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## **Fear and Hope - Thirty Years After the Collapse of Communism**

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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness ... it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us”. This is how the beautiful book by Charles Dickens entitled “A Tale of Two Cities” begins. It is a book about the ancient order and the French Revolution – but it freely could be a beginning of a book about the year 1989. Exactly as 1789, 1989 was a moment in history full of open possibilities, but at the same time of quick decisions, failures and successes, to be assessed by the next generations.

The organizers have asked me to speak about the 30. Anniversary of the democratic breakthrough in Central and Eastern Europe, hope, and fear. Those are subjects so large that I will focus only on one subject, being political passions. A lot has been said in this conference about emotions, such as hope, fear, nostalgia, and anger. We heard fascinating interventions from scholars about their research on those in focus groups and opinion polls. Many of those were inspired by the newest findings in social psychology and neurobiology.

There is a lot of truth in the statement that elections nowadays are won not with sociological tools anymore – but with neurobiological ones. It could not be other way with the new technologies and media we live with. What I would like to propose, however, is what my field of research – history of ideas – has to say about emotions. The most fundamental lesson from this field – as described in works of political philosophers like Thomas Hobbes or Charles-Louis de Montesquieu - is that we should not speak of one fear, one hope, one nostalgia. These emotions come in many different forms and each of them can constitute a different political order.

After 1989, similarly as after 1945, it seemed that the goal of political changes could be only one: liberal democracy. With decades, this has changed. I argue that this is connected with a

wider process, taking place in Europe's collective memory. Namely, it is connected with a disappearance of a fundamental passion, which for decades formed our community of memory and was the basis of the European project. This passion was the fear of the past.

Fear poses an old European question about the community. The ancient Greek historian Thucydides once proposed a powerful intellectual image of it. In his famous book on the Peloponnesian war, he quotes Pericles' funeral oration, where Athenians are described as a people obedient to law. Their fear of law is based on their respect towards the state and experience of the past.

No one like the classical authors shows what passions are. They are not as much as modern psychology indicates, cognitive states relatively easy to educate. They rather seem to be powerful forces that shape human communities. In post-war Europe, fear of the past, most simply expressed by two German words – *nie wieder* – warned against repetition of totalitarian systems, atrocities of war, and genocide. This fear made us treat with suspicion every kind of ethnic nationalism. Its institutional embodiment were the foundations of the liberal order: rule of law, constitution, and division of powers. This shows exactly why the events of the Polish hot summer are so disquieting.

Many people in Europe today have concerns that illiberal politics mean the return of 1930s. Not only the flirt of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz with Jobbik, ONR marches in the Polish streets, and PiS dismantling the rule of law cause that anxiety. The popularity of like-minded groups is rapidly growing also outside Central and Eastern Europe. The polls show that Swedish Democrats take the first place, Alternative for Germany – second. In Italy, the extreme right just won the elections. On the liberal side of the political scene, this means a nervous search for a way to act. Accepting the historical necessity pushing us again into totalitarianism, however, is not a very liberal capitulation. And does not allow us understand the differences between present and past.

So the question is not so much about whether the past can repeat itself, but why illiberal politicians seem to be convincing for so many voters. Countless answers were uttered, but I consider most convincing the one saying that illiberalism manages to channel some very important social emotion which emerges after the expiration of the *nie wieder* era.

Shortly after Thucydides quotes Pericles' funeral oration, we find in his book a completely different portrait of the Athenians. It comes from the time of plague. Instead of fear of the past and the law, we see a new fear spreading: the fear of death, which means the fear of the future. This passion quickly leads to lawlessness. It spoils the political community, makes people think only about themselves, about their comfort. Hurriedly, they are satisfying every desire before death takes their lives.

Today in Europe we observe similar consequences of the shift from the fear of the past to the fear of the future. This first fear evaporated for many reasons. The witnesses of the Second World War are a rapidly shrinking social group. For years, we have been trying to transplant their memory to members of our community born after 1945. Testimonies were recorded and stupendous museums were built for millions of euros, such as the House of European History in Brussels or the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. Digitalized memories, however, cannot replace person's own experience.

The further digitalization of memory went on and the more sophisticated interactive exhibitions were built, the less Europeans understood from their own history, though. An excessive memory resulted in its shallowness. Many young people in my country wearing t-shirts with an anchor, the symbol of the Warsaw Uprising, do not understand how great tragedy this defeated uprising was. For a few hours every year they imagine being equal to the heroic participants of the event from 74 years ago. "The Warsaw Uprising is the only one that is more and more won over time", wrote recently the editor-in-chief of the right-wing "Gazeta Polska" on Twitter. This sentence truly sounds like a perfect example of what is called the narrative fallacy, which means our vulnerability to overinterpretation over incorrect knowledge of history.

When the fear of the past faded in Europe, another one imperceptibly took its place: fear of the future. It certainly has many sources. These include the loss of the welfare state, the disintegration of the European community and common identity. Right now, its most popular face is the face of a Syrian refugee.

Societies refusing to help the refugees, like mine, have usually been accused of selfishness and immaturity. But the key to understanding their behaviour is very strong fear. Central and Eastern European societies were afraid of losing the fruit of their extremely hard work

within the past 30 years. The fear of the refugee makes us, like the Athenians from Thucydides' book, defend our own comfort and use the accumulated affluence in a hurry. But it's not egoism: the refugee triggers a powerful fear of the soon-to-be-coming end of our culture.

This fear of the future was understood perfectly well by the illiberal politicians. They have been the only political force capable of embracing it. And they answered with a narration equalling the external threats to European Union with Brussels.

I started my talk with quoting Charles Dickens and I would like to return to him once more now. Just after the sentences I quoted earlier, he writes about the years preceding the French Revolution: "The period was so much like the present period...". This can also be said about our present day. Again, we live in the times of many open possibilities, quick change, and quick actions, which are to be assessed by the next generations.

One conclusion might be that unless the European liberals understand the consequences of the shift from fear of the past to the fear of the future, they will not be able to face the current wave of illiberalism. However, they must not take offence at the passions. If citizens today find them so appealing, liberals should not allow the illiberal politicians to be the only ones to channel them. Both Emmanuel Macron in France and Ms. Zuzana Čaputová in Slovakia were the ones to show that this is possible. In their interventions they were capable of integrating passions into his rhetoric, pointing out that apart of fear there is also a very important one: hope for a better future.

But another conclusion coming right from the classic political thinking is that being passionate is not enough, because there are better and worse passions from a moral point of view. This is particularly important for me as a Polish person. Contrary to many pessimistic voices, which put Poland together with Hungary, Turkey, or even Russia in one group of authoritarian states, Polish opposition is nowadays doing well. The liberal and progressive parties were able to unite which makes their chance of winning the coming European and parliamentary elections much greater. Observing this, one necessarily is convinced, though, that they remember one crucial thing. Winning elections today is not only about beating the illiberal politicians – but about bringing a better future.

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