

European Union: Seven Glimpses of Opal

By Peter Zajac

I.

In the ninth century Europe started experiencing the process of Christianity. It was a process started from above and it was a collective process. It was political and about power.

This process was accompanied by fight for western rite, Roman alphabet, own cultural language, ethnic definition and nation.

This way, a thousand years ago, present face of Europe started to form its shape, the face of the Europe which was given the name: Western. Central Europe was part of this process, which came as a result of a schism between Western Europe and Byzantium as two heirs of Roma in 1054. Central Europe is characteristic for its hybrid position – anchored in Western Europe but always tilted towards Eastern Europe.

The most often Central Europe was on the periphery of Western European movements, sometimes becoming its centre. Central Europe went through all the important movements along with Western Europe: settlement and agrarian revolution, the crusades, fight for investiture, centuries taking fights for political topography of today's Europe, establishment and growth of cities, trade, crafts and enterprise, invasions of Turks and Tatars, industrialisation and modernization, secularization, increase in importance of an individual, individual and collective identity, birth of democracy and modern political nation, urbanization and emigration, mechanics and holocaust, dreaming about peace and everyday wars, cultured manners and destruction, erudition and dullness, compassion and disregard, solidarity and egoism. History of modern Europe has neither purely utopia nor distopic character, it is not a straight line, it is meanders.

But in this respect first of all I want to say that the nations in Central Europe which did not accept Christianity thousand yeas ago, do not exist today. They vanished.

Or in other words. The European experience says that to accept history means to accept both its good and bad sides and, at the same time, to distinguish the bad from the good. But to accept: those who do not – do not exist.

Historical experience says that decisions are always combination of momentary, short-term, medium-term and long-term trends. This is true also today: future is compilation of points on the trajectory which began in the past. We cannot see the future; the past is possible orientation on the way to future, a star chart on earth on which we permanently change orientation signs. Historical trajectory tells us that our way is connected with Europe in the long run. In the good and the bad times, for the good and for the bad.

II.

Political idea of Europe had several forms. In Middle Ages it was connected with the idea of universal Christianity, later with the idea of dynastic empire, in the 19th century with the idea of Holy Alliance, in the 20th century with the idea of rule of one nation, one class, one race. There were always some universal idea and concept behind it, total, and in the 20th century also totalitarian.

And this idea always competed with the second fundamental European idea saying that differentiation and plurality are sources of invention, creativity, movement and change.

These two main ideas have rivalled each other for a long time. The elementary European problem is a question whether this rivalry must always bring either incessant destructive conflicts or similarly destructive stiffness.

The Americans found answer to this question in the story of the Federalists. The story is based on the idea that nobody but God can hold absolute power. The United States is based on a founding myth about division of power: among people, between individuals and institutions, among various interests, opinions, attitudes and values, among political and economic powers and power of public creation and influencing of opinions, among power of an individual, family, municipality, city, state, the States. This is the basis for American freedom.

And this is what Europe lacks. This has been her Achilles heel, and it is and only will be Achilles heel of the European Union.

III.

My generation has one more experience. Utopia dreams of our parents about an empire of social or national justice drowned in two totalitarian systems of the 20th century. Both were connected with an idea of universal, and if possible right away global, solution. Both ended up miserably. They drowned in blood, the first one in others and own blood, and the second in own and others blood.

Our anti-Utopianism, in this empire of material goods, has a peculiar form of utopia of spirit. It floats through discussions about human rights, the discussion of the late seventies and early eighties, and through all after November discussion about Europe. It has its rhetoric. It is expressed in this astonished shout of a phoning child: Hallo, Europe! what became a slogan about our return to Europe after barb wires had been cut. It has its illusions personified in two thirds of the Slovak nation quietly (although with a little disbelief) hoping for a miracle of manna or never-never land. It has its pragmatics embodied in negotiations with the European Union.

The European Union is for my generation a rounding off a historical manoeuvre, that should put a period after our ignominious past, when we were degraded by others but we degraded ourselves too. In this case, for some the European Union means additional intuition, for some it is delightful forgetting and for some alibi.

For many the European Union is also some kind of a veil covering their own fears. In Slovakia the European Union became a magic formula to protect from Mečiar's autocratic regime and from hatchet stick nationalism. Today, the European Union is

becoming also a veil hiding corruption of unprecedented scale that affects people's relations, institutions, economy and politics. Its motto is: corruption is everywhere the same like here. Also this is going on behind the veil of the European Union.

IV.

During ten years, from Copenhagen to Copenhagen, Western European attitudes changed. Commonly shared 1989 euphoria was replaced by a sober judgment about a poor relative who does not bring anything to common household but asks. The European Union faces its own problem: it has to make a great manoeuvre from a care state to a state of personal responsibility and solidarity.

For us there was nothing else what we could do so in certain respect our manoeuvre was easier. Big western European states like Germany, France, Italy and Spain still believe (although they are not convinced about it) that it will be possible without a big bang. It will not, and the longer it will take, the worse. For us too. Because we do not enter a European Union full of „milk and honey“. The European Union is not a horn of plenty, but a niggard who wants to protect himself from new dwarfs – as mentioned the respectable German daily newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. That is why we have squabbles and exhausting negotiations instead of fanfares demanded by former dissidents.

V.

If there are voices of young generation calling against the accession to the European Union these are different from the voices of exuberant nationalists from historical open-air museums. They do not want to return to non-existing past, but they also do not want to walk with happy smiles to a non-existing future. I understand this and I listen to their arguments carefully, although I know that the will to be part of Europe is part of my personal identity, my own life experience and historical memory. I want to be part of the Europe for which our forefathers decided a thousand years ago and the Europe that our parents having their own experiences, sometimes active, with the utopia projects of Empire I and Empire II long for and the Europe for which we decided in November 1989 too.

The European Union is slowly changing from a desire or a battlefield where the fight for Slovakia's face is going on to a reality and Slovakia – as they say it in a nice way – will with probability verging on certainty become its member on the 1st of May 2004. We will celebrate on the 1st May – contrary to the Friday 13th in Copenhagen when our accession was welcomed with kind of a breath out after hard work. I do not know whether the European Union has chosen the best symbol for the celebration, but in any case I think that on the day when everybody will have a rest from work and celebrate we will have to work. We are facing key questions that are supposed to bring an answer telling us how to behave on the day after accession. And this answer is not an easy one.

VI.

Accession to the European Union does not automatically mean solution to our problems. The way Slovakia will look – and this is our main goal – will depend on us and our abilities. Slovakia herself is the key to Slovakia's future after the accession to the European Union. We decide it here whether this is a country of egoists and

corruptionists or a country of decent people. Here we will decide whether we only have mouths full of nice talk or are able to be up to this talk. It will be decided here whether we disguise or prefer honesty. It will be decided here whether we steal or save. It will be decided here whether we envy or favour. It will be decided here whether we save our country or we leave destruction and disaster behind us. It will be decided here whether we improve or plunder.

The European Union will bring us many new problems. Here are some basic ones.

The European Union still makes our economy more dynamic in many ways but it also starts hindering it in some respects. It is a question to what extent we will be able to raise economic effectiveness and maintain our independence in decision making.

It is a question to what extent we will let the European bureaucracy, that wants to set norms on something which is impossible to have norms and unify something which is impossible to be unified, to bind us.

It is a question to what extent we will realize, even in European conditions, that political plurality does not end beyond Slovak borders and the European Union is only conservative, liberal and socialist.

It is a question how respective states will be able to maintain their own political environment in the political environment of the European Union.

Political legitimacy of decision making in the European Union that is very often based not on political but bureaucratic basis is a great problem. Will we go the „presidential“ and thus centralistic way of the big ones or the way of „common decision making“ and gradual federalization as the small states propose. The key question will be the question of further enlargement of the European Union. Will we be in favour of Turkey or against? Will we be in favour of Croatia and Serbia or against? Will we be in favour of the Ukraine and Belarus or against? Will we be in favour of Russia or against? Or otherwise said – where will be the borders of Europe for us?

Probably the greatest problem will pose the question of relation between the European Union and the United States. Will we join European anti Americanism to which we have certain traditional inclination? And for us alone the question of our own identity will certainly be a problem too. Will our identity be vegetative, will it be the identity of surviving, a passive one – something to which, again, we incline historically? Or will it be the identity of culture and education, with cultural manners and erudition, that will be created here at home and it will be able to address also somebody else?

VII.

My answer might have only a provisional form of personal belief. But I do not want to owe it.

I am convinced that in principle it is Slovakia who decides about the destiny of Slovakia, not the European Union. The way Slovakia will look at home will be the same as the way she will look in the European Union. In this sense of the word, I am

in favour of active domestic and foreign policy for Slovakia. Today, the policy more accepts and only little forms the reality.

I am against any acceptance of unified norms where it is useless and bureaucratic and where it only helps to start stopping mechanisms especially when it comes to the economy and social realm. Only dynamic economic and social policy may put Slovakia on a dynamic trajectory of education, culture and a higher quality of life.

I am against the blending of political differences within the EU, and for the utmost political legitimacy in decision making. I am for the maximum extent of political decision making in respective member states as well as for the maximum extent of decision making at a municipal level.

I am against the conservation of the European model of a care state, but I am also against a state of social coldness. I am deeply viscerally convinced that man is not , homo economicus'. I am against the separation and isolation of the European Union from the United States. I am for a strong and united NATO which, being a strong link between the EU and the USA, has a fundamental and key significance for both the future of Slovakia, and the future of the EU. I am for the Europe of states. I consider the idea of a cosmopolitan Europe as well as the idea of a Europe of regions to be in the first case denying, and in the second case not respecting the European historical trajectory.

I am for the Europe where people will not change into nomads, where a man will have individual, local, regional, national, state and European identity.

I am for the Europe full of respect towards her own or somebody else's.

I am for the Europe where people are not only guests in the country where they live, closed in niches of their inner environment, that they will take with them everywhere they go like a magic small table from a fairy tale, but they are integral, full-fledged and valuable part of the country they live in. But this also means that it will be the people for whom learning and respecting various forms of behaviour, habits, morals, history, culture and language of their home country will be standard part of their individual and collective equipment. Only then this country could be their country and they can be the country's people.

I am not afraid that Slovakia will dissolve in the European Union if Slovakia does not dissolve inside herself. As long as we are able to foster our identity as an identity of culture, we will be able to stand up for this identity and develop it also in the European Union – if Europe is the Europe of culture. The European Union does not represent the greatest threat of loss to our national and cultural identity – it is us alone.

So, I do not consider The European Union to be our greatest problem, but I believe that it is our own passivity and pliancy.

There is a lot to do.

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