

The Best and the Worst

What I think were the biggest positives and negatives of three decades since the 1989 revolution – asks the *Inštitút pre kultúrnu politiku* in Bratislava.

The **best thing** is that we became part of the West. Among many other things, this meant that culture could be looked upon and treated like in western societies:

- Culture ceased to be one of the battle grounds on the global class struggle, another field where communism was supposed to conquer capitalism,
- Culture was no more relegated to be the part of the Marxian superstructure, resistant to entrepreneurship, outside the sphere of “productive forces”,
- Cultural activities were no longer carried out among the conditions of permanent shortage of everything,
- Culture ceased to be the medium of coded political communication.

Before the change one could do only what was permitted – but what was permitted was at the same time obligatory, planned and prefabricated.

Having been freed from all those stupid ballasts, artists and other cultural actors in post-communism became gradually part of the West. They have been facing the same challenges as their western colleagues and have been trying to address them in western ways.

What makes us belong to the same “West”, despite all the diversity, sometimes even antagonism between ourselves? To me, the West – and particularly Europe –denotes today that part of mankind that takes the values in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights more seriously than any other civilisation on Earth. Although not always in explicit manner, but respect and tolerance are categorical imperatives that can be detected in most manifestations of western culture.

What is the **worst thing** that has happened to culture after the regime change? Homogenisation under the spell of consumerism is difficult to withstand. Digitisation has been more of a threat to most aspects of culture than the opportunities it has borne.

But the really worst thing has been the regression occurring in our societies. Instead of freedom, tolerance and openness, certain eastern – not exotically oriental, but provincially eastern – features have returned and regained power. Populism has affected the entire western civilisation, but the post-communist countries represent a particular subcategory. If we go along the above list of issues buried with the past regimes, we can sadly acknowledge that:

- Culture is increasingly used for ideological purposes,
- Beyond aesthetic and intellectual values, political loyalty has again gained importance,
- Critical and experimenting culture must struggle for oxygen (while court culture enjoys plentiful resources),
- Being brave and critical about the political power has again become a value and a risk.

Although the picture suggests a linear sequence from good to bad, the two fortunately exist side by side. We keep being part of the West, which for us is the best setting for culture, and which equips cultural players to successfully handle the predicaments.

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