

Reflections on Poland and America: A View from Warsaw

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In November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. Two years later, a postmodern-style socialist was elected President of the United States of America. The two events marked a giant step toward full implementation of the all-too-easily-forgotten "theory of convergence". Openly, the theory proclaimed civilizing influence of Western democracies and market economy on the Soviet Union. In fact, West and East were to meet half-way.

The first who tried to implant socialism in the U.S. was, of course, President Franklin D. Roosevelt. As befitted the most freedom loving people in the world, Americans resisted the trend for decades. But the silent majority of the nation was being made more and more silent, and alienated, while the liberal political and media elites were taking over the lead, with the consent of corporate America and seeming passivity of the Republican establishment. As a result, the fundamental values upon which America was built are now being questioned. (At the same time however, despite all the current confusion, it is still hardly believable that Clintonites can lure America into the socialistic camp for good.)

Unlike in America, in Western Europe socialism has been advancing without much hindrance for decades already. Under the American nuclear umbrella, more public money could be poured into demoralizing people by welfare whose essence is a massive redistribution of responsibility from the individual to the institution. Of course, Western European socialism is of a modern brand - with a strong private sector, some state owned big companies and high taxes (thus allowing state intervention on a large scale and, in effect, corrupting both big business and societies at large). One should note that the average government share of GDP in the four largest economies of Europe - Britain, France, Germany and Italy - comes to slightly less than 50 per cent (the U.S. government share of GDP stands at 38 per cent, but beware - Clintonites may try to introduce the value added tax which now averages 17 per cent in Europe).

The Soviets and their communist vassals, well aware of imminent bankruptcy of the communist states as well as of the demoralization and dechristianization of the West, did not risk much in gradually yielding power to the democratic opposition in Central-East Europe. Indeed, President Reagan was the last warrior, courageous enough to speak in plain terms, and call the Soviet Union the evil empire. But he was crippled by the Irangate in 1986 and, soon, the media pundits' campaign hailing Mr. Gorbachev as the sole spiritus movens of democratic

reforms in the Soviet hemisphere was in full swing. The role of "Solidarity" in the process of accelerating the Soviet demise, let alone the role of President Reagan, was forgotten. Nobody in his or her right mind could expect that the West would support making the communists accountable for the evil decades inflicted on hundreds of millions of humans. Forty years after Central-East Europe was handed to the Soviets (by an act of betrayal in the case of Poland), justice and common sense were not high-priced.

The preparations for political changes in Central-East Europe started in the mid-eighties. In Poland, they amounted mostly to building ground for future (i.e., when the first democratic government is established) share in controlling the banking system and privatization of the most promising companies. At the last stage, the communist party was refurbished and proclaimed social-democratic. In fact, the "enlightened" leadership of the party consists of "technocrats" eager and now well positioned to control an important part of Polish economy and politics (the former controlled not only by political means but also by Communists turned entrepreneurs, managers, bankers, etc., all this thanks to being allowed to appropriate a portion of the state wealth). Putting aside different histories of oppressors and victims of yesterday, both the ex-communist Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej and Unia Demokratyczna of Tadeusz Mazowiecki (as well as the now doomed to oblivion Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny) have vested interests in preserving the economic and social order as envisioned by UD and KLD. Bound, however, by the party's constituency and the party's rank and file (former communist aparatchiks) the SLD's leadership has to sound, and act, apparently inconsistently sometimes.

To be sure, in 1989, after 44 years of state socialism, many in Polish society favored the welfare state and took for granted the state's obligation to provide employment for the citizenry. Nevertheless, the society at large had staunchly opposed Communism. Characteristically, the last huge street demonstration of "Solidarity" members, organized under the rather-modern-style-socialistic banner in February 1993, turned to a fervent anticommunist and patriotic rally.

After the semi-free elections in June 1989, there was a chance to mobilize the society to sacrifices unimaginable in the West. But that would have required making the communists accountable for what they had done to the country and for the hardships which would necessarily follow. All that was needed was holding the new parliamentary elections in 1990 after the Polish Communist Party had dissolved itself, and banning the high ranking communists from running for office (passing a bill on the criminal character of communist rule in Poland should have followed). But the victory in 1989 was played down by the center-left intellectuals who had dominated the "Solidarity" movement and led the Round Table negotiations. Communists were granted a pardon by Tadeusz Mazowiecki who announced the rule of law as if Poland had had another law than the one

passed by communist legislators. In short, people were led to confusion and alienated, the more so as soon the center-left (most notably, Adam Michnik's "Gazeta Wyborcza") and the left-left began dangling yet another red herring before the public: the alleged threat to democracy in the form of rising clericalism.

Poles are a peaceful people, according to Norman Davies, perhaps too peaceful. They are fundamentally religious and loyal to Roman Catholicism. They see themselves as citizens of Christian Europe. Too bad for them since there is no Christian Europe, while the real Europe finds no reason to welcome them. Nobody denies Western help but, taking needs into account, this help is symbolic and rather costly. In the period of prolonged European recession, Poland was greeted with protectionism and unfair trade practices of the European Common Market. Worse, Poland is paying a huge debt incurred by Communists. Still worse, Poland is not only unwelcome economically, but also politically. With its gaze fixed on the West, Polish foreign politics has been marked with indecision about what to do with the Western humbug such as, to take the most transparent example, the last initiative of President Clinton, the so-called Partnership for Peace. Indeed, denying Poland any specific prospects for joining NATO because of Russian reservations came as a shock to the society at large.

All in all, Poles have to learn to rely on themselves only (which is not bad), aware that, unlike in the case of Russians, odds are against them in the West (which is too bad). At the same time, the West has no right to see an alibi in the fact that the partly ex-communist Left is now in power in Poland. After all, the head of SLD, Mr. Kwasniewski, is no more a leftist than President Clinton is. And, curiously enough, nobody from the Polish ex-communist political leadership can match Mr. Strobe Talbott as a now Russian and, earlier, Soviet apologist.