

Annus Mirabilis

Cynicism is the antipode of that wonderful year of 1989

Adam Michnik | **Across our region, there has never been a better run than the last 20 years. But today, Europe faces a trial. Freedom is threatened by a cynicism that undermines the liberal value system. In the same spirit, the temptations of authoritarianism are seductive. The task before us is nothing less than the defense of the republic.**

Why did what happened 20 years ago happen? The most banal answer to this question is that communism proved economically ineffective. But there are still communist countries today, despite their systems' inefficiencies: Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, China. Therefore, we cannot be satisfied with a purely economic answer to this question.

The year 1989 was a year of miracles, an *annus mirabilis*. Yet the explanations about the causes of communism's demise differ. Americans answer that it was the result of U.S. policies. A Democrat would say it was the human rights policies put in place by Jimmy Carter, namely "détente with a human face." A Republican would credit Ronald Reagan's policies, which initiated an arms race that the Soviet economy could not match.

In the Vatican, meanwhile, one hears that the fall of communism was mainly due to John Paul II and his actions, which deprived the system of its legitimacy, especially in Poland. If you live in Kabul, you are told that communism collapsed because of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the resistance of the Afghans, which placed the Soviet empire in a hopeless situation. In Berlin, it is said that the fall of communism was the result of a prudent *Ostpolitik*, which led the Soviet Union to talk about things it never wanted to talk about. In Moscow, anyone will tell you that it was a result of Gorbachev's perestroika, and in Warsaw that it was because of the independent trade union Solidarity and its leader Lech Walesa.

In short, there is more than one answer to this question. A complicated bundle of facts made the political elite in the Soviet Union aware that a degree of democratic modernization was unavoidable, and that socialism would not

survive otherwise. I am convinced that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev wanted to modernize socialism but not destroy the U.S.S.R. Yet communism turned out to be like the joke about the Jewish shoemaker's trousers. When his wife tells him he should get his trousers cleaned, he energetically resists. His wife wants to know why, and complains that they are getting dirtier and dirtier. Finally Mordecai answers, "Yes, they are getting dirtier, but if I get them cleaned, they'll fall apart entirely!"

That is what happened with the Soviet Union. Communism fell, paradoxically, because the Soviet elite believed it could be reformed. In fact, those who did not want to change anything, the hardliners, were right. We do not know how long communism will continue in China, Cuba, or North Korea. Seen in historical perspective, it is condemned to death. But it could still last a few generations. Thus 1989 was a sign that something was ending, but no one had any idea how it would end or when.

Four Perspectives

When I look back, I have four perspectives: a Polish one, because I am a Pole; a Russian one, because the cards were really shuffled there; a Central European one, because the fall of communism was not a purely Polish phenomenon; and finally, the perspective of the West.

The West was not at all prepared for what happened. I do not mean only Western Europe, but also the United States. I remember my talks at the time with many important U.S. politicians who came to Warsaw. They were abso-

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lutely unprepared for what happened. They did not assume that the communist dictatorship would shatter; they could not diagnose what was happening in the Soviet Union, and—not unlike us in Poland, by the way—they had no idea at all that the Soviet Union could collapse entirely. The decisive factor was Russia. The perestroika reforms set new

forces free, and they triggered further processes that developed a new dynamic. For a long time, neither the ruling communist elite nor the opposition in Central Europe understood what was actually underway in Russia.

In 1989, it was not at all clear that Gorbachev would be in a position to accept the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and talks on the unification of Germany in order to save communism in the Soviet Union. That was all but clear at the time. It is no accident that in 1990, George Bush was still trying to convince the Ukrainians not to seek independence.

The year 1989 is an extraordinarily important one. At its start just two states, Poland and Hungary, were trying to take their own path. But this changed like a kaleidoscope. What was not possible in January became reality in February, and in March one could demand even more.

At the beginning of April 1989 I was in Italy. Catholic priest and newspaper editor Adam Boniecki was generous enough to take me with him to see the Pope. This was after the Soviet elections to the Congress of People's Deputies. The vote was not entirely democratic, but for the first time candidates ran who

did not belong to the party. Andrei Sakharov, Anatoly Sobchak, and Oleg Bogomolov became members of parliament. Among the losers, for the first time since 1917, were the apparatchiks. The Pope listened to me with enormous attention. For him it was a completely new situation. Poland had not yet had elections, but I explained that judging by events in the Soviet Union things really were changing and we had to think in a new direction.

Among the governing elites, Hungary's went the furthest. The change in the party began in Hungary. Imre Pozsgay, the leader of the liberal nationalist wing, was one of those responsible for the "thaw" in the public media. He also encouraged an accommodation with the "nationalist" wing of the opposition. He was the first to dispute Hungarian leader Janos Kadar's interpretation of the 1956 uprising as counterrevolution.

The Hungarian opposition was weaker than the Polish, and from the beginning it was divided into two currents, nationalist and liberal. The national current called for an agreement with Pozsgay in order to restore Hungary's national identity, which had been trodden upon by the communist dictatorship. The second current was based on liberal values, called for authentic democracy, and opposed a compromise with the *nomenklatura*. One might say that the "nationalists" intended to reconstruct historic currents, while Hungarian democrats like Janos Kis and Tamas Bauer wanted a European future for their country.

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Poland went furthest, as the government's Round Table negotiations with Solidarity broke through the iron logic of the communist regime and opened it up to ideas that had not been heard since August 1980, when it was at its height. At the time, I thought: assuming the counterreformation is not a rejection of the reformation, but the adoption of some of its motives in order to modernize and adapt the church to new challenges, then Solidarity was a reformation within communism and Gorbachev is the counterreformation. Later, in our discussions it became clear that Gorbachev knew little about Solidarity, but it seems to me that this metaphor is historically justified.

When I think about Poland's Round Table and how it became a blueprint for other countries, several factors are striking. First of all, it was a major revolution without a revolution. No one took to the streets, there were no barricades, and no executions. Everyone remembered the barricades of 1980 and the martial law that followed all too well. None of us had a sense of what was happening. As Poland's future president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, would say many years later, it is unclear how things would have developed if both sides in Poland had realized that their decisions would lead to German unification.

Nevertheless, in the opposition we were aware that a united Germany was only natural. Maybe this was not openly discussed, but that is what we thought. For me it was obvious that under normal conditions of democratic competition, it would not be possible to maintain the division of Germany. East Germany was a barrack-state that would not exist without the Red Army. The East German opposition thought differently. It had the most left-leaning opposition of

all the East bloc countries. It sought the democratization of East Germany. The autumn demonstrations in East Germany began with the slogan “We are the people” before the slogan “We are one people” emerged.

I want to reconstruct my thinking at the time. In Poland, the idea behind the Round Table was to bring about a kind of Finlandization of Poland. We knew we could not win a war against Russia, which is why we had to work with what came to us from Russia. Thus perestroika was our natural ally. In 1988, I wrote an article called “The Fight Over Stalinism,” which I sent to the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*. The censor spiked it, although the quote that he liked least came from a Soviet newspaper. The Polish censor edited out the word “Stalinism.” This shows the delay and the resistance with which perestroika came to us. At the end of the 1980s, the Soviet press was much more liberal and free than Polish newspapers. Ultimately the censor did let the article through. It was my first article since 1966 published officially under my own name. That, too, was a sign of change.

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A second factor, paradoxically, was the intra-German dialogue that intensified at the end of the 1980s. In one text I asked Poland’s leader General Jaruzelski why inner-Polish dialogue was not possible, if there was a dialogue between Erich Honecker and Helmut Kohl. After some ten years, it seemed that the project of modernization through martial law essentially meant the “Chinese model,” except that our dictatorship was not as strong as China’s. The rulers reached the conclusion that they had to try something new, since Poland with its heavy debt could not go on under its own power.

In the ruling faction in Poland there was a long quarrel over how to assess the Round Table. The strikes in May and August 1988 led to the government’s replacement. The new prime minister was Mieczyslaw F. Rakowski, the long-time chief editor of the weekly *Polityka*, an organ of the communist party, but known for its openness.

Rakowski had been deputy prime minister under Wojciech Jaruzelski, but had to resign in the mid-1980s under pressure from the Kremlin. Rakowski was a reformer even though his personal ideas about reform differed from ours. He wanted to bring about a radical improvement in the standard of living through intelligent economic decisions, and thus achieve broad support for his policies. This would marginalize Solidarity’s opposition, he surmised.

This idea was unsuccessful, and the ruling faction saw it was necessary to negotiate with the opposition. A crucial factor was a televised debate between Lech Walesa and the chairman of the pro-government union. That evening, all of Poland sat in front of the television. It was the moment of truth: Walesa knocked his opponent out—Poland boiled over with excitement. The road to the Round Table was clear.

Ambivalence of Freedom

Communism systematized the world—even for those in the West. It conveyed

to them that the essence of the world was the conflict between democracy and totalitarianism. The end of communism revealed some processes of which we had not been entirely aware. First of all, the struggle against communism meant deep faith in the purpose of human freedom. But the end of communism revealed to us the deep human need to live in a secure, predictable world. Despite its primitive relationship to democratic values, communism constantly told people: there is no unemployment, you are safe. It is a typical prisoners' syndrome. Anyone who has been in prison knows that freedom is a prisoner's only dream. Ultimately the prisoner is released, the world is beautiful, colorful, the birds are singing, the grass is green, people are sitting in cafes, the former prisoner walks the streets, he has space.

But after a time he realizes that he is not secure. As long as he was in prison, he knew at what hour he could eat, when he would be taken to the bathroom, that the barber would come to trim his hair, and above all, that he had somewhere to sleep. And now he is suddenly wandering through the city and does not know what will happen. He begins to miss what was—the prison. We felt something like this for a few years after the fall of communism. For the dissidents, this seems incomprehensible, but that is how it was. In prison everything had its place, and suddenly chaos prevailed.

It was similar for the whole world. The end of communism triggered unexpected and ambivalent processes. Communism undermined national and religious traditions. The end of communism therefore meant the right to return to these traditions. But at the same time, these traditions are not necessarily synonymous with freedom. In today's Russia, the Orthodox Church is not a factor that strengthens democracy; it is subordinate to the state. In Poland, no responsible person can deny some anti-democratic forces in our church—because they exist. They do not dominate, but their active presence can be seen with the naked eye.

It was the working class who toppled communism in Poland. But it was also the first victim of the transformation. Let us imagine a large industrial enterprise that was able to convince those in power to make concessions through strikes. This company produced desk-size busts of Lenin. The workers were good workers. They did not stop being good workers in 1989. But today no one needs busts of Lenin. The market destroyed this company. The workers, who helped bring freedom through strikes, were the first to fall victim to this freedom. That is the first paradox of democracy in Poland.

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The second paradox comes from the fact that the largest firms, like the Danzig shipyards, were Solidarity's strongholds. The new government did not want to treat these people unfairly, for after all, they had brought them to power. But because these firms did not reform, they went bankrupt.

The third paradox is that the political culture that the system taught these people rested on the party's leading role. Thus it was an obvious plan to give Solidarity a leading role and place it in a position where it could decide who

became a *voivode* or a director, or who would find employment in a bank, in the secret service, or in the army. In this way, the democratic system quite obviously lost legitimacy. New types of conflicts appeared. All historical utopias paint a world free of structural conflicts. For the opposition in communist countries, this utopia was, almost everywhere, the utopia of the rule of the people. It was based on the construction of a new communism, but without communists. Pipe dreams prevailed in each of the communist countries of a third way between communism and capitalism. Generally, the search for this third way ended with the realization that this way led to the Third World, and it was best to put it aside. Such pipe dreams were found among both the left and the right, among those referring to conservative, religious, nationalist values, as well as those who based their ideas on plebeian, leftist traditions and ideas of popular rule.

No opposition member would have said before 1989 that we should strive for capitalism. No one demanded privatization, no one thought of it. And yet it turned out that this is absolutely necessary. That is why Francis Fukuyama thought and wrote that we had reached the end of history. Fukuyama meant a

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situation in which no one could realistically imagine a better political project than the market economy, parliamentary democracy, and unrestricted respect for human rights. Fukuyama could not imagine this, and I think he is right. But for millions of people, this system was not the best at all. In addition, Fukuyama held an illusion that was just as naïve as others' belief in a system based on a government of workers' councils.

To this day, books are published that contest the meaning of the transformation. Their authors believe that people are furious that nothing succeeded; that the last 20 years have been nothing but an accumulation of disaster and mistakes. It is true that not everything was perfect, but I have exactly the opposite view. Many bad things happened, but I have the feeling that, with the exception of the Balkans and Russia, the post-communist countries have not had such a good 20 years in their modern history; or in Poland's case, not in the last 300 years.

The Authoritarian Temptation

Let us begin with Russia. There, people believed in modernizing socialism, but this belief collapsed quite quickly. Why did Russia take this path? There is more than one answer.

It is highly likely that historical change follows a zigzag course. Relatively quickly the Russian elite saw democracy as *dermokracija* (*dermo* meaning “shit” or “crap” in Russian), that is, “swampocracy”—babble, corruption, and criminalization of daily life. The head of St. Petersburg television told me that television under Brezhnev was terrible. You could not say anything, and you simply read official announcements from the page. But in the evening you could go for a walk with your daughter without hesitation. In the 1990s you could call Yeltsin and any other minister or governor a drunk, an alcoholic, a thief;

but in the evening you could not go for a walk for fear of being kidnapped and freed only after ransom was paid. That is a very good definition of how the Russians saw perestroika and democratization. That is why Putin's authoritarian solution has so much support in Russia today. He got the lawlessness under control and began to pay wages and pensions on time.

In Poland, this fear of chaos has manifested itself in two ways: as a return to the familiar, which explains the success of the post-communists, incidentally not only in Poland, but also in Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary. The other path was the one taken by Russia's Gennadi Zyuganovs and Slobodan Milosevic, that is, transformation into nationalism.

The critics of the democratic transformation in Poland say that the balance of the last two decades is negative. They say that the perpetrators of the greatest communist crimes have never been prosecuted, that lustration and de-communization were never completed, that corruption is spreading, that the great differences in wealth and the bitter feeling of many children of the Solidarity revolution who feel that they did not fight for a Poland like this. They also say that the criteria for assessing the heroes of the past have been lost; that in early 1989, time was not on the side of the communists, so that the path of compromise at the Round Table was a mistake.

The picture of the past is painted by anti-communists of the 11th hour.

Sometimes I think that in Poland—but also in other post-communist countries—people effortlessly win long-past wars. In 1989, the Soviet Union was still quite firmly in the saddle, and no one could foresee its self-destruction. The Polish compromise was portrayed as a model by the American government and the governments of Western Europe. June 4, 1989 has become a symbolic date. On that day, free elections were held in Poland—not entirely democratic, but real elections that snatched away the legitimacy of the communist dictatorship; on the same day in Tiananmen Square, tanks mowed down students demanding democratic freedoms. Anyone who says today that everything was obvious back then is concealing the fact that he said nothing of the kind at the time. Nor does he say today that he knows the date or the circumstances under which the communist regimes in Cuba or North Korea will collapse, even if he claims this with certainty when the defeat of communism becomes apparent in these countries as well.

In our countries, we can still predict the past more easily than the future. On the other hand, the past has become more and more difficult to predict, because its picture is painted by anti-communists of the 11th hour—people who accuse those who did the most of having contacts with the communist political police. It seems that such writing of history could set the stage for a new type of authoritarian system.

We see today how, in many countries, the ideology of anti-communist authoritarianism is emerging. In Hungary it is embodied by Viktor Orban, leader of the Fidesz party. Orban's path is interesting. He began as the wunderkind of Budapest's liberal intelligentsia. The party he created had an anti-communist face of peace and harmony. I well remember a campaign poster by Orban's party: two opposing photographs. On one, we see a brotherly kiss between Bre-

zhnev and Honecker; on the other, a tender embrace between a pretty girl and a good-looking boy. These were two different worlds. But Orban soon led his party to the right, to an authoritarian, radical, revanchist anti-communism that absorbed conventional conservatism and Hungarian ethnonationalism. In Poland, the two-year administration of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) was comparable. In Russia, the path to authoritarian government was cleared by Yeltsin, who radically overthrew the traditions and ideology of Bolshevism, but used anti-Bolshevik slogans to employ methods far removed from democratic standards. Today there is no major disagreement over the fact that the 1996 presidential elections in Russia were faked. At the time, as a democrat I was on the side of my Russian friends, who declared that it was necessary by all means to stop the communists, who would never give up their newly regained power.

Against a Cynical Europe

After 20 years, it is useful to view Europe as a new whole, a Europe without utopias. This Europe purposely fosters political and cultural pluralism. At the same time, it is a Europe without a strong canon of values. The strengths of democracy are always based on a strong nation-state tradition that purposely permits pluralism and respects human rights and the principle of tolerance. But where these traditions no longer exist, we see a Europe of Berlusconi-ism, in which only clever games, social technology, cynicism, and money count: a coalition of business, politics, the media, and the mafia. There is no doubt that the communist threat—which once was strong even in France and Italy—has quite simply disappeared. In France, the communists have shrunk to a microscopically small group, and in Italy they became social democracy.

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Second, a spirit is growing in Europe of selfishness and nihilism, fear and anxiety. In this regard, the European Union project is very important, and at the same time stands on such wobbly legs that it is constantly being attacked and challenged from many sides.

Third, in the post-communist countries, the gravest threat is that the experiences of Putinism will be adopted—a type of new version of Latin American systems where democratic institutions exist on paper, but in reality someone else rules. The classic example of this is Vladimir Putin, but in Poland, too, we had two years of Kaczynski's PiS government during which this model was constructed, in which institutions of civil society were weakened by attacks on the independent judiciary and independent media.

Is there one Europe? I think not, but that need not be a catastrophe. Europe has grown together over time through crises and new attempts. It continues to be a dynamic entity that is still being built. What is important is that a European consciousness emerge on the part of the young, post-communist Europe. This need not lead to European isolationism. For example, Europe should not turn away from Ukraine. Europe will have a chance if it learns to intelligently export its soft power. If Europe were to close itself off, it would fall into neo-isolationism and lose. Europe should be a democratic project and a light for the entire world.

What threatens Europe today? On the one hand, a cynicism that weakens and that hollows out any doctrine or system of values. On the other hand, any authoritarian or even totalitarian projects. We talk of a multicultural Europe, which of course is good. Nevertheless, if we have a large portion of citizens from the Islamic world in Europe who demand rights as minorities on the basis of European principles but deny these rights to others when they become a majority, because those are their principles, then we must work to ensure that the European Union steadfastly defends its democratic values. Of course I am oversimplifying. But this is the paradox of democracy, that it always tolerates its enemies.

And it must be this way, but only to a point. When this point is passed, democracy knocks its own teeth out. I have often asked myself why the Weimar democracy fell. Because no one wanted to defend it—neither the intellectuals nor the unions, not even the workers. A selfishness prevailed and brought the Nazis to power. Of course, history does not repeat itself, or repeats itself only as farce—as Marx and Hegel said—but democracy is never guaranteed. We could still come to a point where no one wants to defend democracy.

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When I see contemporary plays or read contemporary literature—especially by young Polish artists—I see contempt for the institutions of a free state. One could of course say that the elites have done everything they can to become objects of contempt, but if no one will defend the democratic state, it will ultimately succumb.

My obsession is the defense of the republic. The essence of the debate in all our countries is: do you defend liberal values or are you in agreement with a state in the Putinist mold? This is of great importance, as is the relationship between state power and the institutions independent of it. Will the state attempt to assimilate these institutions, or is it willing to consciously limit itself and permit the existence of civil, religious, professional organizations that must be independent of the state by definition, and with whom the state must deal through compromise?

A second problem—perhaps less serious today, but very important 10 years ago—is lustration and decommunization. Can a democratic system tolerate a conscious consensus in the matter of exclusion of and discrimination against a specific group of people, merely because they were informal collaborators with or members of the ancien régime? No, this path leads directly to dictatorship. In Czechoslovakia after the war, the dictatorship began with the expulsion and murder of the Germans, who were after all citizens of the republic—not, as in Poland, with the expulsion of Germans from Germany. In Czechoslovakia, a majority supported the expulsion of Germans. The principle of collective responsibility was applied. That smoothed the way for a coup. We should be very sensitive—even oversensitive—to such signals.



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