

DON'T SAY IT WAS A DREAM

(Speech by Alejo Vidal-Quadras, Vice-president of the European Parliament, in the Conference "European conscience and Crimes of Totalitarian Communism: 20 Years After" organised in Brussels by the Czech Presidency of the European Union on March 18, 2009)

I would like to start by expressing my satisfaction for having been invited to this gathering on the European Conscience and the crimes committed by the Communist totalitarianism in the framework of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the iron curtain. I am deeply grateful to Alexandre Vondra for giving me this opportunity to share with so many esteemed colleagues some brief reflections during a commemoration filled with so much significance.

The fall of the Soviet Empire caused such commotion in the world that it led to the birth of a myth: the end of History. In the words of its most famous advocate, Francis Fukuyama, "... by the end of history, there will be no serious ideological competitors to liberal democracy left ". This grandiose illusion did not last for long, a mere few years at the beginning of the 1990s. During those glorious and impassioned days, western democracies and their open societies believed that indeed their enlightened and rational model had prevailed by the obviousness of its achievements. The Kantian ideal of perpetual peace seemed within reach and the European Union and the United States were set, at each side of the Atlantic, to lead benevolently all the peoples of the planet towards a new international order without other conflicts than those derived from peaceful commercial competition. The long suffering of the nations of Eastern Europe under the Kremlin's fist was over and of that martyrdom,

like it happened with the first Christians of Ancient Rome, emerged the bright and renewed faith in the liberal principles: the respect of human rights, free market economy, the Rule of Law and the globalisation of commerce as an endless source of wealth creation for all Humanity. The until then known as "satellite countries" of the Soviet Union returned through nearly bloodless velvet revolutions to their natural womb, the Europe of Enlightenment and freedom. Their re-conquered independence was the triumph of a weltanshaung made-to-measure for the human condition over one that had cruelly ignored it. Unlike the brutal methods with which communism was imposed crushing the will of its victims, in Prague, Warsaw, Vilnius, Riga, Budapest and in the other capitals freed from the control of Moscow, the people savoured a victory achieved through the power of ideas and not of tanks. Who could have questioned during those days of overwhelming joy that they were the dawn of a new Golden Age where oppressive totalitarianism, murderous identities and xenophobic nationalisms had been defeated once and for all? Without a doubt, the reigning circumstances called for optimism and confidence. The democratization of Russia, shyly started in the time of Gorbachev and his glasnot, redefined and reconsidered the interests and the priorities of the great Eurasian power that was renouncing its imperial control over Eastern Europe and its claim to be a superpower with a world hegemony calling. The new leaders of Russia did not regard the United States and Western Europe as enemies but as potential associates and its wish was to integrate and cooperate with the advanced democracies, setting itself the goal of becoming one of them as soon as possible. China, traumatized by the slaughter of Tienanmen, was isolated, focused on the program of economic reforms tainted of liberalism that unequivocally broke away from its collectivist past and with an army that, in spite its huge size, was not adapted to modern technological warfare. Japan was entering a

decade of recession and India had not yet taken off. In what concerns Europe, its process of progressive integration offered a model of building supranational institutions, of the renouncement of force to resolve conflicts and of the elimination of borders. The European Union, in this hopeful context of change of historical cycle, emerged as a paradigm of the new times: pre-eminence of universal values over cultural and linguistic differences, the overcoming of old nationalist clashes and the opening of vast areas of freedom of movement for people, capital and goods. Like Montesquieu wrote, "the natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace".

Unfortunately, this sedating mirage lasted very little and we have barely had any time to enjoy it. The second half of the 90s saw the irruption with tremendous destruction capacity of three sources of conflict that took us back to scenarios we thought to have left behind. First, the big powers, United States, Russia, China, Japan, India, Iran, are once again aggressively involved in struggles over the regional predominance in their areas of influence. Second, the classical confrontation between liberalism and totalitarianism has been reborn and countries are taking sides in accordance with their more open or more authoritarian character of their political regimes. From this perspective, the strange alliances that are being formed between Latin American populist and indigenist regimes and Russia and Iran offer worrying prospects. And third, the bloody clash between radical islamists and western democratic societies has reached an unusual virulence, aggravated with the emergence of failed States, such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and probably Pakistan, where fanatic muslim groups find a fertile soil to impose their barbarism. The gale of History blows menacingly again and the bipolar world

stabilised by the doctrine of assured mutual destruction has been replaced by the chaos of a violent and unpredictable multipolarity.

From this accelerated succession of events, the lesson to learn is simple and is pervaded with humility. The same way as the Marxist historical determinism was proven false after reaping over a hundred million lives and dragging the societies it took over into moral and material misery, a liberal determinism of the opposite sign is not recommendable because it can make us conceive hopes without foundation and weaken our firm compromise in the defence of our principles. Unfortunately, it is not true that human progress is unidirectional and that it points towards paradise on earth. The European 20th century was that of the horrors and to the victory of democracies in the Second World War followed half a century of slavery for half of Europe. The crumbling of the so called real socialism did not represent, therefore, the end of History, but only a coffee break in the fight for freedom. Today we are again in the heat of the battle, with the only difference being that the old enemy that was watching us closely from its vast and frozen dominions at the other side of the wire fences has been substituted by a polymorphic and elusive network of cells of heartless murderers that stealthily moves beneath our feet.

In the wonderful poem by Kavafis entitled “The Gods abandon Anthony”, one of its verses is fully applicable to present times. “Don't say it was a dream” recommends the poet to the Roman hero in its tense wait for the final battle. Because, indeed, the epic journey that took us to the summit of happiness 20 years ago and of which our fellow European citizens of the eastern half of our continent were valiant protagonists, was

not a dream, it was a magnificent reality, even though it did not mark the final stop of our undertaking. Our treasure does not lie in the port of destination of a predestined crossing designed by the inflexible becoming of History. Our treasure is, like Ulysses', the trip in itself in which we are now travelling together, shoulder to shoulder, all Europeans from the east and from the west, united by a common purpose. And it is this hazardous voyage, scattered with dangers and disappointments, that probably will never end, that defines us and ennobles us. Pluralist democracy based on the inalienable dignity of each individual is a fragile system, permanently exposed to the threats of fanaticism, tribalism and corruption. Its preservation requires a constant effort, every minute, every hour, every day, without a moment of hesitation or weakness. That is why we are proud of our project of European integration, that is why every night we must watch over our weapons in case tomorrow we are once again called to sacrifice and pain. But with a decisive novelty that happened two decades ago, that we commemorate in this hearing, and that has changed the shape of Europe: ever since, the enemies of the open society will find us, Europeans, all together, from the East and from the West, from the North and from the South, and nothing or nobody will ever be able to tear us apart.