



## 25 Years After the Wall Fell, Challenges Remain

By [Cathy Young](#)

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The festivities for the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a turning point in the collapse of Soviet communism, have passed in the shadow of troubling events around the world. In Moscow, a KGB-bred strongman plots to build a new Kremlin-ruled empire as a nervous Europe looks on. Meanwhile, the specter of radical Islamic fundamentalism is haunting the Middle East. Has the promise of freedom that looked so bright in 1989 faded—or are there grounds for cautious hope, in place of the wild-eyed optimism of a quarter century ago?

Re-reading an essay penned a few months after the Wall came down, [“Why Socialism Collapsed in Eastern Europe”](#) by scholar and pro-freedom activist Tom Palmer, one feels nostalgic. After examining the causes of this remarkably peaceful revolution—the inability of statist economies to ensure prosperity and of aging dictatorships to keep out unwanted information—Palmer expressed his excitement at the emergence of a liberal political and intellectual culture in Eastern and Central Europe. If we are lucky, he wrote, these ideas will grow and “drop seeds back into our societies to reinfuse us with the spirit of liberty.”

I asked Palmer, now a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and executive vice president for international programs at the libertarian Atlas Network, for an updated view. In his email, he sounded more upbeat than one might expect: “Remember what the condition was in 1989 and 1990. Dictatorships. Food shortages. Despair. Visit those countries now and you find very different places. Yes, they are not perfect, but it's so easy to overlook the progress when you're looking for the faults.”

Still, Palmer acknowledges that there is a lingering nostalgia for communism among some in Eastern Europe—especially older people for whom normal nostalgia for their youth is associated with the communist past—and that such sentiment paradoxically feeds into the popularity of far-right nationalist and even fascist movements. In the case of Russia, he says, “there is another element, which I call ‘Failed Empire Syndrome’: the longing for the days when ‘we were feared,’ mixed in with conspiracy theories of being betrayed, humiliated, etc.”

Unlike many critics of American foreign policy—both leftists and anti-interventionist libertarians and conservatives—Palmer is not persuaded by “the narrative of Putin being spurned, threatened, encircled, and so on, so that his turn toward fascism is all the West’s fault.” In his view, “The biggest problem was the rise in oil and gas prices, which gave Putin and his

cronies the idea that they could succeed without the rule of law, since they could build a crony/rentier state on the basis of abundant revenues.” This has been exacerbated by Putin’s embrace of an extreme nationalist ideology, which he is now seeking to export by cultivating neo-fascist parties and movements in Europe.

The former Soviet bloc is not the only place where the spread of freedom has proven far more problematic than was once hoped. A decade after the fall of communism, radical Islamism emerged as a new global ideology implacably opposed to the values of free and open societies. After another decade, the Middle East was rocked by a series of revolutions that some hailed as the Arab world’s answer to the liberation of Eastern Europe. Yet in most countries, the “Arab Spring” quickly turned to either deadly chaos or oppression with a new face—and in Egypt, the revolution’s birthplace, even the old face is back.

Meanwhile, in the West and even in the United States, confidence in freedom is at a low point. The moral clarity of 1989 is long gone. At the moment, we seem hopelessly divided over the balance between freedom and justice and the role of the state in society. Too many on the right glibly use rhetoric that erases the vast gulf between a democratically elected government with constitutional safeguards—even one far bigger and more intrusive than many of us would like—and communist dictatorship. Too many on the left would just as glibly sacrifice freedom to their understanding of equality. At a recent New York symposium on free speech and “hate speech,” British journalist Brendan O’Neill, editor of the maverick online magazine [Spiked](#), noted that the suppression of “harmful” ideas in the name of social justice—once a bedrock principle of the now-defunct communist world—has migrated to the Western democracies. We could use an reinfusion of the spirit of liberty—but from where?

Still, if there is anything the fall of the Wall can teach us, it’s that seemingly hopeless situations can change for the better with dizzying speed. When Ronald Reagan issued his famous challenge to Mikhail Gorbachev in June 1987—“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”—and predicted that the wall would fall because “it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand truth; [it] cannot withstand freedom,” the Soviet press denounced him for giving a “war-mongering speech.” Who could have thought then that Reagan’s words would come true just two years later?

Today, too, the Atlas Network’s Palmer urges a realistic optimism. “If we don’t promote our principles and work to implement them, they will not just be implemented on their own,” says Palmer, who has worked extensively on pro-freedom projects around the world. “But I am optimistic that, if we fight, we will win. Moreover, we have a moral reason to be optimistic, because pessimism is generally a self-realizing-attitude. If you want to promote liberty, you should be an optimist. You owe it to yourself.”

In his 1987 speech, Reagan spoke of a slogan spray-painted on the Wall: “The Wall will fall. Beliefs will become reality.” There are many walls, physical, intellectual, and spiritual, still waiting to fall around the world. Perhaps, twenty-five years from now, we will look back at some of those walls and marvel at how unshakeable they once seemed.