

PR. RAMONA COMAN, PRESIDENT OF THE IEE

SPEECH – OPENING OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR – 2019

Monsieur le Vice-Doyen,

Chers collègues,

Chers étudiants, Chers Alumni,

Mesdames et messieurs,

Au nom de l'Institut d'études européennes de l'Université libre de Bruxelles, notre Vice-présidente, Emmanuelle Bribosia, notre Directeur Nicolas Verschueren et moi-même sommes ravis de pouvoir vous accueillir pour la rentrée académique 2019-2020 en études européennes.

My name is Ramona Coman, new President of the Institute for European Studies.

We are delighted to welcome you all to the Opening of the Academic Year in European Studies at the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

Let me remind you that the opening of the Institute's academic year marks an important moment as it brings together our community of students as well as academics from our three partner Faculties:

- the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, represented this evening by Vice-Dean professor Pascal Delwit,
- the Faculty of Law and Criminology, represented by professor Julio Baquero Cruz,
- the Solvay Brussels School of Economics and Management, represented by prof. André Sapir, President emeritus of the IEE.

The start of any academic year is a milestone of sorts.

This year the event holds a particular significance as it takes place in a special context.

1989 reshaped the world.

It also changed academic institutions.

In the 1990s, a critical juncture led to the transformation of our Institute for European Studie. This happened under the presidencies of Professors Jean Victor Louis and André Sapir. Since then, the Institute blossomed, welcoming new scholars – mainly political scientists - whose research focused on the transformation of the continent and the role of European Communities in the world, under the intellectual leadership of prof. Mario Telo.

1989 marked the evolution of our Institute.

The collapse of communism in CEECs lead scholars to redefine disciplines, concepts and theories, considering that until then the Cold War served as a key reference point

30 years ago the world was different.

I was personally living in the communist part of Europe. It was December, dark and cold in Transylvania where I was living. Dark because isolated from the rest of the world. Cold outside but also inside our homes due to the austerity measures implemented by the leader of the Communist party (Nicolae Ceausescu). On the 6th of December 1989 – today exactly 30 years ago - we were living our lives as any other day: children in schools praising the achievements of socialism and the visionary work of the communist leaders; parents in factories contributing to the so called “consolidation of socialism”. Being a child, in December 1989 the only beacon of light was the anticipation of Santa, whose name was no longer Santa because it was deemed too religious by the communist regime. Presents were not given by Santa; I was taught that everything good was the achievement of Nicolae Ceausescu, who was unanimously re-elected as leader of the Party in November 1989.

The regimes were dying, but we didn't know.

They were presented as a block, but - except for the jokes that we used to tell to mock the rulers of the systems - these regimes were very different in nature.

In 1989 the rapid pace of events took everyone by surprise. In February, the Polish government started round table talks with the trade unions Solidarnosc. In March, the first genuine election took place in the Soviet Union. In May, Hungary removed electrical fencing from its borders with Austria. In June, the trade union Solidarnosc won the Polish election. In August, millions of protesters in the Baltic states formed a human chain to demand autonomy from the Soviet Union. In September: Hungary allowed East German refugees to cross into Austria. In October, thousands attended peaceful protests in the city of Leipzig in Germany. In November, the Wall dividing Berlin was dismantled. In December 1989, while Romanian dictator Ceausescu was executed, dissident Vaclav Havel was elected president of Czechoslovakia.

Before 1989 only a minority of scholars argued that the disintegration of the Soviet Union was a possibility. Most of them failed not only to anticipate the East European revolutions but also to consider them a realistic possibility (Adrian Pop 2013:347).

Mea culpas followed as no one was able to explain why the events took virtually everyone by surprise.

Sovietology – as the study of the communist world was called - disappeared.

The post-communist transitions became a major field of research for political scientists, sociologists, lawyers, economists and historians.

In this context, many declared that with the collapse communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union “democracy was the only game in town” and that “democratic

consolidation” was A one-way street. Of course, we knew in 1989 that “building a democracy was no easy task”, but we hoped that “once the key benchmarks of democracy were attained, the political system would be stable for evermore” (Mounk 2018: 10).

The first signs of the complex transitions to democracy in the 1990s and the accession to the EU gave grounds for hope.

But as we know, in recent years, states which used to be consolidated democracies suddenly found themselves skating on thin ice.

- How to explain that liberal democracy – that reigned triumphant until recently – is increasingly contested by political leaders in the name of “illiberal” democracy?
- What were the blind spots in our research?
- What is at stake in the region 30 years after the collapse of communism?
- and - what are the implications for the European Union?

To address this set of key questions, we have the pleasure to welcome Prof. Jan Zielonka - Professor of European Politics at the University of Oxford and Ralf Dahrendorf Fellow at Saint Antony’s College.

His previous appointments included posts at Leiden University and the European University Institute in Florence.

His work oscillates between the field of international relations, comparative politics and political theory. These three disciplines are often combined in his research as he offers to his readers comprehensive analyses of CEECs and of the normative foundations of the EU and its role in the world.

Some of his influential books include:

- *Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

And

- *Counter-revolution. Liberal Europe in Retreat - which is written in the form of a letter to Ralph Darendorf and which was awarded this year the UACES prize for the best book on Europe)*

Prof. Zielonka regularly contributes to leading media across the EU.

Before concluding let me finish by saying that this event also echoes the ULB’s long-standing strategic partnership with the University of Oxford supported by the Winer Anspach Foundation.

Mesdames et Messieurs, Chers collègues, Chers étudiants, Chers Alumni,

This evening Prof. Zielonka will take us back to 1989 to revisit three decades of transformation in CEECs and their implications for the EU.



Thank you, Prof. Zielonka, for giving our community the opportunity to debate with you this evening. Following the lecture, the floor will be open for questions and remarks.

Please give your full attention to Prof. Zielonka.