

The Blanka Rosenstiel Lecture Series on Poland
European & Eurasian Studies Program

FIU

Steven J. Green
School of International
& Public Affairs

Democracy: Past and Present in Central Europe

Featuring
Polish Ambassador Piotr Wilczek

by Ernesto Fiocchetto

It has been eighty years since the German invasion of Poland and thirty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was the inspiration behind a conference on democracy in Central Europe as part of the Lady Blanka Rosenstiel Lecture Series held by The European & Eurasian Studies Program at FIU, in collaboration with The American Institute of Polish Culture and The Honorary Consulate of the Republic of Poland. The US Ambassador of the Republic of Poland, Consuls, FIU scholars, and other experts from diverse fields engaged in this remarkable topic and brought unique and important perspectives on the past and present of democracy in that region. The conference took place on October 28, 2019 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Management and Advanced Research Center (FIU) and consisted of two panels.

John F. Stack, Founding Dean of the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs (FIU), and David J. Kramer, Director of the European & Eurasian Studies Program and Senior Fellow in the Václav Havel Program for Human Rights and Diplomacy (FIU), opened the conference. Dr. Stack welcomed the audience and especially recognized Lady Blanka Rosenstiel for her continuous support and dedication in bringing excellent programs into FIU about the history, politics, and culture of Poland.

Mr. Kramer introduced the Polish Ambassador to the US, His Excellency Piotr Wilczek. In his opening remarks, the Ambassador emphasized the importance of the year 1989 in Poland. He suggested that we should view the anniversary in a broader context that includes not only



Poland but other nations within Central Europe. The anniversary represents an end of a long and hard battle that engaged the entire region. He recognized that, although they had the West's moral support which is always deeply valued, the nations from Central Europe should be proud of their own efforts that led them to where they are now; that this anniversary represents a starting point for the Central Europeans' quest for prosperity,



Mrs. Christine Caly-Sanchez, Amb. Piotr Wilczek, Prof. Ted Kontek, Lady Blanka, Mrs. Beata Paszyc, Dr. Anna Pietraszek



security, and social harmony. Ambassador Wilczek finished by inviting the panelists and the audience to tackle the question of what we have learned from the events of 1989. He posed questions that guided the debate "Did the Fall of the Berlin Wall really end the Cold War? What kind of victory was it? Are we safe?"

The first panel, which was moderated by Beata Paszyc, Honorary Vice Consul of the Republic of Poland and Executive Director of The American Institute of Polish Culture, was composed of Rebecca Friedman, Associate Professor in History, Director of the Wolfsonian Public Humanities Lab, and Faculty Fellow of the Office of the Provost (FIU); Martin Palouš, SIPA Senior Fellow and Director of SIPA's Václav Havel Center for Human Rights and Diplomacy initiative; and Suzanne Zwingel, Associate Professor in Politics & International Relations (FIU).

Consul Paszyc presented a film, *Animated History of Poland*, which synthesized the last century in Poland in 8 minutes. After the video, Martin Palouš gave his perspective on the events of 1989 and focused especially on his personal experience of freedom after years of totalitarianism. He stressed the importance of the connections between the past events and the future ones, and concluded that the lessons learned from 1989 are still ongoing in 2019.

Dr. Rebecca Friedman discussed aspects of memory and commemoration in Russia and the Soviet Union. The question that guided her presentation was, "How do the Russians and those who resided in the Soviet Union remember the experiences of September 1, 1939?": the day Germany invaded Poland followed by a military operation supported by the Soviet Union. After an engaging presentation of painful personal experiences and stories, she concluded that "memory, and war-time memory in

particular, is a very strange thing that varies from the political to the personal."

The final discussion before the break was given by Dr. Suzanne Zwingel who focused on a different historical moment and geographical area, namely the period after the Fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany. Dr. Zwingel describes her perspective as one of "a hopefully informed private citizen who reflects on those moments." As her academic work is on human rights and gender equality, and as a West German citizen and scholar, she talked about ideas that underpin democracy, such as the inclusion and representation of the voices of all during that period. She elaborated on the young democratic experience of Germany in the last thirty years, and she highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of democracy in that country and the Central European region.

The afternoon panel was chaired by Dr. Markus Thiel, Associate Professor in Politics & International Relations and Director of the Miami-Florida Jean Monnet Center of Excellence (FIU). He explained that the second panel would focus on the questions of Democracy now in Central Europe. "In the last thirty years," he affirmed, "we have seen that there have been significant improvements in the region, which is called the democratic consolidation." These countries are also part of two very important international institutions, namely NATO and the EU. Although there have been great political achievements and economic growth in Central Europe, Dr. Thiel drew attention to possible democracy hazards. After setting the scene, he put a question to the panel, "How can we make sure that the democratic achievements over the past 30 years can develop further and how can we maintain them?" The panelists who addressed the question were Ian Brzezinski, American foreign policy and military affairs expert; Ted Kontek, Former Foreign Service Officer at U.S.



Dr. Markus Thiel, Dr. Tatiana Konstadinowa, Prof. Ted Kontek, Mr. Ian Brzezinski, Mr. David Kramer, Amb. Martin Palous, Mrs. Beata Paszyc, Lady Blanka, Amb. Piotr Wilczek, Dr. Rebecca Friedman, Dr. Suzanne Zwingel

Department of State; and Tatiana Kostadinova, Professor in Politics & International Relations at SIPA (FIU).

Mr. Ted Kontek started by reading some media headlines from western countries that speak about the danger of democracy in Poland in the last couple of years. In his presentation, he confronted these truth of these headlines and similar perspectives, especially by challenging the Western understanding and expectations on how democracy should be in Central European countries. He argued that “to a large degree many of the complaints do not concern democratic practices but concern policies.” He concluded with four relevant affirmations that summarized his perspective: Poland has a vibrant and well-functioning democracy; some sub-structural changes do not need to be made to “de-communized” the system; populism is not inherently anti-democratic; and the government has not made fundamental changes that would threaten democratic structures and institutions. However, he asserted that there are some warning signs in Poland as there are in every democracy around the world, so citizens, civil society, and international institutions must remain vigilant.

Prof. Tatiana Kostadinova addressed the emotional meaning that 1989 has for many people who lived in the region at that moment, like herself. She emphasized the achievements and challenges for democracy in Central Europe after the Fall of Berlin Wall. People who marched and gathered in the streets and squares in the main cities of the region had the same three slogans: Democracy, Markets, and Europe. She asserted that after 30 years we can see success in all three of these areas throughout the region. She illustrated each with current examples from

different Central European countries. She also remarked some threats to democracy, such as xenophobia, various perspectives on migration and refugees, the deliberate weakening of institutions, populism, crisis of representation, and issues related to the communist past, among others.

Lastly Mr. Ian Brzezinski stated that the Fall of Berlin Wall is the monumental event that symbolizes the breaking down of barriers and the prime opportunity for the restoration and advancement of liberal democratic governance, independence, and global cultural institutions in Center Europe. The question that led his presentation was why this democratic process is relevant to the US and the US national security policies. He gave three reasons. First, shared values are the most powerful foundation blocks for enduring, resilient, and reliable alliances and partners. Second, peace in Europe is largely due to the fact that these nations share national commitments to democratic principles, institutions, and freedoms. And third, American global power significantly rests on the stability of not just economic and military capacities of its allies and partners, but also the political legitimacy they bring as a community of democracies.

Both panels were followed by lively discussions, comments, questions, and answers with the audience. This successful event on these timely and imperative matters in democracy illustrated the connection of past and present events in the developments of the Central European countries and the international community, and the necessary commitment of the region, the EU, and the US to strengthen democracy.