complete English translation, by Paul Wilson, was published in *Civic Freedom in Central Europe* (1991) and later appeared in *The Long Night of the Watchman: Essays by Václav Benda, 1977-1989* (2018). These volumes are valuable, but they are not generally available — encumbered by copyright protection, paywalls, and limited print runs.

This situation is deeply ironic. Benda's essay circulated in samizdat — hand-typed copies passed from reader to reader, free and open. It was a text about creating free spaces outside official control. Yet now, this text about freedom is itself trapped behind restrictions that prevent its free circulation.

This translation seeks to restore Benda's essay to the spirit of its original form. It is hereby released into the Public Domain, free for anyone to read, share, and build upon — much as the original samizdat copies were.

The translator has aimed to preserve Benda's distinctive voice and rhetorical style. His sentences are often long and complex, reflecting the intricacy of his thought and the seriousness of his subject. The translation does not simplify or domesticate his prose; rather, it attempts to make his Czech intelligible in English while retaining the complexity that gives his argument its force. Readers may find the text demanding, but this demand reflects Benda's respect for his readers' intelligence and the gravity of the questions he addresses.

A detailed Translator's Rationale and Methodology accompanies this translation, explaining the analytical framework, translation decisions, and challenges faced in rendering Benda's Czech into English. Readers interested in the technical aspects of the translation are encouraged to consult that addendum.

May this translation circulate freely, passed from hand to hand as the original samizdat copies once were, so that Benda's arguments might again cast the light of reason upon a world that still so urgently needs freedom.

**Václav Benda: Mathematician,
Philosopher, Dissident**

Václav Benda (1946-1999) was an unlikely dissident. A mathematician by training, he worked as a computer programmer until his political activities cost him his job. He was a devout Catholic — a significant identity in a regime that was officially atheist and deeply suspicious of religious belief. Unlike some of his fellow dissidents who came from literary or artistic backgrounds, Benda brought a systematic, analytical mind to the problems of resistance.

Benda signed Charter 77 in its first year and became one of its most important thinkers. He was imprisoned multiple times for his activities, and his family faced constant harassment from the secret police (the StB). Yet he continued to write and think, producing essays that combined philosophical depth with practical strategic vision.

What distinguished Benda was his refusal to see dissent as merely negative — as opposition, protest, or resistance. For Benda, dissent was fundamentally constructive: it was about building something new, not merely destroying or escaping the old. The parallel polis was not a temporary refuge but a positive alternative, a different way of living together.

Czechoslovakia in 1978: The Long Night

To understand Benda's essay, one must understand the world in which he wrote. Czechoslovakia in 1978 was a decade into the period known as "normalization" — the regime's term for the restoration of orthodox communist rule after the reforms of 1968. The Prague Spring, that brief season of hope and liberalization, had been crushed by Warsaw Pact tanks. Alexander Dubček, the reformist leader, had been replaced by Gustáv Husák, who oversaw systematic purges and repression.

The regime controlled every sphere of life: politics, economics, culture, education, even private associations. Yet it did so with a peculiar hypocrisy. Czechoslovakia had signed international human rights agreements, including the Helsinki Accords, and the regime claimed to respect these commitments even as it violated them daily. Charter 77 exploited this hypocrisy by taking the regime at its word — by insisting that the regime live up to its own proclaimed principles.

By 1978, however, this strategy was losing its effectiveness. The regime had learned not to engage in public debate with Charter 77. Instead, it resorted to what Benda called "strangulation in the dark" — quiet repression through job loss, surveillance, harassment, and imprisonment. The official term was "trimming the edges," a euphemism that captured the regime's preference for gradual elimination rather than spectacular confrontation.

Charter 77's signatories were exhausted. The initial euphoria of signing had given way to disillusionment. The movement faced a strategic crisis. What should they do? How could they continue when their previous tactics no longer worked?

The Parallel Polis: A New Strategy

Benda's answer began with a diagnosis. Charter 77's initial strategy had relied on what he called a "moral stance" — an abstract ethical position that emphasized the importance of truth and human dignity. This had been powerful at first, uniting diverse signatories across political and ideological differences. But it had failed to sustain itself. An abstract moral stance, Benda argued, could inspire for weeks or months, but not for years.

The problem was not the moral foundation itself — that remained essential. The problem was the lack of concrete expression. What was needed, Benda proposed, was a "positive program" that would give the moral commitment a field of action. That program was the parallel polis.

The concept was simple but revolutionary. Instead of trying to change the official system directly, dissidents should create alternative structures that would exist alongside it. These parallel structures would:

- **Supplement** functions that the official system performed inadequately or not at all
- **Humanize** existing official structures where possible
- **Demonstrate** that a different way of organizing society was possible

Benda outlined specific spheres for parallel structures:

- **Law:** Exploiting the gap between the regime's totalitarian legal principles (everything forbidden unless permitted) and the need for liberal interpretation in practice
- **Culture:** Building on the already successful "second culture" of samizdat literature, underground music, and unofficial art
- **Education:** Creating alternative educational networks outside the state system
- **Information:** Maintaining parallel channels for disseminating news and ideas
- **Economy:** Developing networks of mutual support and international solidarity
- **Politics and foreign policy:** Creating spaces for political discussion and building international connections

What made Benda's proposal distinctive was its comprehensiveness. The parallel polis was not merely a cultural sphere or a political movement — it was a complete alternative way of life. It was not opposed to the official system so much as it existed beside it, in "parallel." Yet over time, Benda suggested, these parallel structures could become so substantial that they would effectively displace the official order — not through confrontation but through attrition, by demonstrating a more humane and functional way of living.

The Essay's Structure and Argument

"Paralelní polis" is carefully structured to move from diagnosis to prescription to implementation.

The Diagnosis (Section A): Benda begins by acknowledging Charter 77's achievements — its ability to unite diverse opinions and remain legal — before identifying its problems. The "schizophrenic situation" of taking the regime at its word while knowing it lies had become unsustainable. The initial moral solution had failed for three reasons: the death of Jan Patočka (the movement's philosophical guide), the regime's tactical adaptation, and the abstract nature of the moral stance itself.

The Strategic Proposal (Section B): Benda proposes two guiding principles: continue from moral commitment as the unifying foundation, but give this commitment a positive perspective in creating the parallel polis. He critiques both "radical" and "retardist" (reformist) alternatives as non-viable under present circumstances.

The Core Concept (Section C): Benda presents his "third way" — neither direct confrontation nor accommodation, but the creation of parallel structures. He defends this proposal against charges of political naivety, pointing to existing examples of parallel structures (the cultural underground, the informal economy) that already demonstrate the concept's viability.

The Concrete Program (Sections D-E): Benda outlines his six-point program in detail, from legal strategy to foreign policy. Each point combines theoretical insight with practical guidance. The section on the information system, for example, includes detailed principles for maintaining effective networks — principles based on hard-won experience.

Integration (Section F): Benda addresses the relationship between Charter 77 and the parallel structures it helps create. These structures must eventually achieve autonomy, or they risk becoming a "ghetto" rather than a "polis." Yet Charter 77 should not separate itself from them — it should provide support while allowing independent development. Document preparation, Charter 77's ongoing activity, becomes the bridge to the parallel polis.

Throughout, Benda's voice shifts between analysis and urgency, criticism and hope. He writes as both insider and analyst, as both strategist and philosopher.

Why The Parallel Polis Matters Now

The historical importance of "Paralelní polis" is clear. It helped shape the dissident movements that eventually brought down communism in Central and Eastern Europe. The concept of parallel structures influenced Solidarity in Poland and informed thinking about civil society across the region.

But the essay's significance extends beyond its historical moment. Benda's analysis speaks to anyone concerned with how free people can live under unfree systems — whether those systems are communist dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, or more subtle forms of ideological conformity. The question of how to create alternative spaces for truth, community, and human flourishing remains urgently relevant in the twenty-first century.

The digital age has created new possibilities for parallel structures — networked communities, alternative media, uncentralizable networks, cryptographic tools for privacy and communication. Yet the fundamental challenges Benda identified remain: how to maintain morale over the long term, how to balance unity with pluralism, how to create sustainable institutions outside official channels, how to avoid the trap of becoming a closed ghetto rather than an open polis.

Benda's essay offers no simple solutions. It is honest about difficulties and uncertainties. But it offers a vision of resistance that is constructive rather than merely oppositional, that builds rather than merely destroys, that creates positive alternatives rather than simply denouncing existing systems.

The Parallel Polis in the Digital Age

When Benda wrote "Paralelní polis," the tools available for creating alternative structures were rudimentary: typewriters, carbon paper, underground networks of trusted couriers, foreign radio broadcasts. The fact that Charter 77 and other dissident movements accomplished what they did with such limited means is a testament to human courage and creativity.

Today, the tools available are vastly more powerful. The internet enables instant global communication. Cryptography provides tools for privacy and security. The dawn of uncentralizable systems offer functional alternatives to centralized control. Yet the human challenges Benda identified remain: the need for moral commitment, the danger of sectarianism, the temptation of isolation, the difficulty of sustaining effort over time.

What Benda understood — what makes his essay enduringly valuable — is that the most important parallel structures are not technological but human. They are networks of trust, communities of shared purpose, spaces where truth can be spoken and heard. The parallel polis is not a technical solution but a moral and political one.

It is the translator's hope that this freely available translation will help Benda's thought find new readers and new contexts. The parallel polis is not merely a historical concept; it is a living idea, as relevant now as it was in 1978. May this translation contribute to its continuing life.

January 2026

Mark Qvist

Parallel Polis

Above all, I think that the problem of how and what to do next — including the embarrassments, depressions, and conflicts it provokes — was raised in its full scope already by the founding declaration. I mean by this, among other things, that all the vicissitudes of the past 16 months, whether they concern external relations or the behavior of individuals, groups, and currents "inside" Charter 77, have contributed to our present uncertainty (except as to its timing, only quite marginally: I shall immediately attempt to explain what I see as the fundamental cause of this uncertainty).

Charter 77 has recorded at least two remarkable achievements: it has encompassed an incredibly wide spectrum of political opinions and civic mentalities, and it has managed essentially to remain on the ground of legality. It has paid for these results by finding itself, from the outset, to a considerable extent in a schizophrenic situation. On one hand, apparently all of us — despite deep differences in the radicalness of criticism and despite other deep differences in conceptions of possible remedy — agree on a very gloomy assessment of the system and of the functioning of present political power. On the other hand, we behave as if we failed to notice that the claims of political power about its good intentions and the legal provisions by which it ostensibly limits its totality are merely a propagandistic camouflage. Such "taking at their word" is in itself a very clever maneuver. However — with all due respect to cleverness — such an approach cannot achieve a mobilizing effect and defend itself against lies, if it cannot bridge the abyss between the two above-mentioned positions.

Charter 77 managed temporarily — and very effectively — to eliminate this split by extreme emphasis on ethical aspects and by preference for moral stance over political. This initial solution has failed, and today the original dilemma opens before us all the more oppressively. The reasons for the failure are roughly the following:

1.

The death of Professor Patočka, who was unquestionably the *spiritus movens* of this solution.

1.

The political power's wisening to the reality that, through its furious campaign, it had managed to transform a political problem into a moral one and had thereby unwittingly accepted our weapons. From this moment onward, a *silentium* reigns around Charter 77, and power limits itself to strangulation in the dark (the official term is "trimming the edges").

1.

The moral stance was postulated abstractly, without the designation of any positive content and direction of action. An abstract moral stance, however, is merely a gesture, which although it may be maximally effective, its effect is nevertheless limited to several weeks or months. In proof of my claim, I can cite a phenomenon with which you have probably encountered and which is quite common among Charter signatories — the transition from the almost ecstatic sensation of liberation caused by signing to gradual disillusionment and deep skepticism.

I do not underestimate the concrete contribution of the first two reasons; however, I consider the third reason decisive and sufficient in itself. And on this diagnosis I base my proposal for a strategy, which should gradually lead us out of today's blind alley.

I have attempted to summarize this strategy in two slogans, which I shall immediately develop and comment upon: First, to continue proceeding from moral commitment and mission as the unifying element and source of dynamism. Second, to give this dynamism a field of action and a certain positive perspective in the creation of a parallel polis.

I. The moral justification and obligation of a citizen to participate in the remedy of public affairs (that is, political in the broadest sense of the word) is beyond all doubt. From this source, Charter 77 derived its public mandate from the very beginning, and as a common starting point this meant overcoming the above-mentioned ambiguity and was a guarantee of unity, tolerant¹ cooperation, and to a certain extent also persistence. I see no other formula that could successfully fulfill all these functions; moreover, this moral position is so closely linked with Charter 77 in the eyes of the public and in the eyes of the majority of signatories that any other formula could only with difficulty legitimately claim continuity. I am not asking, therefore, whether to proceed from the moral aspect, but rather how to make it once again rousing and mobilizing and to ensure its enduring operation — that is, what concrete effort or "positive program" can derive its energy from it in the future.

If I have correctly understood what is hidden under the labels of "radical" and "retardist" conceptions, I cannot consider either of them a promising answer to the stated questions. A citizen can certainly find moral commitment in entering into conflict with evil political power and striving for its destruction. However, under the given circumstances, such commitment is so suicidal that in no reasonable ethical system can it claim public recognition. Similarly, a citizen may feel morally obligated to realistically assess the situation and attempt, through the path of compromises and reforms, to achieve at least partial remedy. However, given the ethical parameters of present political power, such conduct cannot rely on its moral motives being generally perceived and that it might act as a moral appeal.

II. I attempt to propose a third way to the remedy of conditions in the community. Most structures connected in one way or another to the life of the community (that is, to political life) function either entirely inadequately or even harmfully. I propose, therefore, that we unite in the effort to gradually create parallel structures capable, at least to a limited degree, of supplementing missing generally beneficial and necessary functions; where possible, it is necessary to utilize existing structures as well and to "humanize" them.

This plan to a certain extent satisfies the demands of both "reformists" and "radicals." It does not necessarily lead to direct conflict with political power, yet it is not burdened with illusions about escaping the given state through "cosmetic adjustments." It leaves open the key question of the system's viability: what is certain is that its even partial success would expose the official structures to pressure under which they would necessarily either disintegrate or usefully be restored (depending on whether we accept the diagnosis of the radicals or that of the reformists).

This plan is apparently unacceptable to both wings as "educationalist" and politically naive. However, we are all together in the Charter, which is undeniably a politically naive undertaking — like every attempt to derive politics from a moral foundation. Moreover, my proposal proceeds immediately from the present form of Charter 77, which owes its origin to the defense of a parallel structure (second culture) and which to a considerable extent devotes itself to a "humanizing" reinterpretation of existing official structures (the system of legislation). And to the official politicians I would like to remark that, after all, they led the community into its present position: it would therefore be decent if they were to revise either their political convictions, or their view of what is and what is not politically naive — *tertium non datur*.

This plan is perhaps beyond our strength; however, it is realistic in the sense that it relies on realities verified by practice. I shall cite two most striking and yet completely contrary examples. The parallel cultural structure is today an undeniable and markedly positive factor and in some spheres (in literature, but also to a certain extent in popular music and visual arts) completely

dominates over lifeless official structures. An equally undeniable (and negative, albeit functionally more efficient and more humane) factor is the parallel economy, founded on a system of theft, corruption, and nepotism, which under the glossy surface of the official economy in fact manages the majority of not only consumer but also industrial and commercial relations.

And now therefore in (randomly ordered) slogans the concreta of my plan:

a) This point is in fact a preamble to all the others. Our legal system is in fact one of the worst in the world, because it is conceived exclusively for propagandistic purposes and therefore extraordinarily vaguely and without any guarantees. Our legal system simultaneously admits a very liberal interpretation, because it is conceived exclusively for propagandistic purposes and therefore extraordinarily vaguely. This discrepancy must be systematically utilized (and it is necessary to prepare for the fact that it can be used against us at any time). The transition from the totalitarian to the liberal system — that is, in this sphere, the transition from the principle "everything is forbidden that is not explicitly permitted" to the principle "everything is permitted that is not explicitly forbidden" — can be compelled only by the method of constant testing of the limits of what is permitted with energetic occupation of positions once gained.

b) Second culture is at present the most developed and most dynamic parallel structure. It should be used as a model for other spheres, and at the same time it is necessary by all means to support its development, particularly in hitherto neglected areas (literary criticism and cultural journalism generally, theater, film).

c) The parallel structure of education and scholarly life already has a certain tradition, however in the last two years it has rather stagnated. I consider the organization of parallel education a task of eminent importance, both for personal reasons (if officers of the StB know by name my 1-9 year old children, I cannot harbor too many illusions about their official educational possibilities) and for general reasons (the underground, which is by far the most numerous component in Charter 77, has managed to become politicized and overcome its sectarianism, nevertheless the permanence of such a result is apparently conditioned by our possibilities of "educationalist" activity in these circles). I think that precisely in this sphere a certain generosity and a "maximalist" program are appropriate.

d) In its initial period, Charter 77 managed to create a parallel information system that was functional and prompt and encompassed at least several tens of thousands of persons. I consider the gradual degeneration of this system (unfortunately proceeding with greater speed than is justifiable by the waning of the original sensation) to be one of the greatest failures and most critical symptoms of Charter 77's activity to date. It can be estimated that with the more serious materials of Charter 77, through direct internal dissemination (that is, if we do not count monitoring from foreign radio), in the initial period several tens to hundreds (in the case of the founding declaration) of thousands of persons were acquainted. In recent times, this number has declined to hundreds, at best to thousands of citizens.

The content and form of the transmitted information will of course have key significance; I will discuss this, as well as questions of foreign publicity, in other points. Here only several technical principles, observance of which in my opinion could contribute to remedy:

The dissemination of information must be given greater attention, and work on this task should be equally respected as the proper preparation of materials. Everyone who today complains about insufficient information should automatically feel obligated to effectively disseminate acquired information. The information network must be utilized evenly. Excessively long silences are even more dangerous than overburdening, because they lead to loss of interest and

to the disintegration of established connections. Especially near the source, it is necessary to observe the principle that effectiveness is more important than social courtesy, and to allocate information preferentially to places from which its further dissemination is guaranteed. Rather let a "prominent" person be informed only at second hand than that the dissemination of information become stuck and remain limited to a narrow circle of people. It is urgently necessary to improve the flow of information to groups outside Prague. Even more urgent, however, is that these groups secure mutual interconnection and create autonomous information systems. Here too it applies that for the evaluation of the recipient of information, the most important question is whether he knows how to type.

In the longer term, we will not escape the use of more efficient reproduction means than the typewriter. It is necessary both to immediately prepare a solid legal analysis of this problem and to investigate possibilities of material provision for undoubtedly legal but expensive techniques (xerox, photocopying).

e) I cannot conceive the breadth of tasks that we may be faced with in the future in the field of parallel economy; the momentary possibilities are not great, yet their utilization is extremely urgent. Political power considers this area a decisive means for the arbitrary control of citizens and simultaneously regulates it as strictly as possible. It is therefore necessary to rely on the accounting of extreme trust (every other exceeds the field of legality) and to broadly develop charitable and supportive activity; the proper community should be founded on a system of mutual guarantee not only moral but also material. Political power evidently wants to break the initiative of Charter 77 primarily by exposing its participants to unbearable economic pressure (while simultaneously conducting a propaganda campaign about their dissolute and idle life). Proving the morality and selflessness of one's intentions by ostentatious disregard of the material factor is under these circumstances equally naive and dangerous as when someone considers it necessary to inform the State Security in detail about his life, because he considers it honorable and legal (in both cases one not only places oneself at the mercy of the opponent, but simultaneously accepts his false and usurped moral claim).

On the contrary, it is necessary to face this pressure by consistent utilization and even demanding of international solidarity: beginning with support from individuals and organizations and ending with the much more promising form of cultural and scholarly cooperation, securing relative independence from official economic structures (honoraria for artistic works and scholarly publications, scholarships, etc.).

f) It is necessary to create the ground for the emergence of parallel political (in the narrower sense of the word) structures and to assist their development. This point encompasses a broad spectrum of tasks, from education toward civic consciousness and responsibility, through the creation of conditions for political discussion and the formulation of theoretical opinions, to the support of concrete political currents and groupings.

In the area of parallel foreign policy, my proposal proceeds from the premise that the internationalization of any problem may perhaps not help, but certainly will not harm. Some of the parallel structures proposed here (for example, education, economy) cannot at least in the beginning function without effective foreign support. Foreign publicity of our effort is its decisive guarantee against the arbitrariness of political power and for the majority of citizens is also the main source of information (foreign radio and television). Nevertheless, important is the mutual cooperation of kindred currents in the states of the Eastern bloc — in past decades, perhaps every nation of the Eastern bloc paid heavily for the lack of such coordination. The publicity of our

conduct is at present insignificant, and our cooperation with parallel movements inside the bloc has always been woefully inadequate. It is necessary immediately to create a team that would examine the causes of this state and propose concrete means for remedy.

Certainly I have here omitted many parallel structures that would deserve consideration with equal urgency. Individual parallel structures will also be linked with Charter 77 to varying degrees (I attempt to express my opinion on this also through the length of individual points) — some will be its integral part, toward others it will act as midwife and wet nurse, and finally to others it will provide above all a guarantee of legality. Parallel structures created in this way will certainly in various areas surpass the framework of the Charter and sooner or later must acquire autonomous existence: not only because they do not "fit into" the Charter in its present form and mission, but mainly because in the opposite case we would not be building a parallel polis but a ghetto. Nevertheless, the Charter should certainly not in any fundamental way separate itself from these initiatives and delimit itself against them: by such a step it would transfer from the position of civic initiative to the role of mere observer and would thus deprive itself of a greater part of its moral charge. For the future, it is necessary to count on the fact that we will rather agree on a common starting point of our effort than on its external boundaries. After all, the Charter as a civic initiative necessarily passes continuously into the initiatives of others, and given the nature of a free association it does not even have at its disposal the means by which it could in any directive manner define its boundaries. In this respect, the Charter was, is, and will be founded solely on — always renewed — trust that individual groups of signatories, in mutual responsibility and understanding, will refrain from actions that would be fundamentally unacceptable to other groups or would otherwise disrupt the original unity and solidarity.

Nevertheless, Charter 77 must of course also continue to fulfill its most proper task (apart from the "legislative" problematics, which I mention in point a): to monitor cases of serious violation of human rights, to draw attention to them, and to bring suggestions for remedy. This means primarily to continue in the creation of fundamental documents. Substantive documents should appear at most in two-month intervals, otherwise continuity will be disrupted. It is necessary substantially to expand the circle of signatories and non-signatories who will actively participate in the preparation and creation of documents — in this respect I very much welcome the proposal for the public announcement of themes and teams being processed and those responsible for editing. On the other hand, personal opinions and attitudes of the authors, naturally different from other opinions and attitudes, will necessarily be reflected both in the method of processing the given problematics (and this aspect will manifest itself the more strongly, the more specific the delimited area will be) and in the proposed solutions. It is in the interest of all of us rather to reconcile ourselves with this fact than, out of a false striving for objectivity and tolerance (see my polemical gloss above), to produce documents that would resemble diplomatic protocols in their duplicity and emptiness.

Further, I proceed to requirements that already to a certain extent relate to my plan. I think that documents should not be addressed only to the authorities, but also and indeed above all to all our fellow citizens. This places certain demands on them: they should deal with truly generally pressing problems, they should not be inappropriately long (otherwise they will not reach the majority of recipients — appropriateness, however, depends on the seriousness of the theme), and they should be sufficiently intelligible also for the lay public (that is, they should avoid legalistic or other specialist jargon).

If we want to eliminate and not contribute to the general sense of futility and hopelessness, we must in my opinion not overlook the hitherto dubious results of the attempt at dialogue with political power and must learn from them. This means to go still further; nothing prevents us from proposing, in our documents, suggestions for "parallel" civic activities enabling improvement of the given state — in addition to or even instead of proposals for institutional remedy. If the processing of documents ceases to be the goal and is considered merely a part of a more enduring effort to examine the causes of the unfortunate state and to promote its remedy, then Charter 77 certainly faces no danger that it will fizzle out and become a mere producer of "rustling papers." Such an approach, in which documentary activity would merge with the uncovering of various possibilities of remedy and with the stimulation to their utilization, would simultaneously represent the most natural transition to the plan presented here, building a parallel polis.

May 17th 1978

Vaclav Benda

Translator's Rationale and Methodology

Addendum to the English translation of Václav Benda's "Paralelní polis"

I. Introduction and Historical Context

A. The Author and His Moment

Václav Benda (1946-1999) was a Czech mathematician, Catholic philosopher, and one of the most important signatories of Charter 77 — the human rights movement that emerged in Czechoslovakia following the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968 and the period of "normalization" that followed. Unlike some of his fellow dissidents who came from literary or artistic backgrounds (Václav Havel, Ivan Jirous), Benda brought a systematic, analytical mind to the problems of resistance under communism.

Benda wrote "Paralelní polis" on May 17th 1978 — approximately sixteen months after Charter 77's founding and fourteen months after the death of Jan Patočka, the philosopher who had been the movement's *spiritus movens*. This was a moment of crisis for Charter 77. The initial moral stance that had unified diverse signatories was failing. The regime had adapted its tactics, shifting from public denunciation to what Benda called "strangulation in the dark." Charter 77 faced strategic paralysis: direct confrontation was suicidal; accommodation was morally bankrupt.

B. The Essay's Significance

"Paralelní polis" is one of the foundational texts of Central European dissident theory. It proposed a new strategy: instead of merely opposing the totalitarian system or attempting to reform it from within, dissidents should create alternative social structures — a "parallel polis" that existed alongside the official order. This concept went beyond earlier notions of "second culture" or "independent society" to envision a comprehensive alternative encompassing law, culture, education, information, economics, and even foreign policy.

Benda's essay influenced later developments in Central Europe, including the Polish Solidarity movement, and continues to inform discussions of civil society, digital commons, and resistance through alternative institutions. Yet remarkably, a complete English translation of this foundational text has been unavailable despite its importance in dissident literature and political theory.

C. Why This Translation Was Needed

The only previously available English translation, published in Paul Wilson & H. Gordon Skilling's *Civic Freedom in Central Europe* (1991), is not generally available, and encumbered by copyright protection and paywalls. While Wilson's translation is certainly valuable, its availability is severely limited - even in print form. The complete Czech original circulated freely in samizdat form (clandestinely produced, hand-typed copies) and was later published in émigré collections, but it remained inaccessible to English readers.

This translation aims to fill that gap, making Benda's complete argument freely available to all readers interested in dissident theory, civil society movements, and the philosophy of resistance.

II. Source Text and Textual History

A. The Original Czech Samizdat

Benda's essay was originally titled "Pro mluvčí a signatáře Charty 77" (For Spokespersons and Signatories of Charter 77), indicating its intended audience: internal Charter discussion. It was written as a discussion paper for Charter 77's "brain trust" — a meeting of key figures strategizing about the movement's direction. The essay was dated 17 May 1978 and circulated in samizdat form.

B. Publication History

- **1978:** Original samizdat circulation
- **1980:** Published in the émigré collection *O svobodě a moci* (On Freedom and Power), Index, Cologne, edited by Martin Šimečka
- **1988:** Benda reflected on his essay in "Parallel Polis, or An Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe: An Inquiry" (*Social Research*, Vol. 55)
- **1991:** English translation published in Wilson & Skilling's *Civic Freedom in Central Europe*
- **2018:** Wilson's translation republished in *The Long Night of the Watchman: Essays by Václav Benda, 1977-1989*

C. Source Selection

Two primary digital sources of the original Czech essay were available for this translation:

1. **Scriptum PDF** (files.scriptum.cz)
2. **Academy of Sciences PDF** (disent.usd.cas.cz)

The Scriptum PDF was selected as the primary source because:

- It is explicitly confirmed as complete by its editor
- It includes the full footnote that the Academy version deliberately omits
- It has superior OCR quality with fewer textual artifacts
- It presents the text in clean, uninterrupted format

The Academy version, while valuable as an archival document showing the text's publication context, was inferior for translation purposes due to deliberate omissions and poorer text quality.

III. Translation Philosophy and Guiding Principles

A. Preserving Benda's Rhetorical Style

A fundamental decision governing this translation was to preserve Benda's distinctive rhetorical style as faithfully as possible. Benda writes in the tradition of Czech dissident prose — complex, layered, philosophically informed, yet morally urgent. His sentences are often long and intricate, with multiple clauses building upon each other to create cumulative effect. This complexity is not accidental; it reflects the complexity of the reality he is analyzing and the depth of his philosophical engagement.

To simplify Benda's sentences for contemporary English readers would be to diminish the weight and impact of his thought. The translator's task, therefore, was to make Benda's Czech intelligible in English without stripping away what makes his voice distinctive and powerful.

B. Sentence Structure: Why Complexity Matters

Czech academic and political prose typically uses longer, more complex sentences than contemporary English. These sentences often contain multiple subordinate clauses, qualifications, and parenthetical asides. While this can make the text demanding for readers, it serves important rhetorical functions:

- It allows Benda to layer qualifications and nuances
- It creates a sense of intellectual seriousness and depth
- It mirrors the complexity of the political reality he analyzes
- It builds cumulative rhetorical force through careful structuring

This translation therefore preserves Benda's sentence structures, using punctuation (commas, semicolons, colons, em-dashes, parentheses) to handle complexity where English syntax requires it. The result may be more challenging to read than simplified prose, but it preserves the integrity of Benda's argument and voice.

C. Tone Preservation

Benda's essay demonstrates multiple tonal shifts that are essential to its rhetorical effect:

- **Analytical detachment** in diagnosis and systematic argument
- **Moral urgency** in discussing Charter's crisis and the need for action
- **Intellectual humility** in acknowledging limitations and uncertainties
- **Irony and sarcasm** in critiquing regime rhetoric and fellow dissidents
- **Constructive vision** in proposing the parallel polis
- **Practical specificity** in the six-point program

The translation tracks these shifts carefully, using vocabulary, sentence structure, and pacing to signal tonal changes. The irony of "taking at their word," the sarcasm of "educationalist" and "political naivety," the urgency of "extremely urgent" — these all required careful rendering to preserve Benda's distinctive voice.

D. The Challenge of Translating Political Philosophy Under Totalitarianism

Benda's essay was written under a totalitarian regime that monitored and punished dissent. This context shapes his language in ways that present translation challenges:

- He uses coded language and indirect references that would be understood by his intended audience but might escape outsiders
- He employs irony and quotation marks to signal distance from official terminology
- He balances candor with strategic discretion
- He writes for an audience that shares certain assumptions about political reality

The translation therefore had to preserve both what Benda says explicitly and what he implies through tone, context, and linguistic choice. Some culturally specific references (StB, Patočka, the underground) required no translation but may need contextual explanation for readers unfamiliar with Czechoslovak history.

IV. Methodological Framework

A. The Four-Phase Analytical Approach

Before translating a single sentence, this project undertook a comprehensive four-phase analysis of the source text:

Phase I.1: Glossarial Analysis

- Identification and analysis of key philosophical, political, and legal terminology
- Determination of translation strategies for specialized vocabulary (*paralelní polis*, *obec*, *politická moc*, etc.)
- Establishment of consistent terminology throughout the translation
- Documentation of terms requiring translator's notes

Phase I.2: Contextual Mapping

- Historical reconstruction of the moment (May 1978, Charter 77's "second crisis")
- Analysis of Benda's position within the dissident movement and his relationship to other thinkers (Havel, Jirous, Patočka)
- Examination of the Czechoslovak political context (normalization, legal system, economy)
- Study of the essay's publication history and intended audiences

Phase I.3: Structural Analysis

- Mapping of the essay's argument flow and logical progression
- Identification of rhetorical strategies and tonal shifts
- Analysis of the three-part architecture (Diagnosis → Prescription → Integration)
- Documentation of patterns of emphasis and subordination

Phase I.4: Problematic Passages Identification

- Catalog of syntactically complex sentences requiring careful handling
- Identification of culturally specific references needing contextual awareness
- Analysis of ambiguities and multiple interpretations that should not be resolved
- Documentation of irony, sarcasm, and metaphorical language

This pre-translation analysis was essential because it provided the framework for making consistent, informed decisions throughout the translation process. Rather than encountering problems as they arose and making ad hoc decisions, the translation proceeded from a comprehensive understanding of the text's terminology, context, structure, and challenges.

B. The Balance Between Fidelity and Readability

The guiding principle throughout was fidelity to Benda's text — fidelity not merely to his literal words but to his thought, his voice, his rhetorical strategies, and his historical situation. Readability in English was a secondary concern, achieved through careful attention to English syntax and punctuation rather than through simplification or restructuring.

This approach means that the resulting translation will sometimes demand more of its readers than contemporary English prose typically does. Complex sentences must be followed carefully; culturally specific references may require contextual knowledge; irony must be detected through tone and quotation marks. This demand is appropriate to a text of philosophical and political seriousness, and it honors the intelligence of both Benda's original readers and contemporary English readers.

V. Key Translation Decisions

A. Terminological Consistency

A glossary of key terms was established during Phase I.1 and maintained consistently throughout the translation:

Czech Term	English Translation	Rationale
<i>paralelní polis</i>	parallel polis	Retained the Greek term as Benda does — now established in English-language scholarship
<i>obec</i>	community	<i>Obec</i> means municipality but carries the classical sense of <i>polis</i> ; context clarifies the political meaning
<i>politická moc</i>	political power	Consistent translation emphasizing the institutional rather than personal dimension
<i>druhá kultura</i>	second culture	Established translation from Jirous and Wilson
<i>underground</i>	underground	Retained as-is — Benda uses the English loanword in Czech
<i>morální závazek</i>	moral commitment	Captures the binding nature better than "obligation"
<i>morální postoj</i>	moral stance	"Stance" suggests deliberate positioning

B. Czech-Specific Concepts

Obec vs. Society: Benda consistently uses *obec* (community/municipality) rather than *společnost* (society). This is deliberate — *obec* carries the classical sense of *polis*, the political community of citizens. The translation preserves this distinction through "community."

Political Power (*Politická moc*): Benda uses this phrase rather than "regime" or "government." This emphasizes the institution of power under communism rather than particular office-holders. The translation preserves this abstraction.

The "Third Way" (*Třetí cesta*): Benda is not proposing a middle position between radical and reformist alternatives. His "third way" is a different dimension entirely — creating parallel structures rather than engaging directly with the regime. The translation preserves this conceptual distinction.

C. Latin Phrases Retained

Benda uses several Latin phrases without translation in the Czech original. These have been retained in the English translation:

- *spiritus movens* — "driving spirit" (referring to Patočka's role)
- *tertium non datur* — "the third is not given" (logical principle forcing a choice)
- *silentium* — "silence" (referring to the regime's refusal to discuss Charter publicly)

These Latin phrases contribute to Benda's academic and philosophical tone. Translating them would diminish their rhetorical effect.

D. Metaphorical Language

Benda's metaphors are distinctive and have been translated literally rather than converted to idiomatic English:

- **"Blind alley"** (*slepá ulička*) — preserves the visual metaphor of a dead end
- **"Strangulation in the dark"** (*rdoušení v temnotách*) — captures the violent nature of regime repression
- **"Trimming the edges"** (*ořezávání okrajů*) — preserves the euphemistic quality of the regime's terminology
- **"Midwife and wet nurse"** (*porodní bába a kojná*) — retains the distinctive metaphorical pair
- **"Rustling papers"** (*šustivých papírů*) — preserves the onomatopoeic derogatory term

E. The Footnote

Benda's extensive footnote on tolerance and the "religious document" has been kept separate as a traditional footnote, per the translator's agreement with the editor. This footnote is more polemical and sharp in tone than the main text, and its separate placement reflects its role as a supplementary argument rather than part of the main flow.

VI. Structural Preservation

A. The Three-Part Architecture

The translation preserves Benda's deliberate three-part structure:

1. **Diagnosis (Section A):** Charter 77's achievements and problems, the failure of the moral solution, the three causes of that failure
2. **Prescription (Sections B-E):** Two guiding principles, critique of alternatives, the "third way" proposal, six-point concrete program
3. **Integration (Section F):** Charter's relationship to parallel structures, continuing mission, document preparation as transition to parallel polis

This structure is not arbitrary; it reflects Benda's logical progression from problem to solution to implementation. Breaking it up or reorganizing it would diminish the rhetorical force of his argument.

B. The Six-Point Program

Points (a) through (f) present Benda's concrete program for building the parallel polis. The translation preserves:

- The differential development of each point (some brief, some detailed)
- The specific ordering
- The technical terminology in each sphere
- The varying levels of urgency and specificity

Point (d) on the information system, for example, is the most developed because this was where Charter had the most direct experience. Point (f) on foreign policy is relatively brief because this was newer territory. This unevenness is rhetorically honest and has been preserved.

C. Paragraph-by-Paragraph Flow

The translation maintains the exact paragraph structure of the original, with each paragraph representing a distinct unit of thought. The flow from diagnostic opening through prescriptive middle to integrative closing creates a cumulative rhetorical effect that would be lost if paragraphs were broken up or reorganized.

D. Tonal Shifts

The translation tracks Benda's tonal shifts paragraph by paragraph, from the analytical detachment of the opening through the moral urgency of the crisis diagnosis, the constructive vision of the proposal, the practical specificity of the program, and the hopeful synthesis of the conclusion. These shifts are signaled through vocabulary, sentence structure, and pacing.

VII. Challenges and Solutions

A. Syntactic Complexity

Challenge: Benda's sentences are often long and complex, with multiple clauses, qualifications, and parenthetical asides.

Solution: Use punctuation to handle complexity. Em-dashes, parentheses, semicolons, and colons are employed to maintain the flow while making the relationships between clauses clear. The opening paragraph, for example, contains multiple embedded qualifications that have been preserved through careful punctuation.

B. Culturally Specific References

Challenge: Benda references people, institutions, and events that would be immediately understood by his original audience but may be unfamiliar to contemporary English readers.

Solution: Translate these references literally and trust the context to provide sufficient explanation. Key examples:

- **Jan Patočka and *spiritus movens*:** The context makes clear this was a key figure whose death mattered
- **StB knowing children by name:** The horror emerges from the specificity; no note needed
- **The underground:** Benda uses the English loanword; no translation needed

A brief historical introduction in the foreword provides additional context for readers who need it.

C. Deliberate Ambiguities

Challenge: Benda sometimes leaves tensions unresolved rather than offering neat solutions.

Solution: Preserve these ambiguities rather than attempting to resolve them. Examples:

- **"Ghetto" vs. "polis":** Benda insists on the distinction but never fully defines the boundary
- **"Politically naive":** This is both a criticism and a proud acknowledgment; the translation preserves both meanings
- **"Humanize" existing structures:** The term is deliberately vague; the translation does not clarify it

These ambiguities are not weaknesses but reflect Benda's honest engagement with complex questions.

D. Irony and Sarcasm Markers

Challenge: Benda uses quotation marks, sarcastic politeness, and other markers to signal irony that might be missed by readers unfamiliar with his rhetorical style.

Solution: Preserve all quotation marks around terms where Benda signals distance or special usage. Translate sarcastic politeness (e.g., "it would be decent if they were to revise") literally, allowing the irony to emerge from context. The reader must do some work to detect the irony — this is appropriate to Benda's style.

VIII. The Translator's Approach to Voice

A. Preserving Polyphony

Benda's essay is not monolithic; it contains multiple voices that blend and interact:

- The **analyst** diagnosing the Charter's problems
- The **insider** demonstrating knowledge of the Charter's internal dynamics
- The **moralist** emphasizing ethical foundations
- The **pragmatist** providing concrete proposals
- The **strategist** thinking long-term
- The **critic** challenging both regime and fellow dissidents
- The **visionary** imagining alternative structures

The translation allows these voices to emerge through careful attention to vocabulary, sentence structure, and tone. The result is a polyphonic text that reflects Benda's complex relationship to his subject matter.

B. Balance Between Confidence and Humility

Benda's voice combines confidence in his analysis with humility about his proposals:

- "I consider the third reason decisive and sufficient in itself" (confident)
- "This plan is perhaps beyond our strength" (humble)
- "Certainly I have here omitted many parallel structures" (modest)

The translation preserves this balance, which is essential to Benda's credibility as both analyst and advocate.

C. The Rhythm of Czech Dissident Prose

Czech dissident prose has a distinctive rhythm — measured, philosophical, yet urgent. Benda's sentences accumulate force through careful structuring, and his paragraphs build toward cumulative effects. The translation attempts to preserve this rhythm through attention to sentence length, clause relationships, and paragraph transitions.

IX. Conclusion: On the Ethics of Translating Dissident Literature

A. The Responsibility of Accuracy

Translating a text written under totalitarian repression carries special responsibilities. This was not merely an academic exercise; Benda wrote under conditions of surveillance, his family was targeted, his career was destroyed, and he was eventually imprisoned. The translation therefore had a responsibility to be as accurate as possible — not merely to his words but to his thought, his voice, his strategic intentions, and his historical situation.

B. Why Fidelity Matters

Dissident literature is not just literature; it is political theory in action, philosophy under pressure, strategic thinking in real time. Every choice Benda made — of terminology, of structure, of tone — was consequential. To simplify or domesticate his text for contemporary readers would be to diminish not just its literary qualities but its political and philosophical significance.

C. Hope for Future Readers

This translation is offered in the hope that future readers will find in Benda's essay not merely historical interest but living insight into the nature of power, resistance, and the possibilities of building alternative structures under conditions of oppression. The parallel polis is not merely a historical concept; it continues to inform discussions of civil society, digital commons, and resistance in the twenty-first century.

If this translation helps make Benda's thought accessible to a new generation of readers, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

This translator's rationale and methodology addendum accompanies the first freely available English translation of Václav Benda's "Paralelní polis", completed in January 2026.

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