

“DEMOCRACY BROUGHT US FREEDOM, BUT ALSO THE RESPONSABILITY FOR OUR OWN LIVES”

Interview with Adam Michnik

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Adam Michnik is one of the main figures of the anti-communist fight in Poland, being the exponent of the intellectual wing of the resistance. Also, Michnik played an essential part during the round table discussions that led to the liberalization, first partial and later total, of the Polish political system. His open opposition towards the resistance got him arrested several times, spending a total of six years in the communist Polish prisons. Today, Adam Michnik is leading *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the most successful daily newspaper in the entire post-communist space. During his stay in Cluj, where he was invited by the Ratiu Democracy Center, which gave him the *Ion Ratiu Award for Democracy* in 2009, Adam Michnik gave an interview for *Europolis*.

GJ: We would first like to talk about the lack of satisfaction that Romanians and citizens from other post-communist states show towards democracy, or better said towards the forms that democracy took in these countries. For instance, around 40% of Romanians constantly believe, according to opinion polls, that their lives during communism were better than the ones they have today. What would you say to those who prefer the more comfortable lives they had during communism to the freedom that this unsatisfying democracies offer them?

AM: I would tell them that they certainly do not miss Ceausescu, but that they miss the times when they were young. I myself sometimes miss the communist times. I was young, beautiful, girls liked me. Some people always miss what once was, because their memory is selective. I, for instance, do not remember how I was arrested, because I eliminated these thoughts from my mind, but I do remember the times when I was happy and I was thinking I have my whole life in front of me. These are the moments I miss. Then, a person has two needs in life: freedom and safety. When you are not free, you miss freedom. But when you have freedom,

you think it is like the air, it is something natural. And then you miss safety. For instance, during communism there were no mafia like today. Then there was only one mafia: the *Securitate*. Now there is more than one mafia. Many of us are afraid to go out on the street. Because we are free, but so is the mafia, many think nostalgically about what they once had. During communism, people were not afraid that they would be beaten or kidnapped or that they would remain unemployed. And there is one more thing. Post-communist pessimism is common for all our states, because 1989 brought a big change, something like an earthquake. When I had to move in a bigger house, I was afraid. The house was bigger, but moving itself terrified me. Also, communism hid inequities. Market economy brings these inequities to light. Often the problem is not that I live worse, but that my neighbor lives better.

GJ: At least in theory, one of the advantages of democracy is that we can choose. If we are not happy with a party, with a president or with a mayor, we can change them through elections. However, people see that although power and governments change, although we keep having elections, the shortcomings of democracy perpetuate. You said in the past that it is incorrect to wait for democracy to bring paradise for everyone. But what are those elements of a democracy that people should focus on so that they continue to hold positive expectations from these regimes?

AM: Democracy is not a recipe for happiness. Happiness is something that each of us has to create for himself. Democracy is only a system in which we can safely create this happiness. Churchill's words - "democracy is the worst form of government except all others that have been tried" - come to my mind now.

GJ: So should we interpret your words as an urge to work for each of us, in order to build our own personal happiness, and not wait for it to come from the state, as we were used to until 1989?

AM: Of course! Democracy brought us freedom, but also the responsibility for our own lives.

GJ: In these days, the Chamber of Deputies in Romania is discussing the Lustration Law...

AM: Really? Again?

GJ: In 2007-2008, you spoke against the actions of Kaczynski brothers, who promoted in Poland a type of lustration very similar to the one promoted in Romania.

AM: I have always been against lustration, not only in 2007.

GJ: Nevertheless, do you believe that it was a good initiative, aimed at unveiling the past, that has been badly put in practice, or that it was a confiscation of the past, of the struggle against communism, aimed at obtaining certain political benefits?

AM: It was both and even a third thing. Society must definitely know the truth about its history. But this truth will never be found in the archives of the *Securitate*. In the archives of the *Securitate* there is only the truth of the *Securitate*, not the "human" truth. The agents of the *Securitate* made these archives not for showing the truth about the society, but for all sorts of details; for instance, where there was a leaflets printing machine, things about the intimate lives of people, if some guy had a mistress, if some one was homosexual and so on, in order to have things that could be used against them and to blackmail them. In communism everyone lied: television lied, statistics lied, ministers lied. There was only one institution where no one lied: the *Securitate*. But this is nonsense.

GJ: We asked this because in Romania, at least in a part of the society and of the media, there is the idea that the fight against communism was confiscated for political goals.

AM: In the context of lustration, all politicians behaved like that, they all tried to obtain political gains. They were either in favor of lustration for political gains, or against it for the same reason. I know little about this debate in Romania to express an opinion, but after discussing with my Romanian friends, I understood there is an idea that there were two *Securitate*: a Stalinist one, until '62-'63, considered to be soviet and Jewish, and a Romanian one, patriotic, belonging to Ceausescu. From this diagnosis it is obvious that this is political talk and not historic truth.

GJ: We are looking an answer to the following question: how should the elements of recent history be conserved, how should we speak of the fight against communism, precisely in order to avoid the political suspicions appearing every time we speak of lustration, *Securitate* and other aspects of communism?

AM: I do not think I have something very bright to say about this. Recent history is always used for current politics, in France, in the U.S... But we can ask for one thing: an interpretation based on conscience. A historian with a conscience will always use information according to his conscience, and not for other reasons. It is not sufficient to place a person on the black list of collaborators only after finding in the archives of the *Securitate* a document signed by that person. You first have to ask what was the context in which the document was signed, what were the consequences of that document being signed. There is no other way. In Poland there is a permanent conflict over history. We (*n.r. Gazeta Wyborcza*) published the article of a Romanian journalist on the writer Petru Dumitriu. It is enough to read his books to realize how complicated his biography was, you no longer have to go to the archives of the *Securitate*. So when you write about history, you always have to describe the context. There have been no more communists for 20 years now, therefore we no longer have to waste time with a history that wishes to unmask things. We need a history that helps us understand, we need the entire truth. The history of the Romanian society, as well as the history of the Polish one, is not made only of extremes. We cannot say that there were only two parts: one only with bandits and one only with saints and heroes. Those who say today that they want to write the historical truth based on the archives of the *Securitate* end up being on the same side with the extremists.

GJ: Both Poland and Romania experienced moments in their recent past when they allowed populists to take over power. Bulgaria is now going through this, so is Hungary following the last elections. In the past, you spoke of the "putinism"...

AM: Yes, it is a combination of populism and authoritarianism. "Putinism" is found only in Russia, in the smaller countries surrounding it we find "liliputinism".

GJ: This phases of driftwood towards populism, are they a sign of the immaturity of our democracies? Are they a step towards becoming more mature? Or, on the contrary, are they precisely a sign that our democracies are already strong, since we see the same phenomena in Western states, such as Austria - during Jorg Haider's ascension - or Italy, during Berlusconi, have passed or pass through such moments?

AM: Berlusconi is not exactly an example of “putinism”. They love each other, but they are different things. Putin follows a path from political leadership to money, via mass-media, while Berlusconi follows the path from money, via mass-media, through political leadership. I will use a metaphore to describe Putin's leadership: KGB. The essence of Berlusconi's regime is money. This is why I am saying that they are different. But yes, the immaturity of our democracies is a cause for easily slipping towards populism. The problem is that in our countries, except Czechoslovakia, the democratic traditions are very weak. In Poland, in Bulgaria, even in Hungary, because Horthy never meant democracy. So we do now have democratic traditions. There is a tradition of the fight for freedom, but it is not the same. Second, democracy is a system that is imperfect through its own nature, because it tolerates its enemies, and the logic of the enemies of democracy is the following: if you are in power, I demand rights for me, because these are your principles; when I am in power, I leave you without rights, because these are my principles.

VB: We would now like to ask you a question on forgiveness and tolerance. After the fall of communism, everyone started judging everyone. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers wrote after the War a very important essay on guilt, in which he tries to establish who has the legitimacy to judge the guilt of a people. No one argues against the fact that dissidents have earned their right to judge. But what I find very important is that those who spent time in communist jails – I read your essays and Havel's – do not express any sign of unforgiveness. On the contrary. But I noticed these things at others, who do not have the right to judge.

AM: There is a political question and a personal one here. In the political sense, freedom is for everyone, not only for myself or for my friends from Solidarity or from the democratic opposition. It is for everyone. If someone did something wrong, if he tortured, killed detainees, he should be judged. But we were talking about something else here, about the expulsion of everyone who was on the other side of the fence, regardless if he committed a crime or not. Saying that if someone was on the other side of the fence he should be excluded means applying a Bolshevik way of thinking. This would be my political answer. The philosophy of exclusion has no end and it eventually leads to dictatorship, be it Jacobin, communist or Fidel Castro's, there is always a form of dictatorship. Now, from a personal point of view, if I can forgive, I somehow purify my soul. I am not a prisoner of my own resentments. So I do something for myself, in a selfish manner.

VB: All the communist regimes have been obsessed with creating “a new man”. I consider the failure of communism to be an antropological one, related to the incapacity to create this “new man”. However, something has been upset in the human being following these attempts. How are the reminiscents of the “new man” seen in Poland?

AM: “Homo sovieticus”... no one says about himself that he is a “homo sovieticus”. But the mentality created then still exists in all political camps. It is very difficult to say in what this is reflected. For me they are reflected, on one hand, in the extreme conformism in “my leader”. But another side of this conformism relates to the cruelty towards those who are under me, the despise towards them. On another hand, there is the way in which we relate to the truth in public life. According to Aristotle's logic, a proposition that does not rely on the truth is false. For Bolsheviks, the truth was dialectic. If Jan stole something from Piotr, it was theft; if Piotr stole something from Jan, it was historical justice. Therefore, the despise towards the truth, towards bourgeois values was somehow established. Of course, there is again that philosophy of exclusion; this is to me the essence of Bolshevism.

VB: In 1978 I visited Poland and I have been to four cities, including Krakow. Without exception, the visits in all cities started with the most important churches. It is well known that the Church played an essential part, of a counter-power, in Poland. It was not the case in Romania, unfortunately. In 1991, I met a group of professors from the University of Warsaw, who were terrified by the role that the Church awarded itself in post-communism. They said that the Church somehow took the place of the Communist Party, but in a different manner. It is also known that Poland played an important part in promoting Christian values in the Treaty establishing a European Constitution. How do you perceive today the role of the Church and of religion in Poland and in Europe?

AM: There are three different things. The first relates to the role of the Church after 1989. I would not go as far as saying that it took the position of the Communist Party, but it definitely approached these means of wealth: it regained properties, religion was introduced in schools, it militated in favor of an anti-abortion law, it gained influence in public administration appointments, it benefited from tax-breaks. They used to say that Poland was a catholic country, they used to say “We, the catholics, destroyed communism! Then the communists were leading, now we, the

catholics lead!“. This was very unresting, because the authority of the Church was enormous. It still exists, but not to the same extent. Polish people learned to make a difference between religion and political choices. They go to church, but vote as they wish, because otherwise they would not have voted Aleksandr Kwasniewski twice as president (*n.r. former communist official, elected as president of post-communist Poland in 1995 and 2000*). If we speak the current role of the Church, there is a permanent dispute. There is a very powerful anti-European rhetoric within the Church. Part of it was against Poland's integration in the EU and if it was not for Pope Wojtyla maybe it would not have taken place, because he was a very strong supporter of the integration. There is also the hysterical language of those who claim that the Church is discriminated, that it is pressured, but it is a nonsense. The conflict over the role of the Church in Poland will last for many years and it will end with a failure of Catholic fundamentalism, but this will probably happen in about 25 years.