Salvation fantasies

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No one in eastern central Europe suspected that once the fight for independence was won, democracy would become a parody of itself, writes Tomas Kavaliauskas. Open disrespect for the public jars with the ideals of the Baltic Way that existed before and after 1989.

Vladimir Tismaneau, in his book *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism and Myth in Post-Communist Europe*, hypothesizes that politically and intellectually, the post-communist world will remain a battlefield of irreconcilable myths:

The post-communist landscape is propitious soil for collective passions, fears, illusions, and disappointments. The old ideological certainties are dead. Instead, new mythologies have arisen to provide quick and satisfactory answers to excruciating dilemmas. Political myths are responses to the sentiments of discontinuity, fragmentation, and the overall confusion of the post-communist stage. [1]

Should the same hypothesis not also apply to western Europe and the United States? Is the political and intellectual world of democracy’s old-timers not also dissonant? Does not western Europe also have dead ideological certainties and new mythologies? The French Left, for instance, waved banners with Mao’s portrait. And the leftists of the “democratic West” associated themselves with Marxism and Che Guevara at a time when parts of subjugated Europe were striving for the impossible – to deconstruct Marxist ideology, the proletarian Bolshevism of Lenin and the occupational Sovietization implemented by Stalin.

The salvation of the two Europes in 1968

The two ’68s in the two Europes bespeaks of a paradigmatic division that has not vanished today. It has not vanished because the starting points were different: the meanings and goals differed. Both Europes strived for salvation, but one strived for salvation from consumerism and corporate interests, while the other sought salvation from socialist ideals and communist practice. For the former, the critics of capitalism, socialism was the alternative; for the latter, the critics of obligatory fraternity, there was
no freedom in these premises.

The intellectual Left of the West did not understand the anti-humanism of the Soviets, nor that of China’s communist party. For these intellectuals and its youth following, it was important to protest against the given social order and violation of rights, but also to take the opportunity to riot in Red Army outfits. It was the time for cultural revolution. The political and cultural fashion was to question capital at its roots. Besides, the French tradition of socialist collectivism was inseparable from the thinking of Parisian leftists.

But the peoples of central Europe existed under completely different social and political conditions. The rock music of the West’s cultural revolution and its hippie-like posture became part of the underground, a means to protest against social collectivism. In other words, western Europe fought for freedom in 1968 while already having it in its pocket, out of a will to achieve even greater freedoms; central Europe fought for freedom without having it at all: its fight was an existential attempt to win elementary guarantees for human rights. Westerners had enough democracy and individualism to be able to indulge in the ideals of Mao’s dictatorship; central Europeans, on the other hand, had to fight for democratic freedoms from scratch.

*The Dreamers* of Bernardo Bertolucci go out onto the streets of Paris after a threesome of sex. A public uprising with a political leitmotiv: action on the streets seduces the characters to peep out of their bourgeois shells. In Paris, even ardent existentialists could be Maoists and Trotskyites – conveniently overlooking the fact that the proletarian worldview is inseparable from depersonalizing collectivism. At the same time, on the other side of Europe, Aleksander Dubček was creating a programme for socialism with a humane face by preparing his country for a multi-party system. The anti-Soviet criticism that surfaced in the Czechoslovak media was the expression of a democratic world. And in Lithuania, a partisan war against Soviet authority was being quashed. Fighters for Lithuanian independence were accused of being enemies of Soviet ideals and the proletarian paradise. However, never during the Soviet occupation did the political underground of Lithuania cease preparing secret material and data for the national diaspora in the United States and western Europe, to keep it informed of political and religious persecution by the Soviet KGB.

Thus, in one part of Europe, intellectual rioting was a “cultural activity”, while in the other part – the part isolated by an Iron Curtain – people were fighting for freedom with an existential commitment. And as we know, the Iron Curtain consisted not only of communist ideology, but also of Red Army. The 1980s had yet to come.

But if the world in western Europe changed, it did so conditionally – democracy did not vanish, but strengthened. Maybe it is because what the youth wanted was democratic ideals in the first place. As a result, instead of replacing western democracy with communism, they only strengthened it. After all, communism has nothing to do with the political emancipation of sexual minorities or the counter-cultural behaviour of the hippy youth. These tendencies in communist countries belong to the resistance underground and were repressed and persecuted.

The Prague political revolution aimed at freedom from communist ideology. But in the end it was more than that. The wave that this uprising caused was more than just a local
event. Without the energy and political will of Prague 68, Europe’s geopolitical map would not have changed twenty years later in 1989. In essence, the Prague Spring was more than just a striving for democracy – there was longing for a unified continent. The Czechs were actually fighting for the right to unify with western Europe. When that failed, it may have seemed a utopia of ’68, but when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 it became reality. Thus, we are entitled to ask: could the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain have fallen if the political waters had not been stirred in Prague ’68? The demolished wall in Berlin signified the new era of Europe’s geopolitical map, one that needs a prehistory. That prehistory stems from Prague ’68. Which had its own prehistory of the events in Hungary in ’56.

It is important to point out that neither during the Prague uprising, nor in the Baltic resistance twenty years later, did anyone think about the drawbacks of democracy. No one in central Europe suspected that fighting for independence and the right to join western Europe would suddenly, when it was achieved, make democracy a parody of itself. Not a single idealist of salvation from communism would have dared predict that Lithuanian anarchists in the twenty-first century would make a public statement that communism was the best system. This in the country that, in its foreign policy, promotes democracy in Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia. Who would have guessed that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in Lithuania’s capital Vilnius, the Palace of Rulers would debut as an oligarchic excrescence at the expense of the taxpayer. Even during the financial crisis, when the government abolished the last privileges for artists and writers, the parliament still did its best to find “new” millions for the continuation of the building of this architectural monster.

Twenty years after the events of Prague, for an intellectual of Lithuania’s Sajudis or Poland’s Solidarnosc, it was still obvious that communism was unequivocally evil, whereas democracy and its principles of freedom were unequivocally good. Claiming independence twenty years ago and talking about liberal values, civil society was elevated to the realm of political justice in contrast to proletarian Soviet society. Another twenty years later, as Europe commemorates the fall of the Berlin Wall and the last division of Europe, central Europeans suddenly start talking about the “pornography of democracy”. [2] Critics of democratic Lithuania posted a banner saying “sold” over the castle of Gediminas – the most important symbol of Lithuania’s statehood. Needless to say, the meaning is that privatization favoured those who could afford anything, including the most significant architectural symbol of independence.

Not coincidentally, the free market for Lithuanian intellectuals is associated with a Hobbesian natural state where *homo homini lupus est* and communism looms as an alternative. In this sense, Vladimir Tismaneau is right in seeing post-Soviet salvation-fantasy as a facade without substance. However the fall of the Berlin Wall united western and central Europe, and the fantasy of political emancipation turned into reality. When the transition was made from a socialist economy to the free market, the map of Europe altered. In terms of the results, the fall of the Berlin Wall is a higher achievement than Prague Spring. But the demolition of the Berlin Wall would have been inconceivable without Prague Spring, which marked central Europe with a spirit of anti-communism.

However, have Prague ’68 and Berlin ’89 become myths of salvation? When people formed a 600 kilometre human chain from Vilnius to Tallinn, it was done in the name of
emancipation and political salvation. This goal was achieved, as was the demolition of the Berlin Wall. But in 2009, are these achievements real or just a myth? The collapse of the government of the Czech prime minister Mirek Topolanek during the Czech presidency of the EU parliament bespeaks of an inability to take on a leadership role and to prove to Europe how much democracy is valued. The same applies to the corrupt Lithuanian government, with its coalitions that contradict declared party programmes. Open disrespect for the public jars with the ideals of the Baltic Way that existed before and after independence.

On 11 March 2009, in a speech to the Lithuanian Parliament on the anniversary of Lithuania’s independence, MEP Vytautas Landsbergsis stated that Lithuanian politicians have degraded themselves. However – and this is important – when parliamentary politics is diagnosed as degraded, the implication is that it could have been otherwise. But would it have been possible for Realpolitik not to show its jaws? For post-communism not to create a “pornography of democracy”? Vladimir Tismaneau is correct when he states that “the post-communist landscape is propitious soil for collective passions, fears, illusions, and disappointments.”

The great paradox of central Europe is that under a dictatorship, it was able to fight for democracy with dignity, but once the victory was achieved, the initial premises were forgotten. Herein lies the essence of the fantasy of salvation. Is this not as great a paradox as the fact that in 1968, western European workers and intellectuals demonstrated for more human rights using the symbolism and ideas of dictators?

**Excursus on the salvation fantasy of 9/11**

Until 9/11, democracy was generally associated with freedom of speech in the United States and western Europe. That type of association was produced by mass media discourse on the basis of clichés about political good and evil. Central Europe had and still has the label of a post-communist region. The reason is that this part of Europe is still learning democracy, lacks a civil society, is making its way out of its Soviet heritage with difficulty, does not control corruption and submits to interest groups. Russia has been verbally attacked because of human rights violations. China was criticized even more until the Olympic games in Beijing; then diplomacy took priority. In other words, all argumentation functions as a kind of Manichean ethics, in which political good and evil work independently. Good and evil is clearly defined and geopolitized on the basis of a rational western argument that emphasises the principles of freedom, which says that those who limit human rights and stand in the way of democratic processes belong on the side of evil.

Such a vision stemmed from the perspective of a western space of communication. When central Europe began to democratize its institutions and political processes, it was immediately treated as a region striving for political good. It became a *homeboy* (in American English), a *svoj* (in Russian) or a *savas* (in Lithuanian). Respect is given to central Europe on the basis that this region is fighting through the “leftovers” of political evil. And central Europe continues to fight the consequences of Sovietization even after joining the EU. This effort is seen as a helping hand in the process of implementing global democracy under the *pax Americana*. But is not this yet another salvation fantasy?
The tragedy of 9/11 was used by the White House as a means to establish democracy as political “good”. Victimized New York was portrayed as a heroic city of democratic world. In 2001 everyone applauded George W. Bush’s rhetoric that the democratic world was under attack, that it was necessary to defend values of freedom. No one could argue against it – the mass media ceaselessly reiterated the image of terrorists attacking the Twin Towers in Manhattan. To oppose such rhetoric would have been indiscreet and politically incorrect. Moreover, opposing Bush’s rhetoric of 11 September would have implied a sympathy for cold-blooded terrorist act of the fanatic Al Qaeda. The Kremlin, afraid of Chechen terrorism, also could not argue against the public discourse of 9/11, although it is possible that a secret, evil joy over the weakness of the US warmed their cockles. Even Jacques Chirac’s Paris, regardless of its anti-Americanism, was silent when the White House declared war in Afghanistan. In the public space of communication about 9/11, one talked one-sidedly, since the very conception of democratic civilization existed as an unequivocal good.

Following this logic, Guantanamo Bay prison opened where human rights were forgotten – a fanatic or a madman who fights against the unequivocal good of democracy does not need rights. Just as in Marxism: anyone who opposes the revolution of the proletariat is an enemy of history, because Hegelian history has to end with the revolution of the proletariat. It is not something one can accept or reject. After all, it is the law of historical wisdom, not merely that of a single philosopher. Similar logic was implied at Guantanamo Bay: the enemies of democracy and the United States can be tortured because they are beyond political truth. Those inmates accused of terrorism contradict the logical and historical necessity of globalization, that is, of the pax Americana. Because an Al Qaeda terrorist fights against the country that defends human rights, those rights do not apply to him. Existing outside the United States, Guantanamo Bay is beyond the space of democracy.

After the political sacralization of Ground Zero, democratic “good” became absolute. However, not even such a sacralization of Ground Zero could prevent Barack Obama announcing a decree to close Guantanamo Bay. This decree means that the inmates of terrorism no longer exist beyond democracy. It might be considered whether the Pentagon might have avoided the policy of working “without white gloves” if Barack Obama had been the President of the US in 2001. However, even had been the case, the very concept of an “evil axis” would still have been put forth. Obama would not have been able to avoid categorizing those who are homeboys and those who are enemies. In his Cairo speech, Obama attempted to overcome the stereotypical opposition of the democratic world and the Muslim world, but by amassing more military in Afghanistan and continuing to put pressure on Iran, certain divisions and ideological classifications have inevitably been retained.

Lithuanian scholar of Islam Egdunas Racius contends that in Iran, the youth are active in the political underground, listen to Western music, and that the government does not ban American newspapers in which the Iranian government is criticized. Racius avoids Huntington’s thesis about the clash of civilizations, in which people assigned to the “axis of evil” are just as globalized and Americanized as Europeans. [3] Needless to say, the mass protests in Tehran rejecting the official election results in 2009 would have been impossible without a foundation or underground of democratic values.

Nevertheless, Al Qaeda is a visible power, even though its struggle does not pertain to a
war of civilizations. Still, it has raised its battle flag of truth – an anti-American truth in a global context. But this is a different political discourse. If we believe the mass media, then the mission of Al Qaeda is to cleanse the Arab countries of westernization. This organization disliked American military bases in Saudi Arabia next to the mosques of Mecca and Medina. Its motivation is to counterbalance globalization with the Islamic Truth, providing a different salvation by implementing extreme hatred for American values. A mighty Islamic Empire is its aim. This empire is supposed to be ruled by the Sharia – the Way, God’s will.

Michel Foucault, modifying Nietzsche’s will to power, contends that will to truth is established by the order of discourse. One discourse exists at the expense of another, one truth is established at the expense of another. It is a Darwinian model of the survival of the fittest. This time we are talking about the survival of the fittest discourse, not the species. Foucault writes:

True discourse, liberated by the nature of its form from desire and power, is incapable of recognising the will to truth which pervades it; and the will to truth, having imposed itself upon us for so long, is such that the truth it seeks to reveal cannot fail to mask it. [4]

The rhetoric of the Bush administration promoted the discourse of the homeboys of democracy versus the fanatics of the “evil axis”, and so in essence spoke of the necessity to exclude the opposing discourse of the enemy. The institutions of democratic countries had to support such an effort with an adequate language.

However, if for Al Qaeda 9/11 was not a goal, but a means striving for a larger aim, then it is important to reconsider the means of fighting the “axis of evil”. Are bullets and tanks the most efficient means? If this story is about the will to truth, then terrorism can be fought by creating a more sophisticated mind of global communication. Such a democratic mind should be able to dominate the extremist narrative of Al Qaeda. Following such a strategy, Afghanistan, certain territories of Pakistan, and Iraq must be invaded not with weapons but with books and universities. Today, it is well known that in Pakistan Taliban extremists control schools in poor areas and educate the young, students who are simply abandoned by Pakistan’s government.

My point is that democracy should be exported by creating unprecedented educational programs, which would become realistic if the billions for military expenses were shifted to billions for educational expenses. This method would more realistically implement human rights, free elections, gender equality and principles of tolerance. But little of that has been achieved. Not coincidentally, a few years ago in Prague, Vladimir Putin replied to George W. Bush that Russia does not need democracy like Iraq.

The invasion of Iraq was the breaking point. The world no longer looks at the US as a victim of a fanatic terrorist attack. Instead America is perceived as an aggressor. The alternative could have been an unprecedented educational programme. In post-communist countries, George Soros became a warrior in the war for an open society.

His idea of an educational programme for an open society has been implemented by
means of publishing and academic infrastructure. Learning projects confronted Moscow’s authoritarian rule headlong. Belarusian president Aleksander Lukashenka closed the European Humanities University in Minsk, but it moved successfully to Vilnius with all its students. Following such an example, we may ask: if billions of dollars were spent not on fuel for military jets and soldiers’ salaries, but instead were invested in education, would not that be a sign of a high civilization? After all, we are talking about a million educational arrows directed at the “evil axis”. We are also talking about the possibility of mobilizing the educational resources of the US and EU to set new standards of establishing a western will to truth.

In the meanwhile, central Europe continues to support the US. The support is quite straightforward, without any recommendation for a higher standard for the humanities. But such a recommendation would indicate high-mindedness on the part of the New Europe, when what this part of Europe has is hardly spiritual strength. But central European countries do not even search for spiritual strength, rather they are satisfied with good diplomatic relations with the US. There is no attempt to question the forms of war against terrorism. It is not the speciality of central Europe.

A self-reflective politics of central Europe could raise the status of the region instead of its continuing to exist as merely an American poodle, seeking protection from an unpredictable Russia. However, even though self-reflective politics and the thoughts of intellectuals could be productive in changing political attitudes towards the US, it could also be dangerous: any flavour of anti-Americanism in the region may also change the direction of foreign policy towards Russia.

### Beyond salvation fantasies

Bearing in mind that countries throughout central Europe are driven by local interest groups, a state of affairs that results in democratically unstable institutions, it is necessary to find ways to fortify those institutions, not to deconstruct them. Russia would welcome such a deconstructive move by central European intellectuals and politicians, anarchists and leftists. Getting closer to the Soviet past while distancing themselves from a pro-American *pax Americana* is a step that the Kremlin would kindly agree to sponsor. In other words, if dissident intellectuals deconstructed the Soviet Union, hopefully a new left of anarchist intellectuals will rebuild it.

Lithuanian political commentator Kestutis Girnius’ recent comment that “Russia will not attack Lithuania” renders all the aforementioned logic useless: if Russia will not attack, then there is no motive to support the US in its efforts. In this case, there was no need to hold back criticism for Bushism nor for Lithuania’s founding the Vilnius 10. Pro-American logic in central Europe only has meaning if we accept the reverse thesis: that Russia would attack if it could. That Russia, with its current aggressive imperial mood, would attack central Europe or the Baltic States if the region were not structurally interwoven with the US.

Moreover, Lithuania and Poland are not passive in accepting the ideology of the *pax Americana*. These countries actively support pro-Nato and pro-democracy powers in Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia. The Estonian academic and public intellectual Rein Raud has criticized such a foreign policy. According to him, Lithuania is acting like the Grand
Duchy of the thirteenth century. [5] But the population and territory is not the same as back then. If they were to accepting Raud’s warning, Lithuanians would have to have a sense of inferiority in foreign affairs in addition to their already small territory and population. For Raud, it is incongruous to see an ambitious State with a small population. Lithuanians and other central European states should be politically significant not by being submissive to American military tactics, but by having strategies of their own, using Nato behind America’s back. Central Europe, rich in political history and culture of political dissidents and writers, should play a key role in forming European identity and destiny. When Poland and the Baltic States supported the Orange revolution in Kiev, it was more than support for Ukrainian integration into a democratic region. Although the Orange revolution degenerated, still it served as a counterbalance to the Kremlin’s regional interests and its attempt to regain control over the “lost territories” of the Soviet Union. “An attack” or “occupation” no longer has to mean military invasion. We witnessed a humanitarian catastrophe in the central European region when Gazprom turned off gas for Slovakia, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Does not this story give a good reason to redefine the term “occupation”?

Russian dissident Andrej Piontkovsky said that if Russia were one-on-one with the EU, Russia would manage to take control. The methods are known. It is not just Gazprom making part of the EU to freeze in winter. We know about the fate of Aleksander Litvinenko, the author of Blowing up Russia. Anna Politkovskaya had a similar fate. Viktor Yushchenko was lucky, but his face testifies to the method of poisoning. Khodorkovsky is sentenced to almost a life term in prison for sponsoring opposition parties. Is it possible, in this context, to believe that today’s Russia would not attack the Baltic States or its “lost territories”, if it could? Especially when re-occupation no longer has to be military. Economic means can be just as efficient. It is more than symbolic that before central Europe celebrated its full membership in the EU on 1 May 2004, Nato forces entered the region on 29 March 2004.

Today the world is looking at Barack Obama’s administration with the hope that the image of a democratic US will be re-established. The more democratic America is, the less it will be criticized and the easier it will be for central Europe to provide arguments about why it supports the White House. By the same token, central Europe will have fewer temptations to develop an anti-American discourse.

History has shown that a pro-American attitude served the region better. It was not an empty illusion or salvation fantasy. It is unfortunate that while geopolitical reality bespeaks of salvation in reality, everyday reality makes us doubt the inner freedom. The political emancipation of Prague ‘68 or the Baltic Way ‘89 will likely remain the self-contradictory and romantic dialectics of the region’s history. It is just like in Paris ‘68, which was so romantic and naive, only for completely other reasons.

Footnotes


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