

Peter Robinson:

Václav Klaus. When the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, to put down the Prague Spring in 1968, our next guest was forced out of the academy of sciences. 21 years later he became a member of Civic Forum, the resistance group, and three years after that, he became Czechoslovakia's first non-communist minister of finance. But to call Václav Klaus a non-communist does not even begin to do him justice. A member of the Mont Pellerin Society, he is an ardent advocate of free markets. He served twice as Prime Minister, and two terms as president of the Czech Republic. After his country had endured more than four decades of faceless communist bureaucrats, Václav Klaus presented a man who knew his mind, and how to express it. No leader on the planet has made more extensive or vigorous use of freedom of speech or prompted more debate in his own country. Today, Václav Klaus oversees a free market think tank in Prague, the Václav Klaus Institute. Ladies and gentlemen, a hero of the Cold War, the former president of Czech Republic, Václav Klaus.

Václav Klaus:

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Many thanks for organizing this conference, for bringing all of us here, and for giving me a chance to address this distinguished audience. I am pleased to be here, because I find the topic of this gathering highly important and relevant, both for Europe and America. Ronald Reagan and John Paul II did change the world, and significantly influenced Europe. As a result, the lives of people like me, of people from the former communist Central and Eastern Europe, were greatly impacted. I am an economist who believes in the law of comparative advantages, and I'm always trying to maximize my comparative advantages. But this time, I'm afraid I have a comparative disadvantage here. I'm not, and I don't pretend to be, an expert on Ronald Reagan or John Paul II. Nevertheless, they were part of my life and my personal experience. Let me say a few words in this spirit.

Let me start with two factual remarks, perhaps reservations. First, I am not convinced that we should speak so strongly, as it has been done during the whole day, about a "partnership" between Ronald Reagan and John Paul II. As I see it, it was at the very most an implicit partnership only. They both parallelly defended freedom and traditional Western conservative values and attitudes. There is no doubt that the synergic effect of their parallel activities was considerable. We in the communist central Europe felt it very strongly. Both of them were a great inspiration for us. Our communist leaders, on the contrary, regarded them as a threat. Second, the title of the conference mentions Ronald Reagan and John Paul II. These are two very important names, but the title doesn't mention a third one which was at the time no less important. I have in mind the name of Margaret Thatcher, who I believe deserves to be mentioned as well.

Reagan and Thatcher were politicians. John Paul II was the Pope. He benefited from the opportunity to experience the reality of communism in his native Poland. These three individuals, more than anyone else, changed Europe and the world. Some people would probably want to stress especially their extraordinary role in bringing communism to an end. Yes and no. Yes, because there is no doubt about it. No, because it seems to me they did much more.

Why concentrate on the end of communism only? When speaking at the conference in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California in November 2009, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall. I made the point that "the European, so called, Helsinki process was toothless and naive to bring any results, and the only real help from outside that accelerated the final collapse of communism came from Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, who understood that words alone were not enough to bring the end of this evil empire." They understood more than anyone else that the Soviet system and the Soviet expansionism had to be resisted, not just considered wrong.

The role of these three exceptional individuals can't be denied. We should remember it again and again. In spite of this, I always keep stressing that communism collapsed. The main cause behind its collapse were the internal problems of the regime itself. At the end of the 1980's communism was already weak, soft, old and emptied of all meaning, and there was almost no one seriously defending it. However, without Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and John Paul II, its dissolution would have taken much longer. An hour ago, Edwin Meese mentioned the same point, and he said that it would last decades longer. I disagree. I would think in terms of years, not just decades.

As I have said, these three individuals didn't just help us in central and Eastern Europe to get rid of communism. They did much more. They noticeably changed the west itself. They understood what was wrong with the relatively prosperous, as compared with us, 1970's and 80's. They looked with critical eyes on the victorious leftist ideology that began dominating Europe and the whole west, and they were there to oppose it. They had strong ideological views and very loudly defended western conservative values. They reflected and expressed the wisdom of ordinary citizens, not of political elites. With this being the foundation, they succeeded to change the type of public thinking. They were not contented with pursuing a pragmatic policy only. They were able to inspire. Ronald Reagan in America and Margaret Thatcher in Britain returned to the people the already almost lost belief in capitalism and free markets, which was a statement fully in opposition, and in the prevailing spirit in Europe, especially in western Europe at the time. It was different in central and Eastern Europe.

In the last stages of communism, Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and John Paul II were regarded as heroes in our part of the world. We didn't pay much attention to European politicians such as Francois Mitterrand, Helmut Kohl, or Jacques Delors. They were no inspiration to us, and we did not expect very much from them. They were not actively advocating the good, old western values and didn't stand firmly and explicitly against communism. I do regret that the west didn't use the fall of communism to make a decisive step forward.

The end of communism proved to be a crucial moment in a positive direction only for us, or mostly for us in the former Eastern block. After traumatic decades of depression, irrationality, and frustration, we were forced to go through. We very much enjoyed the birth of freedom and democracy and used

it to fundamentally change our societies. The west felt a refreshing relief when the communism disappeared, but together Francis Fukuyama came to believe we were approaching the end of history, the end of ideology, the end of conflicts of visions, etc. It was naively supposed that the western liberal system will prevail all over the world and will last forever. Which proved to be fatally wrong and misleading. It led to recklessness and irresponsibility.

The resulting loss of attention caused a substantial shift of the west to the left – to the dominance of the new left, the liberally progressivist left -- which together with the greens took control of all mainstream political parties and has become a chief factor in the formation of new ones. We who spent decades in communism are very frustrated to see that the pendulum has returned to its long-term equilibrium position, which is very far to the left away from Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. To my great regret, the impact of this unique and exceptional trio of truly legendary personalities turned out not to be permanent. It brought about only a short term, or perhaps medium term, change. Its original effect has already fully evaporated. The prominent personalities of the contemporary Europe are politicians such as Merkel, Macron, May, Juncker, or the new Pope Francis.

The names Reagan, Thatcher, or John Paul II are more or less forgotten. Are we ever of debt, and do we actively try to do something with it? I'm afraid not. Where do we look for new upholders and advocates of good old conservative ideas and values, and at the same time for able, persuasive, and trustworthy politicians who would be able to make these ideas dominant again? Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and John Paul II possessed all of these characteristics. Was it a lucky, exceptional, highly improbable historic coincidence, or something which regularly comes because the mankind deserves it? In this respect, I am rather pessimistic. Thank you for your attention.