

The Other Europe Revisited
Vaclav Havel European Dialogues,
Vaclav Havel Library
11 May 2021

Jacques Rupnik

Let me, to begin with, pay tribute to the memory of **Ivan Havel** to whom we bid farewell yesterday. Before I got to know him in person, he had organized at the end of 1988 the first private viewing of the *The Other Europe* in Prague!...

The Other Europe documentary film project was conceived in a divided Europe before 1989. It took two years, entailed over a hundred interviews which- with the whole archive- have now been transferred to Prague under the auspices of the Vaclav Havel Library.

The film was completed a year before the fall of the Berlin Wall, so this was, so to speak, the “landscape before the battle”. None of us, none of the great minds we then interviewed, had a clue about the imminent collapse. So it is, among other things, a cautionary tale about the **unpredictability of history**. Vaclav Havel used to say: “I find people who claim to understand the laws of history eminently suspicious” ...

Let me say a few words to introduce our discussion today, to be continued tomorrow.

-First, What has *The Other Europe* project about? What’s behind its title?

-Why the documentary evidence and especially the interviews may be relevant today to help us better understand the past in our present?

-Finally, can it help us deal with and hopefully overcome some of our current divides, misperceptions and misunderstandings not just about the past, but about the present state of Europe.

The starting point of *The Other Europe* project in the mid 80’s was the following: there were **new important cultural and political developments** in

East-Central Europe, related to the dissident movements, -but not confined to them- which, we thought, were of great relevance to West Europeans. Yet the prime focus of attention in the media and political circles at the time was on the “Gorbachev moment”, his perestroika reforms and his call for a “common European house”.

So our idea was to shift the focus from Moscow to Central Europe and from so called “actually existing socialism” to the cracks in the “actually existing dictatorships”.

Our interviews conducted in Central Europe focused on three related themes:

The emergence of **dissent as signaling the rebirth of civil society, and the human rights movement as a rehabilitation of the language of rights and a call for the respect of the rule of law**. Both clearly have relevance to the shaping of post-89 democracies.

2nd- We explored the sphere of **independent culture**, the way it was challenging official taboos, extending the possibilities of freedom and reflected a shared Central European predicament.

Last but not least, beyond the decay of the communist system, its ideology and economy, there was the **erosion of the Soviet empire**, especially on its Western periphery.

We wanted Western audiences to listen to *unfamiliar voices*. When you listen to the leading intellectual figures of the time, **Havel, Simecka, Konrad, Geremek, Kuron**, you understand that a shift in the perception of the region was under way: they were long seen as the West of the East, they were becoming the East of the West.

That was the goal of the project: to give the perspective on a divided Europe, from within Central Europe.

The first panel of our conference with some of those who were interviewed back then, should allow us to ask them: how they see the legacies of that period from the perspective of today, 30 years on?

Some may ask: “what’s the point of recalling the pre-1989 era? Times have changed, let’s discuss our present-day challenges and look to the future.”

There are, it seems to me, some good reasons why it may be worth it to make these interviews available and revisit their lines of questioning rather than just letting the archive collect dust in a museum.

One is that we live in times dominated by the tyranny of immediacy: instant permanent news flows known as “infotainment” which contribute to a form of amnesia or at least a considerable ignorance about our recent past. Especially for the younger generation this tends to be a “far away past of which we know little”.

Yet at the same time we live in the midst of a **variety of memory wars** where statues are being brought down and new narratives promoted. Our goal here is, hopefully, to contribute to an informed public debate about the past and highlight the interplay between individual and collective memories as they have developed since 1989.

I can think of no better way to approach these issues, and the generational differences they reveal, than our second panel which could be called the “Simecka family reunion” or more adequately “a dialogue of three generations of Simeckas”.

I happen to have the privilege of having known all three, and will never forget my meeting with Milan Simecka senior for our interview in Vaclav Havel’s flat almost two years before the “Velvet revolution”. He is greatly missed and I really look forward to hearing the Simecka’s reflections about the legacies and memories of **the past in our present**.

The second no less important reason has perhaps more political implications. Especially The new generation - I can see it with my students- tends to take a free and open Europe project for granted. It may be useful to reflect on thirty years of convergence and unification of our continent at a time when we read headlines in our newspapers concerning a democratic backsliding in Central Europe, the resurgence of nationalism and outright skepticism about the project of European integration.

A question often posed in Western Europe in recent years is: “**Are we witnessing a return or a new form of an East/West divide in Europe?**”

It concerns primarily, but by no means exclusively, the rule of law and free media which are the very foundations of liberal democracy.

It concerns also several societal issues, ranging from the role of women or multiculturalism, or, if you wish, “societal liberalism”. Indeed, the rejection of “societal liberalism” is used as a justification for the rejection of “political liberalism”. In short, what is at stake here is not about the political complexion of a given government but about shared values, political principles and institutions.

There is a great panel devoted to such questions tomorrow and I do not want to preempt that discussion. I just want to highlight here the connection with *The Other Europe*.

-Hungary in the late 1980's was, relatively speaking, the most open country in terms of its borders and free speech East of the "iron curtain".

Today, the border is protected by a fence and independent media are being shut down.

Poland witnessed the strongest social movement known as Solidarnosc associated with the name of Lech Walesa who will be joining us shortly.

Today, Solidarnosc is better known as museum to which the government claims to control the appointments. The pre-1989 past has clearly become part of the political struggle.

Meanwhile **Adam Michnik**, the veteran dissident and editor of *Gazeta*, writes op-eds in West European papers warning about threats to press freedom in his country.

Who would have imagined that 30 years ago?!

How did we get from there to here? That will be the underlying theme of this year's European Dialogues.

To conclude: Before 1989, when we presented the film to western audiences, I could sum up the situation as follows:

There was in Western Europe a rather **poor knowledge of the realities of East-Central Europe but there was growing curiosity and interest**. And with *The Other Europe* we were trying to bridge the two.

Today, there is undoubtedly much better knowledge (people travel, there is a constant flow of news). But there is perhaps less interest.

As if we lost interest in each other once our common problem – the Soviet empire and the division of Europe – had been overcome?

The West Europeans discover that present day discourse on Europe in Budapest or in Warsaw does not correspond to their simplified image of East Europeans belatedly embracing a Western understanding of liberal democracy. Conversely, the image of Western Europe in Visegrad countries does not fit the one of pre-1989 either. Central Europeans discovered that the West had changed since 68, let alone since 89; and the present does not correspond to the image they had kept or constructed in a divided Europe before 1989.

Hence a mutual disappointment, and sometimes mutual recriminations.

The Other Europe project was meant to dispel stereotypes and misperceptions about ECE. Revisiting its legacy may, albeit modestly, help better understand and hopefully correct those of today.

That is what the Vaclav Havel's European Dialogues are about.