Visegrad Insight is the main platform of debate and analysis on Central Europe.

This report has been developed in cooperation with the Open Lithuania Foundation and the Jan Nowak-Jezioranski College of Eastern Europe.

Rethinking the Democratic Future: Lessons from the 20th Century is a project co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union.
Considering the current decline of democratic consensus across the different states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), as well as challenges met by democracy globally, 1989 stands in vivid contrast in terms of hope and belief in the rules and democratic values promised by a unified Europe. This juxtaposition of circumstances provides a moment for reflection on 1989 and the subsequent transition.

With this in mind, the Open Lithuania Fund (OLF), the Res Publica Foundation and the Jan Nowak-Jezioranski College of Eastern Europe launched a project "Rethinking the Democratic Future: Lessons from the 20th Century", generously funded by the European Commission’s Europe for Citizens Programme.

During the project, a mix of online consultations, public events and in-depth interviews with past activists, historians, experts and civil society representatives were conducted. A variety of issues were discussed: from 1989 as a cultural memory and the polarisation of peaceful revolutions through ‘ownership’ over the symbolic meaning attached with 1989, including the imitation thesis, to the perils of transition and the legacy of the Soviet politics. Special attention was given to the post-1989 generation’s perspective on the highlighted year.

One of the key takeaways of the project was the decisive role of civil mobilisation and civil disobedience.

In 1989, civil power grew out of the small acts of disobedience to Soviet ideology and rule. In a democracy, meaningful change in policies, first and foremost, requires a capacity to navigate the democratic institutions and processes. A somewhat naïve, and unfortunately widespread, belief is that an active civil society is a natural byproduct of democratic rule or that it can take root immediately following the collapse of another system. One of the key consequences of this belief in our focus region is the lack of sustainable investment in the civil society sector, with most of the organisations relying on international project-driven donor funding. As a result, citizen capacity for meaningful participation in the democratic process in many countries remains limited.

In addition, many self-organising groups during the previous system – such as workers’ or ecology movements – emerged in response to the inaction and ignorance of the state, and it was natural that these groups of people stood in opposition to the government. In contrast, in a democracy, we still need to learn to treat civil society as equal partners in governance, not only as watchdogs of the government, picking up the slack.
For the past few years, we have been witnessing the reemergence of civilian mobilisation and civil disobedience in response to the growing abuse of powers and corruption. The arrival of tech-savvy generations poses new challenges to various tactics of civil power and civil liberties, providing the much-needed hope for self-mobilising citizens reassuming political power.

While 1989 can offer limited lessons here, it does suggest the need for leadership that, beyond protests and civil disobedience, would transform the demands of people into policies. This means that the role of civil society is more important than ever, undertaking the challenge of civil education and democratic participation.

This very report offers a non-exhaustive insight into the debate we have managed to animate across Europe and raise important recommendations for civil society to take into consideration when addressing the mounting challenges of today and tomorrow.

Visegrad Insight’s original, interactive design thinking and mind-mapping methods brought together a diverse group of independent and distinguished voices in a scenario-building workshop which generated a number of recommendations that civil society and decision-makers at the policy level should consider when programming their activities.

First, civil society overall – often captured by the anti-political sentiment – must reconsider its historical path and ask itself whether democracy in 1989 would be possible if activists decided to keep their distance from interacting with politicians and building up non-partisan constituencies in support of the cause. Today, more often than not, civil society hosts refugees from the awful world of politics. But the political world ignores the considerations of those who do not speak up and eventually tends to expand beyond what we recognise as legitimately democratic limits of power. Civil society’s duty must be to keep this political expansion in check and that often requires crossing set and seemingly-safe boundaries.

Throughout the meetings, we could observe how important the role of memory about past democratic achievements is in civil education, and that this education is not currently being delivered nor is it building bridges between the past and future as it ought to. With this in mind, a bold proposal emerged to redesign civil education from scratch and initiate such programmes at the primary school level.

Obviously, civil society organisations (CSOs) always look at practicalities and many voices raised the need to adapt funding schemes from public resources. Activists pointed out that, especially due to the pandemic, the needs for social projects are dynamically changing and that mental health seems to be one of the future key areas to work in.

Another strong voice that came from the sector of CSOs concerned private donors, which not often enough encourage collaborative funding schemes. The example of the Visegrad Fund and the European Commission programming could significantly improve the situation by encouraging to consolidate and coordinate many partners instead of inducing them for fundraising rivalry.

Finally, we have to stress the importance of the local community level and focus more attention on the trends and ideas that shape our democracies from the bottom up. Just like democracy needs the local press, it also needs local activism to keep delivering on its promises of equal rights and individual freedoms.

“Democracy dies in darkness”, so it takes millions of candles – often from small remote communities – to light the way and keep the good work going.
Scenario: The Civil Society Sinkhole

Civil society organisations are squeezed from every angle in a world made less accessible to funding and spaces to operate, limiting the very democratic freedoms of everyday citizenry.

Interview: Nation-building and Sovietisation in Lithuania

The extent and lasting impact of Soviet cultural institutions in Central and Eastern Europe are questioned from new perspectives in this interview with Nerija Putinaite.
Case Study: Hungary

The relative benefits from Hungary’s ‘Goulash Communism’ in the 1980s changed how the people viewed the transition to democracy. This study juxtaposes Hungary’s post-1989 world with that of its Visegrad neighbours.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our authors shed light on possible policy responses to the civil society sinkhole scenario.

Interview: The Historic Role of Solidarity

Selections from an interview with Rafał Dutkiewicz which looks into the origins of ‘Solidarity’ in Wrocław and assesses, with the benefit of hindsight, where the movement succeeded and faltered with hopes for how those lessons could be utilised today.
Since the democratic transition, which began in 1989, Central Europe (CE) has undergone considerable social and economic changes. Yet, many feel disconnected from their shared past of authoritarian and communist traditions—a defining experience for the generations before them. This unclear relationship with the past combined with the high and often unfounded expectations towards democracy has left them open to thoughts and interpretations discredited by history.

Just as the Hungarian attempt to converge with the West failed during the early democratisation process—leading to skilled, illiberal politicians capturing power from weak state institutions and the contemporary rise of populism in Central Europe—the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has put a similar strain on most CE countries. With cooperation from international democratic structures diminishing and public faith in Western security structures and their own democratic institutions decreasing markedly, the countries which have transitioned since 1989 feel left to their own devices.

In these trying circumstances, many governments in Central Europe are forced to look east and west for developmental opportunities and support. While mostly adhering to EU regulations, investments (and influence) from Russia and China increase in the Baltics as well as in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. The national governments—stretched to the brink and borrowing larger and larger sums—need to reprioritise their budgets. The national education services and police and other public servants (sans medical care professionals) see their wages temporarily frozen.

By the end of 2021, in urban and rural communities, undertrained and poorly-funded educators—who have to deal with the compounded challenges of digital and in-person instruction—struggle to teach basic critical thinking skills to students, many of whom lack reliable internet connection as well as appropriate IT tools and support.

Moreover, intermittent national lockdowns increase the amount and severity of mental health issues for all generations as well as increase the occurrences of domestic violence and abuse. Relevant NGOs and government facilities are inadequate to deal with the level of demand for their services.

By 2023, the younger generations—who have grown up in the world of disinformation and lack the much-needed social support—become easily indoctrinated in propaganda from far-right movements and information sources. These disruptive social mindsets linked with the lack of a solid educational background puts them at a disadvantage for future employment where jobs will be scarce due to the rise of automation, and those available will require more nuanced understanding and capabilities.
In these discordant environments, the newly reinforced economic ties with Russia and China meet many CE countries’ needs to diversify their prospects as much as possible. The natural interchange between the countries eventually leads to an explosion of disinformation from non-democratic forces in the east, mottling the region’s already murky media spheres.

Opportunistic political actors further exploit the situation to increase their own standing by occasionally supporting and blaming Russia and China but so too the EU. Feeling domestic pressures rising, governments seek to control more of the public sphere through varying initiatives, often with questionable, non-democratic motives.

The Lithuanian and Latvian governments follow Estonia’s lead by replacing some high-level officials and leaders of non-partisan state institutions with party apparatchiks.

Viktor Orbán’s monopoly over the media in Hungary becomes a regional paradigm echoed by governments that begin buying out hundreds of local media outlets and solidifying the control over the information available to much of the population.

The situation is compounded by the Czech trend of privatisation and conglomeration of the media – first seen by the PPF corporation – which is mimicked by similar interests and companies in the Baltics, Bulgaria and Slovakia. A barrage of mergers and buyouts leave the populations with either state-owned media or large multilayered conglomerates offering a very limited scope of information to the public.

Meanwhile, Poland’s push for social media regulation on the EU level is successful by invoking and rebranding concepts like information sovereignty. Due to the complexity of the issues and difficulty of enforcement, the particulars of how the law should be implemented are delegated to each individual country.

By 2024, these new regulations allow for non-democratic and disinformation-heavy administrations to create a rubric for acceptable discussion, effectively using the law to censor any stories the governments deem undesirable - greatly hampering free speech in the region - while accelerating misinforming messages.

This puts civil society organisations (CSOs) in a bind. Many find it nearly impossible to walk the tightrope between adherence to the new rules while accomplishing their varied stated goals such as increasing the levels of education in impoverished or rural communities or providing further education and training for adult populations. The effects spill across sectors harming programmes raising environmental awareness as well as those working against disinformation activities and non-democratic actors.

The CSOs compete heavily for limited resources, and worse, as the domestic and regional money for non-governmental organisational activity dwindles, they become almost wholly reliant on international sources of income.

Conspiracy theories about the foreign influence on these initiatives grow in number and are echoed by politicians who make use of the situation to propose stricter government oversight of where and how international funding can be spent.

With such draconian control over the public sphere, many CSOs begin to fade into insignificance. At the same time, underprepared populates must contend with a gestalt of disinformation, rising political polarisation and repeated attacks on their democratic institutions.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Build a hybrid education system offering subsidised or free tutelage
- Challenge antiquated teaching methodologies by re-centring attention on student-focused learning which helps enable critical engagement with content
- Increase funding for education across the board, including new brick and mortar buildings but also opportunities for continued teacher development, which involves regional and international travel
- Allocate funding for mental health support programmes across the region
- Encourage local, community-driven schools to be built across countries
- Keep public broadcasting systems independent by introducing license fees or alternative methods of funding, such as crowdsourcing
- Reconfigure part of the primary education programme to include lessons in civil education and have them develop steadily throughout their instructive lives
- Start building common interest partnerships for civil society organisations by making use of the goodwill and solidarity that has arisen out of Europe’s collective fight against the COVID-19 pandemic
- Change donor strategy by taking into account and assigning resources for collaborative projects (rather than competitive) which should result in more cooperation and having a greater impact
- Allow for more funding for micro-grants that are focused on addressing the needs and issues of local municipalities and communities
Nerija Putinaite is an Associate Professor at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University, studying the Soviet transition and identity [re]formations. She is author of *Trimmed Pine: Atheism as personal resolve in Soviet Lithuania* as well as the more recent *Ringing Clay: the Lithuanian Song Festival and the Trilogy of Justinas Marcinkevicius as Pillars of Soviet Lithuanianness*, which explores the relationship between the different forms of national identity, its manipulations and adaptations to the Soviet regime, the thin line between collaboration and resistance rooted in national culture and practices.

The phrase “Ringing Clay” is an ambiguous metaphor. A useable object can be formed with clay, yet it remains largely unstable. This is how Putinaite imagines the ‘Lithuanianness’ coined by the local Lithuanian government and central government in Moscow during the Soviet era – deliberately constructed, simple, crude, but useful for the system. Simona Merkinaite interviewed Putinaite about the process of Sovietisation and atheisation, including the subsequent impact of the idea of resistance rooted in national identity and culture versus the ‘foreign’ ideology from the Soviet regime and its effect on post-soviet state building.

As for the complicated relationship between the [Soviet] regime and nationality, how does the origin of the Lithuanian Song Festival change the meaning of the Singing Revolution?

The Song Festival in the Soviet era created a certain sense of community, there is no denying that. Another question is was it enough to mobilise the political revolt in the long run? In my opinion, no.

The narrative that communities flocked together, their sense of nationality strengthened and grew until it blossomed into independence, that the singing nation erupted from the clutches of the regime through songs, reveals only a small, simplistic part of a complex truth. It is necessary to look at the broader context, what was happening in the Soviet Union at the time, and how the country’s, as well as regime’s, politics were changing.

At first, the glasnost policy allowed for partial public criticism of the small ills, but eventually this evolved into criticism of the regime, which the government was no longer able to control. Under pressure from the West, in 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev also was forced to release part of the political prisoners who had joined the ranks of the regime’s critics in Lithuania.
An example of a newer, folklore-based political project was the Naisiai phenomenon in Lithuania. You described it as a ‘pseudo utopia’ that came together from two things: the Soviet narrative of a beautiful life and pagan mythology, that is, the orientation towards nature and the human connection with it, characteristic of both. The phenomenon of Naisiai, consistently developed as a simulation of an idyllic small community, has become quite a ‘springboard’ to power. Naisiai established the image of the “Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union” party head, R. Karbauskis, as an ordinary person, a well-organised and orderly community leader, and consequently the new political program started to expand the utopia of Naisiai within Lithuania. Was this ‘mix’ one of the reasons for the temporary success of this project (2016) and what does it tell us about society?

The Naisiai project is interesting primarily as a local occurrence, but politically, it is an important and interesting phenomenon exactly because it did not grow into a national project. It was presented as ethno-nationalist which was based on Soviet and post-Soviet images of a pagan Lithuanian worldview and a prosperous happy settlement, a collective farm. The question is – why was it unsuccessful?

In 2016, before the election, it seemed that success for the project would be unattainable. Thirty years have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in that time, the understanding of patriotism and identity has changed, expanded and developed; it was filled with new experiences and meanings.

Suddenly a political power emerged, the leader of which returns to ethnocentric myths – to pagan deities, not excluding the cult of the Earth, and its cultivation and they do manage to win. However, following the elections, these provisions were only developed a little, due, I think, to a better understanding of public attitudes. There were also the anti-European hints in the party’s electoral program, but those remained untouched and were never developed further after the election, seemingly for the same reason.

This shows that society is not easy to manipulate and national feelings are not so simply constructed. This is reflected in an analysis of the Soviet period, which offers the same conclusion.

The regime would gladly not have integrated national elements into politics as they are always dangerous. However, it was understood that if national sentiments and practices were completely ruled out, it would be difficult and confusing for the regime to establish itself. Karbauskis’ phenomenon was similar – he tried to gain popularity by ‘playing the nationality card’; but his attempts to achieve this through the primitising of nationality were unsuccessful, nor did he consider that national images had changed significantly over the past three decades.

Karbauskis tried to revert to Soviet-like images of nationality, for example by emphasising humanity’s relationship with nature, leaving other forms of national identity aside. However, during the years of independence, society has steadily changed, and the consolidation of the national community constructed itself based not on images of nature and Earth, but on patriotic stories of sacrifice and struggle.

The main rousing, patriotic image is, of course, the story of the post-war partisans, which occupies a very important place in the nation’s current self-perception. The story is patriotic in a very different sense to that of the Soviets. This story forms the basis of the Homeland Union – the Lithuanian Christian Democratic Party, without neglecting ethnocentric nationality.

An interesting question is why this nationality-focused project did not work as intended in Lithuania but may have worked elsewhere. Perhaps, at least in comparison to Poland, Lithuania is a far more secular society. In Poland, ethnicity is associated with Catholic self-awareness and even some Catholic messianism. In Lithuania, it is difficult to imagine that the symbiosis of the nation and the Catholic faith would become an explosive political mixture.
This factor also plays a key role in how liberal democracy is perceived today by the young people of the region and underlines tendencies which could provide an explanation for the rise of populism in the post-socialist bloc – especially in Poland and Hungary.

The economic and social drivers behind the revolts also change the perspective on democratic backsliding occurring today: first, it reduces the meaning of political action to the economic and social wellbeing, and second, it takes attention away from institutional and constitutional erosion by focusing on the economic and social needs.

The international consensus among academics that the world order founded on liberalism and democracy is built on unshakable foundations has been tested to the breaking point. The functioning and legitimacy of states have been questioned by populist political forces building on this sense of instability. However, they are not just dissatisfied with the performance of their particular governments; they are increasingly critical of liberal democracy itself. This is a tendency that has already caused considerable unrest among academics and researchers studying this new phenomenon.

Regardless of the fact that Central Europeans have achieved a higher quality of life and better prospects than any of their predecessors, they are rapidly becoming disillusioned by the form of government and institutional framework which has served as the foundation for their current welfare and the relative peace on a global scale.

In 1989, people wanted democracy which they thought would lead to ‘Western’ standards of living. When despite this democratisation Hungary did not catch up with the West, the trust in democracy faltered.

The problem not only lies with millennials. According to the participating experts throughout all of the project interviews of this study, older Hungarians also seems to be critical of the post-1989 period, often sentiments are directly tied to the perceived and actual levels of quality-of-life people are experiencing.

The qualitative interview conducted with the student participants confirmed the following phenomenon: disconnect from their past of authoritarian and communist tradition – a defining experience for the generations before them – young Hungarians are valuing liberal institutions less and less. This unclear relationship with the past combined with the high (and often unfounded) expectations towards democracy led them to be receptive towards thoughts and interpretations which have been discredited by history.

Krisztina Arató described part of the problems facing Hungarian citizens: “There are many civil organisations, but the problem is with the indi-
vidual. The people don’t want to belong to any organisations; they want to solve the problem alone, [and] they don’t ask for help. Thus, the quality of the civil organisation system, the civil society is not adequate, but in [other] educational systems - for example in the USA - there are courses about civil participation. It’s very practical (how to organise, how to solve a problem). In Hungary, we...never got this type of knowledge in the official curricula."

“Political socialisation is...why the younger generations are not having real connections with 1989. It wasn’t really a successful part of the change. Young Hungarian generations are the new silent generation; they are really passive.” – added Viktor Papházi, who researches the political participation of young Hungarians.

To counter this, all experts agreed that much more effort should be allocated to education and past developments should be put into context.

The participants contended that civil education is an invaluable asset that could change all transformation processes. The young generations can be influenced not just in civil participation but also in democracy. It is not easy to learn, that is why we should start to teach democracy in the youngest level as soon as possible. But this would still not be enough to arm the society with knowledge and skills to be resilient towards misinterpretations of 1989, and thus having a better understanding of everything that has happened in the region in the past 30 years.

Moreover, there has to be a strong political will to delegate decisions to local communities and that’s how politics can gain people’s trust; a serious problem because trust has been decreasing in post-1989 liberal institutions and there is a lack of activism within the civil society.

The problem in Hungary has been exacerbated by the current political leadership, which has stepped towards centralisation. But how involved were the civilians and smaller communities in the developments around 1989?

“1989 wasn’t a revolution, but a systemic change,” claimed both Gábor Fodor and György Schöpflin, who were active politicians in the process. “And in fact, Imre Nagy’s funeral was the only public event with a large number of participants. Mass participation is very important for the legitimacy of a democracy, which was almost entirely missing from Hungary.

In the Baltic States and Czechoslovakia, the people were mobilised, there were mass protests, but in Hungary, the funeral was the only mobilising event, and the whole transformation was beyond peoples’ heads.”

Dániel Bartha and Krisztina Arató highlighted that in other countries, such as the Baltic states the newly achieved statehood was able to assemble and to legitimise the hardships of the years that followed the democratisation while in Poland, the totalitarian nature of the regime made living conditions very harsh and kept the standard of living extremely low.

Thus, after the transition, a minimal increase brought a stronger sense of legitimacy for democracy. This was not true for Hungary where the standard of living in the final years of socialism was considerably higher in comparison to other Eastern Bloc countries, referred to as ‘Goulash Communism’. The only reason why it was able to be maintained was the western loans which the socialist Kádár leadership was taking to maintain its power (more below) by providing minor improvements in the quality of living on a yearly basis.

When the transition took place, the offer from the old-new elites was a better, Western-like standard of living – a promise which was never fulfilled, and which has a fundamental role to play in the perception of liberal democracy and market economy today in Hungary.

This circumstance affects the evaluation of the state of democracy today – people see no clear break from the totalitarian past and hence distrust political process altogether. Another side of this thesis is that the 1989 revolutions are not over because the transition was a step-by-step process, and our countries are still advancing towards fuller renewal.

The experts agreed that there are a number of conclusions to be drawn from the nature of the regime change. The missing revolution and the fact that both old and new elites were exploiting the opportunities provided by the lack of strong leadership in the period resulted in democratic institutions which gradually lost credibility. The trust in democratic institutions was high in the early 1990s but became a record low in the past few years.

The revolutions of 1989 teach us that human dignity is at the heart of any social change.

This thesis is the most idealised version of the past, but also may be considered as a motive that expands beyond any narrowed political visions and goals, the revolutions were provoked by non-political motives, but also by motives not reducible to social/economic. In turn, reflecting on today – it allows us to identify the reasons that may provoke and are probably already provoking political disobedience and protests.

Dorian Elek

Case study participants:

- György Schöpflin, former MEP
- Gábor Fodor, former MP
- Viktor Papházi, Researcher ELTE
- Dr Krisztiina Arató, Head of the Political Science Department, ELTE
- Dániel Bartha, Director for Foreign Affairs, Egyensúly Intézet
- Júlia Lakatos, International Director, Centre for Fair Political Analysis
- Máté Hajba, Director, Hungarian Free Market Foundation
- Tibor Mándi, Teacher, ELTE
- Students: Soma Sárkány, Tamás Gebei, Dániel Varga, Péter Újvári, Dávid Almási, Tamás Mátyás, Dávid Buka, Bálint Mesterházy, Bálint Lukács, Botond Póti, Norbert Jenei, Simon Benedek
A conversation with Rafał Dutkiewicz, the former-Mayor of Wrocław and former Solidarity organizer in Wrocław.

What does Solidarity as a movement and an idea mean today?

Today, Solidarity is just one of my memories. It was both a movement and an idea. Today, using the term Solidarity, I often think of European solidarity. However, I remember a beautiful quotation from Fritz Stern’s Germany in Five Incarnations:

“And so from afar I watched as Wrocław in the eighties of the last century took on a new noble meaning: becoming the stronghold of Solidarity, that Polish social movement that led to the self-freedom of Central Europe and the unification of Germany (the fifth Germany in my life).”

It was therefore no coincidence that I installed Stern’s bust with this quotation in Berlin, inside the Building of the Brandenburg-Berlin Academy of Sciences and in Wrocław, in the University Library where his book collection was placed after this distinguished historian passed away.

Is it accurate to talk about Solidarity as one unified movement or was it a multiplicity of movements, decentralized and organised at the local level and around different ideas and issues, such as ecology, worker’s rights?

Solidarity was a movement for workers’ rights but also, as I have already mentioned, a libertarian movement. It is interesting and beautiful how it led to a peaceful revolution.

Nevertheless, Solidarity, even during the period of martial law, has remained very diversified. In 1989, Solidarity, the largest social movement in the history of Poland, was allowed to thrive in the citizens’ committees. In the beginning, these committees were set up by a top-down method – initially at the Civic Committee affiliated with Lech Wałęsa and later in large provincial cities. As time went by, numerous committees were set up spontaneously and there were many of them: in housing estates, parishes and factories.

In the course of the preparations for the June elections in 1989, when our candidates were being nominated to run for the Sejm and the Senate, we sought to reflect the different aspects of Solidarity’s focus areas – such as working classes, farming communities, ecology, employee unions, politics and the academia. The role of intellectuals was of the utmost importance for the Solidarity movement.

Were the hopes of Solidarity movement justified? What mistakes
were made during 1989 and the following transition that may have led to polarisation and the decline in support for key ideas Solidary stood for, namely personal freedom, the idea of a unified Europe, human dignity?

Solidarity has fulfilled its historical role.

I would also like to remind that Poland’s membership in the European Union is approved by a very significant and stable majority of Poles. (It is quite opposite with Poles’ acceptance of joining the eurozone.)

The Polish civilisation’s transformation is also an important success of our country.

I was the Mayor of Wrocław for sixteen years, and I am rooted in the Solidarity movement. At the end of my tenure, Wrocław was the European Capital of Culture, became the ‘European champion’ in job creation (No. 1 in the EU, according to Eurostat) and was ranked third among the fastest-growing cities in the European Union. Wrocław was preceded only by Dublin and Prague.

All these achievements are resultant of three driving forces: Solidarity, reform of the local government and Poland’s joining the European Union.

It must not be said that personal freedom and human dignity are not respected by Poles. Yes, they are not respected by some Poles; unfortunately, by some Poles currently in power.

However, the growing role of populism and nationalism is not just a Polish speciality, although it is true that the populist and illiberal Law and Justice (PiS) has won the recent elections.

The causes of this phenomenon are universal rather than local. However, tracing the mistakes we have made, I would surely mention the lost confidence of the citizens in the strength of public institutions and the lost understanding of their own impact in shaping these institutions.

I would also add the neglected sensitivity to social needs, presented by ruling authorities prior to the seizure of power by Law and Justice.

What can we learn from the Solidarity movement in the fight for liberal democracy and active citizenship?

Solidarity has taken place under certain historical and social conditions. Today, the world and Poland look and, if I may say so, operate differently.

The experience of peaceful transformation is, however, more than historic.

Jarek Kaczyński’s late brother, Lech Kaczyński, told me twice that the 4th of June, 1989, was one of the most important days of his life.

On the doorstep of the pandemic, on the eve of the crisis, I had an extremely naive hope that Jarosław Kaczyński would take the last chance to become a statesman and invite the opposition to talk about holding elections safely, to work together on a strategy for the current crisis.

Why do you think that the people that stood “shoulder to shoulder” 30 years ago today find themselves on radically opposite ends of the political spectrum?

This year, 40 years have passed since the foundation of Solidarity. It’s almost two generations. The founders of Solidarity are retiring, some of them have already retired, others are slowly approaching retirement. I share my way of thinking with Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Lech Wałęsa and Władysław Frasyniuk. They were the ones who founded and constituted Solidarity.

I have a different way of thinking than Kornel Morawiecki or Jarosław Kaczyński. They, as you may know, neither founded nor constituted Solidarity. I am writing about this Solidarity that Fritz Stern observed from afar. This is the first point.

Secondly, already in 1989, there were many opponents to the idea of the Round Table. However, they constituted the minority. These days, the choice was very simple. What mattered was ‘what’ we chose, not ‘how’ it would be dealt with. Thus, we said yes to freedom, yes to democracy, yes to Europe. The goal was clear. Choosing a path to this goal has led to divisions.

The third issue is a certain universality of Poland’s current divisions, which are based, among other things, on the tensions that exist everywhere in the world between urban areas (especially metropolitan areas) and provincial areas. I do not evaluate these terms.

The ferocity of these Polish divisions partly results from the increasing shallowness of communication and the collapse of institutional authorities. Poland is no exception to this.

Finally, I cannot resist another impression.

The strength and aggression of the socio-populist, national option in Poland are merely the paroxysms of the old paradigm of thinking. The paradigm that is doomed to fade away and clear the way to greater openness and respect for others. In the name of Solidarity.

It remains to be seen whether I am too optimistic.

Simona Merkinaite
Visegrad Insight is the main platform of debate and analysis on Central Europe, that generates future policy directions for Europe from the region. It was established in 2012 by the Res Publica Foundation – an independent think tank in Warsaw with its flagship Polish language publication Res Publica Nowa and the New Europe 100, a network of leaders of tomorrow.
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