

Summary

Freedom and its Adversaries 20 Years after the Fall of Communism

November 14, 2009, Prague

Former Czech President Vaclav Havel, French philosopher Andre Glucksmann, political scientist Jacques Rupnik, British-Czech playwright Tom Stoppard and former Polish dissident Adam Michnik were among the speakers at the debate "Freedom and its Adversaries", taking place on the 14th of November at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University to mark the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. The main theme of the discussions was the value of freedom, its friends and adversaries, but also its shortcomings in post-communist countries in particular. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright dedicated the afternoon session to answering students' questions on topics such as the role of the Czech Republic in relation to the United States and the rest of the world. The day was closed with a concert held at Prague Crossroads, attended by musicians such as Lou Reed, Renee Fleming or Joan Baez.

Martin C. Putna, director of the Vaclav Havel Library, introduced the first debate Freedom and Its Adversaries: Perspective of Human Experience by reflecting back to meetings held in the same auditorium 20 years earlier at the time of the Velvet Revolution. "Back then it was clear what freedom is, who are its enemies: the regime, or put simply, the Bolshevik."

Jan Sokol, Czech philosopher and anthropologist, recalled John Locke's thesis that individual freedom is perceived as power by our surroundings, this has proven to be the case after the fall of communist regimes: "We rejoiced at our newly acquired freedom, but we got scared of the freedom of others." Enemies of freedom encourage the sense of fear in us and offer themselves to protect us from the constructed "enemies".

The importance of viable institutions and a strong civil society was highlighted by Czech politician Petr Pithart as a way of countering enemies of freedom. He described these as no longer being the architects of utopian ideologies, but those who "mean well, and instead of offering freedom, offer warmth, a sense of belonging, solidarity".

Both French philosopher Andre Glucksmann and former Czech President Vaclav Havel pointed to the value of truth. Glucksmann views the importance of the revolution of 1989 in that dissidents linked the fight for freedom with a fight for truth.

For Vaclav Havel it is necessary to differentiate between truth and a simple piece of information where "truth is not anonymous and is guaranteed by someone". "Truth" also prevents taking oneself too seriously, manifested often by "self-admiration, fanaticism, obsession, but also a sort of cautiousness". Havel also developed the idea that a society exposed to freedom after a long period of its absence tends to show the symptoms of a prisoner after his release. He stated that it is relatively easy to get used to the certainties of daily routine and to not having to make decisions. Similarly, a citizen that acquires freedom becomes capable of "the best and the worst", noted Andre Glucksmann.

Journalist Jan Urban spoke of identity as a function of freedom and a task for all. It is either constructed negatively - against someone, or positively - for something. "If I aspire to something, I may have enemies, but only through their own will."

In the question and answer session, the audience raised the issue of financing public media or the insufficient historical awareness of today's young generation.

In the second debate entitled Freedom and Its Adversaries: Perspective of Central Europe, the Czech-French political scientist Jacques Rupnik, like Petr Pithart, spoke of the less obvious enemies, who use the language of freedom and form part of the democratic transformation, but who discard the legacy of the dissident movement. Using Isaiah Berlin's concept of freedom, Rupnik stressed the preponderance of its negative delimitation, i.e. the non-interference of state. The excessive spread of liberalism put the state in a position of the enemy and led to untransparent privatization and unrestricted greed. "We chose the quickest way – that of imitation."

Adam Michnik, editor-in-chief of Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, partially subscribed to Rupnik's view on the emptiness of democracy. He warned of corruption leading to nihilism, cynicism and fundamentalism, not only religious or ethnic, but also market fundamentalism.

The issue of "civic fridity", resulting from a combination of civic helplessness and civic indifference, was raised by Slovak sociologist Martin Bútorá. Not only politicians are to blame for this, people themselves do not feel the urgency of the problem, he said, linking this to the rise of individualism.

The Czech-British playwright Tom Stoppard highlighted a change in the dynamics of freedom. "Over the last century we have gotten used to an assumption which no longer holds: that freedom gets lost and regained in overnight acts of great drama and possibly violence." Nowadays, this happens almost invisibly.

Turning specifically to East Europe, Andriej Piontkovsky, Russian political writer and scientist, spoke of capitalism being a vital component of "putinism" and dismissed theories claiming that capitalism inevitably leads to democracy. Putinism has to be seen in an international context - how it corrupts other countries, but also how it is vulnerable to democratization in its proximity. "What can we do to have democracy in Russia? Help Ukraine!"

Corruption was the main theme of the subsequent discussion with the audience. While Bútorá highlighted the importance of fighting it on the individual level, Michnik sees the solution in legal action. Corruption is in his opinion here to stay. However he admits that "history contains an element of surprise", recalling the pessimism in Poland prior to the fall of communism. Bútorá agreed, saying that "there will be obstacles and barriers, both hidden and visible, but only if you try, can you know what the result will be".

We can handle more easily enemies than the false friends of freedom, Michnik added at the end, while Stoppard alerted: "You have to be worried about what is happening in the countries, where these things are not overt – my country, France, Germany..."

The last debate of the day hosted former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who is of Czech origin. Students were given an opportunity to ask the former diplomat questions regarding, for example, the role and perception of the Czech Republic in the world today. The debate was co-organized by the Czech student initiative Inventory of Democracy.

Madeleine Albright was actively involved in the Czechoslovak democratic transition after 1989. Today, she and others in the US regret that the Czechs failed to make use of the opportunity presented to them by the recent European Union Presidency or that the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty was so complicated. "I really don't understand what your President is doing, I always thought that the Czechs belong in Europe."

Madeleine Albright spoke of the Czech Republic as being able to assume a specific role in the world. "It would be good if you took elsewhere what you learned - such as how to build a new democracy. There are lots of things a small country can teach others." The foreign policy of such a country differs from that of a big one, "one has to play the cards one holds".

US foreign policy was another topic brought up in the discussion. Madeleine Albright identified Afghanistan as the biggest challenge currently facing the US, but also other states. With regard to these and other challenges, she considers the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to be the key platform for cooperation. Every member state has to contribute to NATO's activities. Addressing the Czechs, she said that "NATO is not a philanthropic or scholar organization, but a responsibility. And you assumed it by becoming members." She also touched upon the new Strategic Concept for NATO and mentioned her role in the working group.

Speaking of US relations with Russia, Madeleine Albright finds it necessary to "cooperate where we can, and compete where we must", embracing Joe Biden's idea of a "reset" in mutual relations.

Europe is a very important and the best partner America has. "A lot of people think that America does not want a strong Europe, but we need it. We follow the debates and hope for a strong President of the European Union." However, for Europe to become an equal partner to the United States, it has to think more about what is going on outside of its borders.

Replying to a question concerning the Nobel Peace Prize recently awarded to the US President, Madeleine Albright said that "Obama didn't nominate himself", adding that "people expect a lot from him and it is difficult for him to receive it now". According to her, Václav Havel and Bill Clinton also deserve the prize.

The day ended with a concert entitled "It's here, at last!" at Prague Crossroads, organized by Vize 97 foundation. Featured were musicians known not only for their music, but also for their advocacy of civil rights: Lou Reed, Joan Baez, Suzanne Vega and Renee Fleming. The Czech scene was represented by jazzman Jiri Stivin and the Prague Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra. As Vaclav Havel said, during the Velvet Revolution, music played an important role. The event was also attended by the current Czech President, Vaclav Klaus, who gave a short speech. Video greetings were sent from American President Barack Obama, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Angela Merkel, as well as musicians, including Bono Vox and Mick Jagger.