

Keynote speech at the Lennart Meri Conference

A quarter century ago the Polish *Solidarnosc* activist Adam Michnik described the tasks that lay ahead for a liberated or about-to-be liberated Eastern Europe: "We know very well how to make fish soup from an aquarium but we don't know how to make an aquarium out of fish soup".

I thought it the most succinct description possible of the difficulties Eastern Europe faced after overthrowing half a century of communist dictatorship.

I met with up with Adam again two years ago in Warsaw and asked him if we now knew how to make the soup into an aquarium. He smiled and said, "Some of us, yes".

That is to say, that some of those who came out from under communist dictatorship have learned a thing or two about what to do and what *not* to do after a change from despotism to something better on the road to democracy. My talk today is to explain why I believe that knowledge to be empirical, proven and transferable.

Yet beautiful and appropriate as it is, the aquarium is too simple a metaphor. Some years ago Francis Fukuyama described the problem we in Eastern Europe faced as "Getting to Denmark", how to change undemocratic, weak or failed states into modern functioning countries, where "Denmark", I quote Fukuyama:

**"stands generically for a developed country with well- functioning state institutions. We know what 'Denmark' looks like, and something about how the actual Denmark came into being historically. But to what extent is that knowledge transferable to countries as far away historically and culturally from Denmark as Somalia and Moldova?"**

Looking at the post-overthrow, though not yet post-revolution Northern Africa and the Arab World, I would suggest that we not fixate on "Denmark" as a specific place, because Denmark is one instance, one version out of many of the best we can do. It is a generic term, as Fukuyama himself stresses. Rather, and to give us all pause to reflect on what the hell we are thinking in our cranky crabbiness regarding EU enlargement, allow me to rephrase and turn the problem around as *Getting to Turkey*, far and away the most successful of all countries in the Islamic world on the road from despotism to liberal democracy.

Indeed, I detest the term "Islamic World". We do not say "Christian World", certainly at least not in a geopolitical context. Yet "Islamic World" has entered the discourse as a term that means something, so you know what I mean, even though I find it ridiculous.

Moreover, of course, we can always find some whining member of the *gotcha gang* to say "but Turkey isn't there!", but then again there were all kinds, when Fukuyama posed the metaphoric *getting to Denmark* construction, who found reason to say that Denmark also had not reached the Platonic ideal of the perfect state.

So for the purposes of the North Africa democratisation process discussion let us agree that Turkey also has its imperfections and problems, but it is by far the best example out there in the "Islamic World" and, I would argue, better even than some members of a European Union doing their utmost to keep Turkey from becoming a member.

But I am not Turkish and even as a turkophile, cannot pretend to know how Turkey did it. Moreover, knowing a little bit of the history of Turkey I am not sure that, aside from the matter of a shared Islam, whether the Turkish historical experience is even the appropriate one to look at to figure out how in the Arab world to make an aquarium out of despotic fish soup.

We do, however, at least in this room today and in our part of the continent, know a thing or two about democratic transformation in Europe. Nor do I believe, as I have repeatedly averred, think there is anything particularly "unique" or "European" about our transformations, at least the successful ones.

A decade ago, when for a while I enjoyed the opposition parliamentarian's exquisite right to speak his mind and be quoted without having to face any consequences, I summarised the democratisation experience of the post-communist world with a paraphrase of the opening line to Lev Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*: "All successful post-despotic countries reformed alike. Each unsuccessful country finds its own excuse."

Already then, after a decade of "transition", it had become clear that to successfully overthrow authoritarian or totalitarian rule, "regime change" was not enough. That was the quick, and deceptively often, the easy part. Everything else that we consider to be the essence of creating a democracy: institution building, establishment of rule of law, development of civic society, fundamental rights and freedoms, economic growth, low corruption, turned out to take years and a lot of effort and political capital and will.

There were no guidebooks. There were no guarantees. We saw, sometimes almost immediately, other times slowly, that not every country would succeed. Some failed miserably, some moved ahead, in fits and starts, and at times at a breathtaking speed outsiders could not believe. Other countries languished and continue to languish somewhere in between — better off than under communism but far from fulfilling what looked then to be a promising future.

Plagued by corruption and kleptocratic rule, or subject to de-ideologised but still authoritarian despotism, it is a depressing empirical truth that most citizens of countries that escaped communist totalitarianism twenty years ago today remain under some kind of undemocratic rule. Indeed, of those 400 million (400 million!) people living in countries that back then comprised the audience of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, three quarters live today under rule rated by Freedom House as "Un-free" or "Partially free". While these citizens are arguably better off than a generation ago, they still live as subjects, not as free citizens.

In other words, the promise of 1989-91 has soured. Many today are unconvinced that democracy was the right choice, some realize as well that what the revolutions of a generation ago resulted in often was not democracy. Yesterday, our colleague from past Lennart Meri Conferences, Andrei Sannikov, was sentenced by a kangaroo court in Minsk to 5 years of hard

labour for something he did not do.

When we look back at twenty years of democratisation efforts in the post-communist world it is possible to pick out elements common to all successful transitions. As Tolstoy's dictum suggests, we can with little difficulty pick out many more pitfalls and errors. These observations and conclusions are largely empirical, not necessarily truths, although perhaps in the future these might become rules for political scientists studying transitions to democracy from authoritarian rule.

Today, as the world watches fascinated — and in some cases, horrified — at popular rebellions against authoritarian rule in Northern Africa and in parts of the Arab world, what we here in the post-communist world sense first and foremost is *déjà vu*. We recognize ourselves just a generation ago. The feeling of *now or never*

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*on* our back for decades. An exhilaration at success, bewilderment at how weak tyranny turned out to be and how quickly the despotic clique that for decades had brutalized the citizenry collapsed, gave up or fled. To our democratic colleagues in Egypt and elsewhere, I would say: Cherish these emotions; they will be touchstones.

Now, however, comes the shock at suddenly having to take over responsibility for running the country. Mail needs to be delivered, healthcare managed, payrolls met. Alliances of like-minded colleagues and comrades crumble, factions emerge, politics emerges from the furtive *sub rosa* world of dissident meetings. No one any longer taps your phone, *you* are now in charge and now you wonder if those long-time employees working in the ministry you run are trustworthy. You pinch yourself and wonder is this real, after all this time. Yes, it is. Now put away those childish toys, bewilderment time is over. Time to get to work.

*III The Irrelevance of Initial Conditions.*

Much of the discussion on democratic revolutions has focussed on some rather silly and empirically dubious issues of how things in the Arab world are "different" from what has gone before.

The revolutions of 1989 and 1991 themselves differed in kind. Some were gradualist, as in Poland and Hungary, some rapid as in East Germany (the "DDR"), and in the erstwhile Czechoslovakia and Romania. Some were peaceful throughout, others turned violent, as in Romania or in the brutal Soviet crackdown in Lithuania and Latvia. In some, post-authoritarian plans for change had been prepared for years and with tacit co-operation from the undemocratic regime (Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). In others, the collapse of authoritarian/totalitarian rule occurred so suddenly that almost overnight dissident furnace-stokers became ministers of government charged with formulating policy, as happened to the late Jiri Dienstbier in Czechoslovakia.

Initial conditions varied as well. Iron-fisted and thuggish rule in Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia and the "DDR" stood in contrast to the softer authoritarianism in Janos Kadar's Hungary. Poland had by 1989 seen an easing of the martial rule of the early 1980s with recognition of *Solidarnosc* as a legitimate negotiation partner. In the Baltic countries, the totalitarian style of most of the rest of the USSR had by 1989-91 become softened to the degree that independence movements were mildly tolerated, at least by the native authoritarian elite.

Yet in retrospect, initial conditions mattered little in the long-term transition to genuine liberal democracy, or in its failure. After all, conditions across the USSR were more similar than different, yet of the 15 successor states of the Soviet Union only three countries today — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — are rated by Freedom House as "Free". Those three also are members of the European Union and NATO, the premier "clubs" of democracies, while the rest of the erstwhile "fraternal republics" of the USSR range from mildly authoritarian to brutally autocratic. There have been backsliders as well as those who never made it past the starting gate. Some that started off on the right path but simply stalled either because the new political leadership feared to risk unpopular steps or because of corruption or both. Whatever the individual cause for failure, one can always find a justification. Each unsuccessful country finds its own excuse. And every country where overthrowing a repressive regime does not result in a democracy is a *failure*.

That said, I believe the standard line that functioning democracy is about building institutions is too simplistic and broad-brushed. Twenty and more years after the revolutions of 1989-91, we know a good deal more than that trivial truth. We know empirically what kind constitutional arrangements tend to lead to authoritarianism, which voting systems result in cycles of

retribution, which in turn lead to cycles of mismanagement.

Allow me to offer a few lessons we have learned.

*Presidential vs Parliamentary systems.*

Already before the revolutions of 1989-1991 it seemed to be the case that presidential forms of government had far more problems with democracy than parliamentary systems. In Asia and Latin America strongman rule was associated with Presidential systems. Unstable, unconstrained by a strong opposition, with powers unchecked and unbalanced, presidential systems had problems even in ostensibly democratic Europe, as in the case of Urho Kekkonen's dubiously democratic rule in Finland.

Indeed, the U.S. seems rather to be the exception than the rule, having successfully managed presidential rule for 230 years. Even in the case of the U.S., however, we need to admit that for its first 150 years the powers of the President were quite constrained. With the exception of the extraordinary powers taken by Abraham Lincoln during the U.S. Civil War, the modern institution of a strong President only emerged with the New Deal reforms of the Roosevelt Administration.

With a century and a half of weak powers and strong suspicion of centralized power and support for constitutional limits, the U.S. has avoided the problems we observe elsewhere. It is one of those cases of American exceptionalism we Europeans often so envy and occasionally decry. Which has not prevented American politicians, journalists and diplomats from failing to grasp that parliamentarism does not mean "weakness", "instability", that the "figurehead" role of presidents in parliamentary systems is not to be scoffed at. It is precisely the separation of executive *political* power from the constitutional *legitimacy of the State* invested in its formal head that in so many cases has helped preserve democracy in cases of political over-reach by the executive.

The correlation between presidential rule in the post-communist world and failing grades in the Freedom House index should give all 2011 post-revolutionary democrats in Northern Africa pause. As should the recognition that all the new post-communist members of the EU have weak presidents and strong prime ministers. As is the case, incidentally, in Turkey as well.

Presidents, however, are not everything.

*Majoritarianism, politicized civil services and multiple mandate election districts.*

Authoritarianism, totalitarianism or simply despotism with their frequently messy or even bloody successions instill a no-holds-barred, winner-take-all-mentality in politics even after transition to democracy. It is imperative to break that cycle, to resist the temptation to give them what they did to you.

Even the most ardent democratically-minded former dissident may find that once in power, the imperative to compromise with an opposition comprised of the former, now deposed ruling elite, is weak. The urge to use majority rule as a sledgehammer under the banner, "this is democracy", is not only understandable but even completely legitimate.

Yet majoritarian, two party systems, while infinitely superior to one-party rule, can, if unchecked by compromise lead to an ultimately destabilizing flip-flopping bi-polar pattern of rule. It is not only in countries with low Freedom House ratings that a politicized civil service in combination with electoral flip-flopping leads to incompetent administrations with slow learning curves and ultimately to stagnation.

Majoritarian, first past the post or single mandate electoral districts of the kind we have in the Anglo-Saxon world, the UK, the US and Canada seem elsewhere to lead precisely to the winner-take-all sledge hammer approach to politics. Multiple mandate electoral districts, on the other hand, which result in a number of parties in parliament, force upon society a greater degree of compromise. This has the disadvantage of making dramatic change more difficult to effect, yet does increase the need to forge coalitions, find common solutions, and compromise, etc. It also means that the political process is more inclusive, for even the more extreme parties are far tamer in the parliament than in the streets.

Moreover, the absence of winner-take-all politics makes it more difficult to politicize the civil service, my next point.

Politicized civil services, a fundamental problem with authoritarian societies, is not unfamiliar to democratic societies. The more politicized, i.e. the lower down on the bureaucratic ladder that party membership is an issue or relevant, the less competent your government as a whole will be, for your ministries will consist of party loyalists not competent people. Moreover, the greater the politicization, the greater the "cleaning house" effect when, as in all democratic societies the inevitable happens, and the electorate votes in a new government.

I have over the years seen cases in the post-communist world where everyone but the cleaning staff is changed after an election. This is not good. The new party stalwarts in civil service posts have to learn from scratch. The result is incompetent governance and a disaffected populace, not good if you want to ensure that democracy is permanent.

There are many other lessons we have learned in Central and Eastern Europe, involving lustration, methods of privatisation and how that is related to the emergence of oligarchic economic rule, press rights freedoms and obligations. This is not the place to go through them; I mentioned those above only as examples of what we have learned the hard way and what can be of use to others.

My main point is that we in the successful countries of the post-communist world know a good deal from our own experiences about what works and what does not. We also know that much of the advice we got back when we were still fish soup was just plain silly. So we know too what it is like to have overbearing, often obnoxiously patronizing experts telling us how to reform our countries.

From this experience we who live and occasionally govern in successful post-communist countries have an obligation on the one hand to be available to post-revolutionary, democratic governments in the Arab World to share our empirical and first hand knowledge of transition to democracy. On the other hand, we must never forget our understanding of how delicate this can be. After all, we got a lot of very bad advice from people who had no clue as to what they were talking about and who had no sense of propriety either.

If there is anything I have concluded thinking back on the past 20 years is that we in fact have much to learn from the way the Arab world was treated for the past 500 years. Professor Edward Said, who taught at my university but whose courses to my own misfortune I failed to



take, describes in his book *Orientalism* the patronizing treatment, actual and intellectual, of the Arab world by the West. I read the book in 1980 and thought it uninteresting. I reread it recently and realized how apt a description it was of how we in Central and Eastern Europe were (and occasionally still are) treated. Just as an example, the following is a quote from a previous president of the European Parliament some dozen years ago when it had become clear that there would be an enlargement of the EU:

**The forthcoming enlargement is not comparable to any previous one. This is true not only – and not primarily – because of the immense gulf between the West and the potential East of the Union in terms of the standard of living. More important is that the citizens and the politicians of the Central and Eastern European countries differ fundamentally from those in the present EU Member States as *regards their national emotional traditions, experiences, interests and value judgments. What needs to be overcome here is not only the legacy of 50 years of separate development but also far older and more fundamental differences rooted in European history***

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I could say that is one of the silliest, crypto-racist, indeed *orientalist* things I have encountered, except it is not. It's just part of the narrative we in Central and Eastern Europe have endured for almost a quarter century, from "Lazy Latvians" working for Laval in Sweden to "Polish Plumbers" in Paris to Post-soviet, emotionally traumatized, hence foreign policy-challenged Estonians right here in Tallinn. I mention all this to shame those that treated us that way, to chasten those of *us* who might behave the same way to others and to warn our democratic brethren in Northern Africa that even when you do your best, there will be those in Europe who don't get it. As the Turks well know.

Moreover, I think we shall have to make sacrifices for the Arab democrats, if they are to succeed. The EU's obsession with keeping immigrants out while stubbornly refusing to reform trade policy and the Common Agricultural Policy is intellectually untenable. And morally absurd. Why would we expect people to remain in Northern Africa if they have no work, which will remain the case if we do not provide them or the fruit of their labours with access to our markets? This, however, goes already beyond my brief for today. Democracy in Central Europe and the Arab World is already a big enough topic.

Let me just conclude with this: functioning democracy is not an idea owned by any of us. There are rules, but those who inherited a functioning democracy without having to fight to create it don't quite know what it means; those who had to build it do. I hope we who do know what it

## Getting to Turkey or Aquaria from Fish Soup

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means are willing to work together with democrats in the Arab world to build their democracies. That we appreciate their sacrifices and now extend our hand to them... if we are asked.