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Why the EU Needs Croatia (Even More Than Croatia Needs the EU)

When in late 2005 the accession negotiations between Croatia and the EU officially started, a leading Croatian liberal daily triumphantly published the following headline all over its front page: „Bye, bye Balkans!“. At that time, this was the prevailing and typical stance towards the European Union: some sort of 'self-fulfilling mythology' of the Balkans as a region needing to be 'civilised' by integration into the West. Only eight years later, as Croatia is finally becoming part of the European Union, neither the EU nor the Balkans has the same image anymore. Today's situation is somehow reminiscent of the famous joke about a patient whose doctor makes him choose whether to hear the bad or the good news first. Of course, the patient chooses first to hear the bad news. „The bad news is you have cancer“, says the doctor, „but don't worry, the good news is you have Alzheimer's, so when you get home you will already have forgotten about the first predicament“. Doesn't that just sound like the situation regarding Croatia's EU accession, where the bad news is that Croatia is in a big political and economic crisis, with corruption affairs erupting almost on a daily basis and unemployment rates rising as well and the good news is: „Don't worry, you will enter the EU“.

Manufacturing consent

„A clear majority in favour of EU accession“, that is how the teletext of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation reported on the referendum in Croatia regarding the country's EU membership. And indeed, two thirds of the votes cast said „Yes“. But taking into account the historically low turnout in the referendum of 43 %, this means that actually not more than 29 % of the population entitled to vote spoke out in favour of EU accession. On the eve of Croatia's EU referendum, the former war general Ante Gotovina, recently released from his ICTY prison cell in The Hague, who was once the biggest obstacle to the Croatian negotiations with the EU, sent an epistle to the Croatian people urging them to vote in favour of the EU. At the same time, the two biggest Croatian parties, the social-democrats (SDP), now in power, and the conservatives (HDZ), the former ruling party, together with the Croatian Catholic Church, did everything to convince the voters that „there is no alternative“.

Only a few days before the referendum the foreign minister even went so far to point out that pensions will not be paid unless the vote is „Yes“. And, thanks to a „Yes“-campaign that cost around 600,000 euros, the main arguments were exactly similar 'blackmail alternatives', among which the most frequent was: „If we don't enter the EU, we will stay on the Balkans“. In such an atmosphere it is no surprise that the referendum on Croatia's accession to the EU recorded the lowest turnout among all current Member States. With an attendance of only 43 percent of its citizens, Croatia has beaten the previous record holder Hungary where the referendum was attended by 45 percent. One possible explanation was nicely formulated by Croatia's prime-minister after the first official results: „Afraid that the referendum might fail, we changed the Constitution“, involuntarily echoing the famous proverb by Bertolt Brecht: „When government doesn't agree with the people, it's time to change the people“. Not only were the rules of the referendum indeed changed in 2010 because of the EU-accession, but also other (legal, economic, etc.) things were settled beforehand.

Bye, bye, demos!

When, only six days after Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation which triggered the 'Arab Spring', 41-year old TV engineer Adrian Sobaru attempted to commit suicide during the Romanian prime minister's speech in Parliament by throwing himself off the gallery dressed in a T-shirt saying „You have killed our children's future! You sold us!“, almost no one took this as a indication of what was going to happen in the European Union. Only a year later

thousands of Romanians protested austerity measures (mainly provoked by the privatisation of the health-care system). Unlike at the time of the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 or 2007, there is no optimism in the air anymore – and yet, Croatia is joining the Club.

Only last year the EU was facing huge protests and several general strikes from Spain, Portugal and Greece to England, Hungary, Rumania and future Member State Croatia.¹ And there is a new anti-democratic tendency in the EU, which does not only manifest itself in the success of right-wing movements (Golden Dawn, etc.) and governments (Viktor Orbán). An even bigger threat to democracy are the new technocrat elites in power, people who are actually provoking new nationalist tendencies and who all have one thing in common: they all worked for Goldman Sachs; people like Mario Monti, Mario Draghi or Lucas Papademos. Actually, the last one is the best example for what is wrong with the EU today. If we play with the etymological meaning of „papa“ (which means „father“ and „goodbye“), at the same time you have a „father of the people“ (*Papa demos*) and someone who is saying „goodbye to the people“ (*Pa-pa demos*). When we spoke about this weird congruity, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek made a brilliant Hegelian synthesis: if you put the two together, you have neither more nor less than the mythology of Saturn who is eating all of its children, except Jupiter! (Namely, „papa“ in Croatian and Slovenian language also means „eating“.)²

Actually, the Croatian referendum was another symptom of the EU's democratic deficit. We had a referendum after everything was already settled. We did *not* have a referendum in 2003, when Croatia applied for EU membership. We did *not* have a referendum in 2005, when Croatia officially opened negotiations with the EU. We did not even have a referendum in 2010, when our Constitution and the rules of the referendum were changed because of future EU membership. In other words, today we are in a situation where we can only choose what was already chosen with all these steps. Already the question, repeated continuously by the Croatian government, „What is the alternative?“ sounds like blackmail and is strangely reminiscent of the there-is-no-alternative-slogan made famous by Margaret Thatcher. And it is not by chance that we have a paradox here in the shape of an allegedly social-democratic government actually putting forward neoliberal reforms faster and more efficiently than the former conservative government. Already now – as a plan to 'rescue' the economy – this social democratic government is announcing gradual privatisations of highways and railways, the energetic sector and even prisons.

Eurosis, or, how to escape the Balkans

At the same time we witness the bizarre situation that the government is trying to convince the people that Croatia has to join the EU because, firstly, we will no longer be part of the Balkans anymore and, secondly, we will finally be part of the West. Sometimes it is enough to take a look at the path of the previous candidates who are now full members of the Club, to see what sort of mythology haunts each new Member State. In his provoking book 'Eurosis – A critique of the new eurocentrism', Slovenian sociologist Mitja Velikonja made an extensive discourse analysis starting from the observation that the infinitely reproduced mantras of the new Eurocentric meta discourse have caught on and became normalised within all spheres of social life: in politics, in the media, in mass culture, in advertising, in everyday conversations. In his own words: „Never during the one-party era of the uniformity

¹ For a detailed overview of the situation in Croatia, the period of „transition“ and new protest movements, see: Igor Štiks & Srećko Horvat, „Welcome to the Desert of Transition. Post-socialism, the European Union and a New Left in the Balkans“, *Monthly Review*, 2012, Volume 63, Issue 10 (March): <http://monthlyreview.org/2012/03/01/welcome-to-the-desert-of-transition> and Toni Prug, „Croatia protests show failure of political promise“, *Guardian*, 2 April 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/02/croatia-protests-economic-slump>

² Private conversation, Ljubljana, 2011.

of mind under Yugoslav totalitarianism did I see as many red communist stars as I saw yellow European stars in the spring of 2004, that is to say, under democracy.“³ In short, what we have is a kind of 'virosis', therefore the neologism 'Eurosis'.

The pattern is always the same: according to the then Slovenian foreign minister, by joining the EU, Slovenia has come „one step closer to the European centre, European trends, European life, European prosperity, European dynamics and the like“. On the other hand, all things that are 'backwards', 'bad' or 'out', stand for – you can guess – the Balkans. Or as one journalist said in the Spanish daily *El Pais*, „by joining the EU, Slovenia escaped the Balkan curse“. But if we take a closer look, Europe is 'balkanised' already, and, on the other hand, the Balkans are 'europeanised' as well. This can be best explained if we look at the main myths circulating in the Balkan region already since Slovenia entered the EU and moving from one candidate to the other, finding its temporary resort in Croatia and waiting to transmigrate to other countries like Montenegro or Serbia. The first myth is the one about corruption, the second on prosperity and the third brings us to the recent Nobel Peace Prize.

No more corruption?

Here is the first myth: „When we enter the EU, there will be less corruption“. By now, almost everyone knows about the Hollywood-like story of Croatian ex-Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, escaping from Croatia and being caught on the highway near Salzburg. He was accused of several corruption affairs, including an Austrian bank (Hypo-Alpe Adria) and Hungarian Oil company (MOL). In other words, without European partners, he couldn't be involved in these corruption affairs. The last discovery is a 'deal' made between Sanader and Sarkozy, because of which Croatia's national carrier, Croatia Airlines, faces bankruptcy unless it can change a contract that was signed in 2008 by the former prime minister. Sanader struck a deal worth 135 million euros with the former French President, to buy four planes back in 2008 with Airbus France.⁴ Croatia Airlines didn't really need the planes, but it was Sanader's ticket to secure a meeting with Sarkozy, just before France took over the presidency of the Council of the EU. At the same time, Jacques Chirac was found guilty of corruption and the German President Christian Wulff had to resign because of corruption. So much about the thesis there will be less corruption in the EU than in the Balkans. What we are facing here is a clear case of applying double standards perfectly illustrated by a recent edition of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* where Commission President Barroso gave a big interview claiming we need 'more Europe',⁵ accompanied by a small piece of news that Romania won't get the green light to enter the Schengen Zone. Why? Because of corruption. So speaking about 'reforms' and 'monitoring', why isn't the same applied to the EU itself? And to take it to the extreme: why shouldn't new Member States 'monitor' the EU?

Fixed jobs are monotonous!

And here we come to the second myth: „When we enter the EU, there will be more prosperity“. It is not difficult to dispute this myth. It's enough to look at the 'prosperity' of PIIGS or, as they are being called recently, the GIPSI, an expression which, by the way, perfectly illustrates the actual significance of the periphery for the centre. Croatia will not join the centre – it will be part of the GIPSI states. Recent statistics show that Croatia – with more than 40% – is the third country in Europe when it comes to youth unemployment, after Greece and Spain. As the Polish philosopher Jaroslaw Makowski noticed, „Until now, sociologists have focused on the so-called 'lost generation', but politicians had been wary of using the phrase, until Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti, broke the conspiracy of silence,

³ Mitja Velikonja, *Eurosis – A critique of the new eurocentrism*, Peace Institute, Ljubljana, 2005.

⁴ See: <http://www.croatiaweek.com/croatia-airlines-face-bankruptcy-because-of-french-airbus-deal/>

⁵ See, „Ich will keinen Superstaat Europa“, FAZ, 16. 09. 2012.: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/europaeische-union/im-gespraech-kommissionspraesident-barroso-ich-will-keinen-superstaat-europa-11891523.html>

telling his young compatriots: "You're a lost generation". Or, more precisely, "The truth, and unfortunately it's not a pleasant one, is that the promise of hope – in terms of transformation and improvement of the system – will be only for those youth who will come of age in a few years."⁶

Instead of precisely investing in young people, Monti even went so far to say that „young people will have to get used to the idea of not having a fixed job for life“, and added: „Moreover, what a monotony! It is much nicer to change and accept new challenges“. So on the hand, as Makowski explains, you have the „enraged youth“, which we saw in action in London's streets in summer 2011, the „new poor“ facing a prospect of protracted unemployment or flexi-jobs below their qualifications and ambitions, and on the other hand, although it is exactly the Erasmus generation that is Europe's last resort, education is being scrapped as part of „austerity measures“.⁷ Maybe the time has come to paraphrase the famous saying by Max Horkheimer and say „Anyone who does not wish to talk about neoliberalism, should also keep quiet on the subject of EU“. And the same goes for 'reforms' in Croatia. Those who don't wish to talk about the reforms of the financial sector, should also be quiet on the subject of all other (legal, human rights, etc.) reforms. Already now more than 90% of banks in Croatia are Austrian, French, German or Italian, and the Croatian 'euro-compatible' elites are trying to implement further neoliberal reforms portrayed as a necessary part of the EU accession process. And maybe this is what Mr Barroso meant when he was saying that Croatia's accession to the EU will only strengthen the EU (with new privatisations and new capital flows).

War is Peace

The third myth linked with the myth of prosperity is the following: „When we enter the EU, there will be more stability“. Or as one liberal Croatian intellectual put it before the referendum: „For us the option is clear: either the Balkans or civilised nations“ and his colleague added: „Euroseptics are just bigoted obscurantists, maniacal patriots, fans of war criminals and tragicomic visionaries“. This is the old myth, reinforced for example by Emir Kusturica's movies, about the Balkans as a dark region only good enough for war crimes.⁸ It is the „Imaginary Balkans“ so well explained in Maria Todorova's classic book under the same title. But when the European Union got the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize for having „contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe“, it was exactly this myth which was repeated in the official press release by the Norwegian selection committee: “The admission of Croatia as a member next year, the opening of membership negotiations with Montenegro, and the granting of candidate status to Serbia all strengthen the process of reconciliation in the Balkans.” Here you have it again, a celebration of the European Union's *mission civilisatrice*, although it was exactly the EU who failed to stop massacres like that in Srebrenica. However, it is not really necessary to discredit the Nobel Peace Prize: at the latest when Henry Kissinger got it, it was obvious that Orwell's famous credo „War is Peace“ had become a new motto for its awarding, a suspicion confirmed by the choice of Obama, who afterwards did not withdraw his troops from either Iraq or Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is necessary to mention that one of the prerequisites for joining the EU is to be a part of the NATO, not really known for „strengthening the process of reconciliation“ if we have in mind the war in Libya or other places. Or take the recent war in Mali, where the EU is again sending troops to fight 'Islamic fundamentalism' under the pretext that it is endangering European democracy. It is also worth mentioning that the current presidency holder of the Council of the EU is Cyprus, a still divided country, and that

⁶ See Jaroslaw Makowski, „Erasmus generation, you're Europe's last hope“, 24 October 2012, available at: <http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/2933441-erasmus-generation-you-re-europe-s-last-hope>

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ For more on this sort of mystification see: Srećko Horvat, „The Land of Blood and Money“, Eurozine, 01.03.2012.

the Nobel Peace Prize is given in a country whose citizens twice refused EU membership. All in all, the myth of 'stability' goes hand in hand with the myth of 'prosperity', as there is no real peace in Europe, exactly the opposite – a permanent economic warfare going on in the 'bay of PIGS'. Is there any better proof than the submarine deals that helped sink Greece, the billions spent on buying German U-boats whilst the EU is pushing for deeper cuts in areas like health or education?

So maybe the time has come to change the doctor-joke and switch the roles. The bad news is that the EU is in a big political and economic crisis, with corruption affairs erupting almost on a daily basis and unemployment rates rising. The good news is that Croatia is entering the EU: it is precisely Croatia's accession, just like the Nobel Peace Prize, that should give new credibility and legitimacy to the European Union in its current state. In that sense, we could say that at this moment the EU needs Croatia more than Croatia needs Europe the state it is currently in.

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