

Twenty years on: The world(s) beyond the wall

I would like to greet everyone here today and thank the organisers, in particular the local authorities and the Province of Alessandria who have put so much effort into restoring the Abbey of Bosco Marengo and the Santa Croce church, both derelict until seven years ago when we set up the World Political Forum, and where today we have this wonderful cultural centre, known in many countries of the world for the exceptional quality of its intellectual initiatives and discussions.

The forum's theme today was prompted because it is 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, one of the shameful symbols of the absurdity of the cold war and the dangerous division of the world into opposing blocks and spheres of influence. For me this date is not merely an official anniversary linked to an important political watershed marking the end of the 20th century ("brief" if we wish to use the definition of the British historian Eric Hobsbawm, present amongst us today) but something that made a profound mark on me as a politician, and on me as a son of my country and of this century.

Twenty years is a considerable period of time in the life of an individual; for history, involving the destinies of millions of people and spanning decades if not centuries, it is also a considerable period of time and it allows us to get closer to the events of those times and take stock in a less emotional and more rational way – even though any emotions that might arise are fully justified when remembering the events of 1989: the first Congress of People's Deputies at the Kremlin, the final withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and, of course, the wide open Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, as well as all the other more-or-less "velvet" revolutions in eastern Europe.

We can look back on this recent past with different eyes not only because we are 20 years older (and wiser?) but because, in the meantime, we have acquired experience of life in a World After the End of the Cold War, a world which at the end of the 1980s was no more than an idea but one to which many hopes were attached and, as is now evident, illusions. What are then, even only in general terms, the conclusions that can be drawn from this unique period and the message contained in this new page of humankind's history? Such conclusions are not univocal.

The first optimistic observation: the announced End of history has not come about, even though many claimed it had. Neither has arrived what representatives of my generation of politicians trusted in and sincerely believed: a world in which with the end of the cold war humankind could finally forget the absurdity of the arms race, dangerous regional conflicts and sterile ideological disputes and enter a kind of golden century of collective security, the rational use of material resources, the end of poverty and inequality, and restored harmony with nature.

Obviously, no one doubts the achievements that have been made. We entered a new century not only in a chronological sense but also because of the re-established unity of the world and the world's historical process, a single global economy and communications methods and mobility on a global scale. Once freed from artificial barriers, walls and limitations, the world returned to a process of natural development, which provided a strong impulse towards its intrinsic potential for globalisation, which has now reached maturity (this in no way means the achievement of global harmony).

Another very important consequence of the ruins of the cold war is the realisation by many of one of the most important postulates of New Thinking: the interdependence of extremely important aspects that go to the very heart of the existence and development of humankind. This interdependence is not only between the processes and events that happen on the different continents, but concerns the organic link between changes in economic, technological, social,

demographic and cultural conditions in the multiple aspects of human existence that determine the daily existence of billions of people on our planet. Humankind has effectively started to transform itself into one single civilisation.

At the same time, the fall of the Wall, the disappearance of the Iron Curtain, of barriers and borders, unexpected by many, has juxtaposed not only those countries that had until recently represented different political systems, but also civilisations, cultures and traditions, accompanied by the need to synchronise historical time for those who had been living at different levels of internal development. From this derives a bigger role and responsibility for politics and politicians in that they are the expression of multiform human interests and the regulators of and “search engines” for the best solutions, compromises and ways of smoothing out and preventing conflicts.

Like the sluice gate of an enormous dam that opens unexpectedly, these processes have proved to be tough on the civil conscience and on the political elites who up to then had been used to existing and acting in the comfortable shadow and shelter of walls and borders. Most proved to be unprepared. This is why while recognising the obvious progress made towards unifying humankind, we must be honest and speak of the unsolved problems, the vanished illusions and lost opportunities. The list, unfortunately, is no less imposing.

Naturally, we politicians from the last century can be proud of the fact that we avoided the danger of a thermonuclear war! However, for many millions of people living around the globe, the world has not become a safer place. Quite the contrary, innumerable local conflicts and ethnic and religious wars have appeared like a curse on the new map of world politics, causing a very high number of victims. Clear proof of the irrational behaviour and irresponsibility of the new generation of politicians is the fact that defence spending and the defence budgets of many large and small countries alike are now bigger than during the cold war and strong-arm methods are once again the general way of tackling and solving conflicts and a commonplace aspect of current international relations.

Alas, over the last few decades the world has not become a fairer place. This is because disparities between poverty and wealth were preserved and increased not only in the northern hemisphere and in the developing southern hemisphere but also within developed countries themselves. The social problems in my country, Russia, as in other post-communist countries, are proof of the fact that the simple abandonment of the flawed model of a centralised economy and bureaucratic planning is not enough, it neither guarantees the country’s competitiveness in an open global economic context nor does it guarantee respect for the principles of social justice or support for a dignified standard of living for the population.

And neither has our planet itself become a safer house that its inhabitants can depend on. The warning given by the founders of the Club of Rome 40 years ago has been ignored. The limits of growth that they indicated then as reasonable limits to industrial production and consumption of natural resources have crossed the danger mark. Demographic disproportion and the flows of migrants are causes of political and social conflict, dwindling energy resources become reasons for war, while drinking water has become an inaccessible luxury for millions of unfortunates.

New challenges can be added to those of the past that have been ignored, ones unknown to politics at the time of the cold war. One of these is terrorism. In a context in which a world war is no longer an instrument of dissuasion between the most powerful nations, terrorism has become the “poor man’s atomic bomb”, no longer only in a figurative sense but perhaps in the literal sense of the term. The uncontrolled proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the competition between the erstwhile adversaries of the cold war to reach new technological levels in the production of arms

and the new pretenders to the role of influence in a multi-polar world increase the sensation of chaos which is afflicting global politics.

The regulators at one time, first of all the UN and other regional and international organisations that evolved during the cold war, are now either impotent or unequal to the task posed by the new reality, and at the same time a return to different types of nationalism and chauvinism, particularly evident in the appearance of numerous new states on the world map, as well as an increase in separatist movements create further lines of tension.

In some people this causes a sense of confusion, apathy and disinterest in politics. In others, however, there is nostalgia for the old days of stability and a tendency to return to the archaic and simplistic methods of solving problems and this favours authoritarian and populist politicians. In others still, it provokes desperation and irrational protests, which serve to increase political extremism, terrorism, religious fundamentalism and fanaticism.

The crisis of ideologies that is threatening to turn into a crisis of ideals, values and morals marks yet another loss of social reference points and strengthens the atmosphere of political pessimism and nihilism. The real achievement we can celebrate is the fact that the 20th century marked the end of totalitarian ideologies, in particular those that were based on Utopian beliefs.

Yet new ideologies are quickly replacing the old ones, both in the East and the West. Many now forget that the fall of the Berlin Wall was not the *cause* of global changes but to a great extent the *consequence* of those deep reform processes that started in the East and in the Soviet Union in particular. After decades of the Bolshevik experiment and the realisation that the experiment had led Soviet society down a historical blind alley, a strong impulse for democratic reform evolved in the form of Soviet Perestroika, which was also available to the countries of Eastern Europe.

But it was soon very clear that Western capitalism, too, deprived of its old adversary and historical contender and imagining itself to be the undisputed historic winner and incarnation of global progress, is at risk of leading Western society and the rest of the world down another historical blind alley.

The present global economic crisis was needed to reveal the organic defects of the present model of Western development imposed on the rest of the world as the only possible; the economic crisis further reveals that not only bureaucratic socialism but ultra-liberal capitalism are in need of profound democratic reform and the acquisition of a human face, a kind of its own Perestroika.

In the past enlightened minds like John Kenneth Galbraith and Andrei Sakharov, aware of the significance of these issues, had dreamed of the convergence of two opposing social systems. This opportunity has not been seized. All the more reason, then, not to miss the opportunity to try to jointly define, on the basis of the collective experience acquired, a "humane globalization formula". If the current efforts to overcome the consequences of the global crisis quickly lead just to the pursuit of solutions aimed at saving the pre-existing and clearly flawed model of development, then, in the near future, we will run the risk not only of a new crisis, but also suffer a real catastrophe involving each civilization.

Today, while we sit among the ruins of the old order, we can think of ourselves as active participants in the creation process of a new world. Many truths and postulates considered indisputable (both in the East and the West) have ceased to be so, including the blind faith in the all-powerful market and, above all, its democratic nature. There is an ingrained belief that the western model of democracy can be spread mechanically to other societies whose historical experience and

cultural traditions are different. In the present situation even a concept like that of social progress, which seems to be shared by everyone, needs more precise information and redefinition.

Finally, let us not forget a challenge of the greatest importance that our society is having to face for the first time. We have not yet fully realised, after having mercifully avoided a world war between human beings, that for quite some time we have all been fighting **another kind of world war, that between man and nature**. Today it is impossible to consider society's development as distinct from that of nature and it is further impossible to solve the economic and political problems we face if we ignore the deep interconnection, which exists between natural and social processes. This new approach requires the definition and dissemination of rules for a NEW ETHIC. This task will concern everybody: politicians, civil society, the business world and the mass media.

Pope John Paul II, one of the last century's greatest sons, used to say that we must be brave. Let us try to transform the dramatic experiences of the previous century into the material we need to build the new one, and let us not allow the construction of new walls on the ruins of the old.

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