

## Awareness of Commitment

By Peter Zajac

After 1989, conservatism in the post communist countries found itself in a paradoxical situation. The conservatives' objective was a conservative - liberal constitutional revolution. The revolution, conservative, in the sense of a radical return to the European traditions and liberal, meaning the establishment of the rule of law representing foundations of modern western civilisation.

This paradox is obvious even from the words that I have used at the very beginning: revolution, radical, modern. None of these words belong among the key terms of conservatism. Conservatism is in principle evolutionary, middle-of-the-road and traditional.

The paradoxical nature of this situation came as a result of the fact that on the way from the reality of the communist system to conservative values, it was necessary to overcome the greatest difficulties which required more radical manners. In contrast to the social democratic, as well as the liberal ways of thinking, the conservative way of thinking demanded the greatest discontinuous extent.

But it is the difference between the relationship to domestic sources and to international sources of conservative traditions that represents discontinuity. It is possible to profess the international sources as Christian democrats profess the tradition of Hlinka and conservatives profess the traditions of Štefánik and Hodža, but the half century since the war leads to a wide hiatus in both cases. The original succession was interrupted and we try to define what from the old tradition could establish new continuity. European conservatism stepped forward after World War II and the gap between European and current Slovak conservatism is great, it is perceptible especially when comparing how anchored European conservatism and how unsettled Slovak conservatism are in the new political society.

Conservatives – since there was actually nothing worth preserving from the previous regime – had to behave radically and revolutionary and as Czech philosopher Ladislav Hejdánek says, they had to “ruin the possible, in order to be able to preserve and maintain what they built themselves”. Hejdánek pointed out the real danger that became a reality in Slovakia: “Just because in a majority of cases they are not well equipped for this and they are not – like many revolutionists – patient enough to prepare both the public and public opinion for changes, we have to be afraid that they will not be allowed to preserve their own creations and own provisions.”

It is necessary to say that in Slovakia we are not that far from even starting to consider whether Slovak conservatives will be “allowed to preserve their own creations and own provisions.” After decades of the communist regime we have witnessed neither a radical nor an easy and gradual change in this decade. We have lived most of this decade in an autocratic regime which doubles the problem of continuity and discontinuity.

To believe that conservatism lies and in the near future will lie in a bed of roses would be an illusion, if only because the present conservatism is based on the values that are contrary to the publicly respected, or at least, accepted norms of instrumental policy of power. Conservatism is a synonym for stable values and cultivation, for fostering during a time of instability of values and lack of refinement. It still makes a radical impression and often presents itself with swollen veins on the forehead.

Conservatism is based on an awareness of commitment. But in a free society this awareness cannot exist without individual responsibility. Without it, there is no inner feeling of commitment. Enforced commitment without personal responsibility remains formal and impossible to accomplish. An irresponsible person cannot feel bound by any commitment.

Conservatism bears a value not instrumental character. It does not consider law to be neutral, law represents a system of values stabilised by experience. Means are not the objective they are just a tool to achieve the objective. Therefore conservatism chooses the means that will not destroy the objective. A conservative does not mistake means for objectives. The market economy is not an objective, it is the means to achieve a higher living standard for people. He does not understand enterprise and trade as a search for single-track profit, but as a search for mutual profitability. Political power is not merely a tool but also a form of public service for him. He does not wish to have a weak state, but a well functioning one. The accession to NATO and the EU is not a definitive target for all efforts, but a way how to enter the competition and do well when compared with other European nations and their cultures.

Conservatism is not tolerant, it is compassionate. The word compassionate means also sympathetic, merciful and involved. To be involved does not mean only sympathy and mercy on the powerless but participation in their destiny. To be involved means to be interested in somebody and this is more than tolerance because in most difficult cases tolerance changes into disregard. Involvement means overcoming. Indifference protects, involvement binds. Involved conservatism supports the family; but it has to learn to accept – although very different – other types of human relationships.

Conservatism respects public interests. But it knows that they cannot be imposed, only accepted where and when there is consent.

Conservatism fosters memory – both individual and collective memory of family, environment, region, nation, culture, and civilisation.

Conservatism respect otherness. Justice does not mean sameness but equality. Therefore conservatism does not want to change otherness according to its rules, but it does not let itself be changed. Conservatism searches for maybe more difficult but also longer lasting solutions based not on a quantitative search for the same amount of the same but on a qualitative search for the same scale of the different. Conservatism does not seek relativity, it balances.

It is obvious that all these characteristics make conservatism very different from liberalism. But where might a conservative be liberal? Conservatives support liberal democracy. Conservatism knows that the mere existence of an option does not guarantee sufficient freedom because freedom depends also on the division of power and its effective control. Conservatism cares about the free market because it respects

private ownership. It respects private ownership not because it is a kind of a fetish but because it fosters responsibility and frugality. Conservatism accepts change despite not being its apostle; it evaluates any change on the scales of individual and collective experience.

The honour of conservatism lies in not leaving behind a worse world. This is what conservatism strives for in a period when permanent changes only sometimes mean a change for the better.

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