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The Great Theft

DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ IN CONVERSATION WITH ŁUKASZ PAWŁOWSKI · 21 March 2016

Dubravka Ugrešić

is a post-Yugoslav writer. A graduate of University of Zagreb in comparative literature and Russian language, she has been living in the Netherlands since the 1990s. Her books include *In the Jaws of Life* (1992), *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1998), *Baba Yaga Laid An Egg* (2009), *Europe in Sepia* (2014). Almost all of her books (apart from the last one, *Europe in Sepia*) have been translated into Polish.

Łukasz Pawłowski

managing editor at “Kultura Liberalna”.

Łukasz Pawłowski: In one of your essays you wrote: “People in the East developed a bunch of stereotypes about the shiny democratic West, while westerners had a sense of superiority. A lot of lies were there on both sides from the beginning”. Are those lies going to haunt us now?

Dubravka Ugrešić: I think that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, East and West didn't really have a proper dialogue. A complex history of relationship between two sides, East and West, has been reduced to questions of power, prejudices and illusions. It seems that it would be difficult to have a proper conversation today. The extreme emotions exist and persist on both sides. Disappointment is one of these emotions.

What has changed? Why is this “shiny, democratic West” no longer attractive?

For the last 25 years we didn't manage to solve many problems. Take the former Yugoslavia, for instance. After the Second World War, during the “yugoslavism” and “titoism” citizens of Yugoslavia lived better. When Yugoslavia in 1991 fell apart the whole “ideological package” of WWII popped out: the same quarrels, the same patterns, the same nationalism, the same hatred. Now, as a result, and for the sake of respecting the “high standards” of democracy in Europe, we are not only witnessing but also tolerating the rebirth of fascism of a sort.

But the change is not only visible in the Balkans but also in the rest of the Central Europe – in Hungary, Slovakia after the recent elections, even in Poland there is a change of attitude towards the West. In Poland in 1989 we were willing to sacrifice a lot to become exactly like the Western countries. And now there is a feeling of disillusionment.

I am sure that the patterns are similar. However, I prefer to talk about what I know best, and that is post-Yugoslav case.

And what was that?

The truth was replaced. People claimed that the rise of nationalism was something good because during the Yugoslav years they had been nationally suppressed. They claimed that they had dreamt the moment Croatia would become an independent state for thousands of years. The same pattern went all over the East Europe. But beneath that “national liberation” political narrative comprehensible to Western politicians, primitive and unsophisticated plunder went on. Brutal and blunt plunder. Post-communist transition, with or without war, appeared to be a perfectly well organized great theft. Communist property didn't have an owner, it had been “nobody's property”, so everything was grabbed and sold out in no time at all. Factories were sold out for pittance. That was the so-called privatization time. Great theft was blessed by church and by those involved in it. Only people in power could participate in share.

What happened after that?

Political leaders had to create an ideological justification for this big plunder to keep the properties in their hands. Croatia became independent in 1991. For already 25 years people in power are working on convincing ordinary people they were and are right, mostly by repeating

the stories about communist repression, against Tito's dictatorship and against exploitation (done to Croats by Serbs and the opposite). Today in Croatia, in this very moment, you can see a triumphant return of fascist ideology. Croats at this very moment have a minister of culture who openly propagates elements of Ustasha's ideology. For the first time in last 25 years of "independency" some Croats are protesting by signing the petition for minister's replacement. There is no sign that Zlatko Hasanbegovic (the minister in question) is going to be replaced. Even if he were replaced it would not make a difference. Because in the meantime everything changed: educational system, school books, university curriculums, major ethical values. Money has become the top priority.

For instance, almost 86 percent of Croats declare themselves Catholics, which were not the case before. The Church managed to get into primary schools, high schools, and universities, even into hospitals. There is a shortage of anesthesiologists and specialists, but every hospital according to the new law has been forced to employ a priest. Is this a change for the better or for the worse, I can't tell.

But you need to admit that in general people are better off. If you take a look at the economic indexes...

No, they are not. There are 4.2 million people living in Croatia. Out of that figure we have approximately 400.000 unemployed people and 1.2 million retirees. Half of the retired population of Croats are former soldiers, volunteers of the 1991-95 Civil war. That's what the figures claim. So I don't know how people are better off? Who told you that?

I looked at the statistics: GDP growth, average wage, life expectancy. For example in Poland the average wage has been rising for years. People are frustrated because it is not rising fast enough but...

The figures I gave you were picked up from Croatian press. You tell me, how any state is able to function properly if it consists of 4.2 million people, out of which 1.2 million are retirees, 400.000 unemployed and 100.000 of those who are employed but do not receive their wages for months?

Would you then say that the growing radicalization of social mood is driven primarily by the current state of economy?

The growing depression is not driven only by poverty. There are many reasons for desperation. One of it is crash of the previous system of values. Thanks to the so-called democracy, scum came into power: it started with Milosevic and Tudjman. Croats and Serbs are putting a lot of effort into "beatification" of those two criminals and Croats succeeded, I must say with regret. Tudjman, for instance, opened the door to deprofessionalization. He established the "unwritten law" according to which only "true patriots" were capable of performing their duties. Many journalists, lawyers, doctors, etc. were fired simply because they have been Serbs or former communists or were too "opinionated" and critical towards the values of the new societies. Many of them have been replaced by "young Croatian patriots". That was a process of deprofessionalization. That was the time of "national priorities", when the social scum came to power, as an award for loyalty to the regime.

What was the primary motivation for the Croats to join the EU?

Joining Europe provoked a national orgasm in Croatia. That meant we are better than Serbs, that we are finally joining “our” Catholic European family. That meant “good bye” to Serbs and “good bye” to Balkans. That meant that we, Croats, belong to Europe, and other people of former Yugoslavia belong to all that Balkan shit. However, my problem is not Croatia. My problem is Europe that might feel flattered by Croatian motivation for joining the EU.

Has this motivation disappeared?

Croats are not ready to articulate their problems, neither to act critically, or to fight for their future. They are only ready to fight for destigmatization of their Nazi past, and they are, I am afraid, succeeding in it. Media are the biggest friend of Croatian regime. In all the Balkan countries you can hardly find decent media. Along with deprofessionalization, there has been the process of “dumbification” of the nation (which has lasted for the last 25 years). Media are responsible for making people politically ignorant, passive, frightened and stupid. Media are responsible for making the national heroes from ordinary killers and criminals. In all post-Yugoslav states there’s no media outlet in which one could publish a longer and more ambitious article. How in such conditions one can expect intelligent narrative about today’s Europe and participation in European life? Lack of serious public forums resulted in lack of democratic thought. People can get only trivial news, like what was the color of Angela Merkel’s costume during the last European summit. From that perspective everyday life looks really Orwellian, as though somebody decided to make people dumb and now, after 25 years of “dumbification” practice, they really are dumb. But then, Croatia is not my problem, my problem is Europe, which is supposed to clearly show that it doesn’t support such practices. However, Europe doesn’t show anything of that sort.

What would be then the best case scenario for Europe in general and Eastern Europe in particular?

Europe is in big trouble – with financial crisis, migrant crisis and the crisis of main package of human values, or crisis of “social imagination”, as Slavoj Zizek would put it. How is all that going to end? I do not know. I’m not a prophet. I can only observe and comment the environment we live in. And what I see is not nice: people lost their basic rights and they don’t even know how did it happen. Their educational system got worse, their medical care system got worse, their worker’s rights are almost non-existing, they are more enslaved with each new day. They behave like lotus-eaters, although they eat cheap kale.

I guess this is not a problem specific to the Balkans but rather shared by both the West and the East.

That’s true, it’s a problem of our time, our digital epoch.

Since you live in Amsterdam you can also observe the Western attitude towards the so-called new EU members. Has it changed recently?

Are you asking me specifically if the Dutch see the Croats differently?

Or the region as a whole.

Croatia does not exist for the Dutch people except as a holiday destination.

Does it mean that 25 years after the fall of communism, the divide between the West and the East is still intact and the two parts of Europe have not got any closer?

From the point of view of ordinary citizen hardly anything has changed. An average Dutch citizen recognizes Romanians only as accordion street players. He recognizes Bulgarians only as maids, cleaners of their apartments. At the same time those accordion players and maids are not interested in Dutch issues either, because they feel as victims of all those processes after the fall of the Wall. Dutch are the winners in their opinion. They see the country only as a good place to earn some money. On the other hand do Dutch see Romanians differently? Or do they see Romania as a possible place for their businesses?

Would you then say that the whole process of unification, of transcending the West-East divide has been a failure?

I'm just trying to say something from the point of view of an ordinary observer. I really don't know whether Poles these days are totally united with France...

No, they're not.

And probably vice-versa. This general indifference which was there at the beginning is still there. In fact, more interest was displayed before, in case of the Balkans during the war or during the communist times. When the Iron Curtain fell one could almost instantly find western products in Eastern Europe. Now one can find Polish products in small ethno-shops in Great Britain. It's not, however, because British are so interested in Polish products but because of the Polish workers that in search for better life "occupied" Great Britain.

What in that case, keeps us together as Europeans?

We can of course say, like Umberto Eco and some other intellectuals, that European culture is our common heritage and the most powerful unifying glue. But I would say that what keeps us together is money (for some) and that would be the unifying principle while there is money to share. For the rest of us, who are not involved in any structures of power, we might be united by fear. We share our fear of poverty, of "migrants" whoever they are and wherever they are coming from. We all lived quite comfortably for some years but the time of plenty is over.

Where do we go from here? Are we going back to the nation states?

No, I don't think such thing will happen. It would be like going back in a video game. At the same time, we can clearly see that many states are moving into the radical right. We constantly see the examples of the radicalization of the social mood. They call it "incidents". But if you have incidents for 25 years, and you end up with an "incident" of a huge swastika engraved on Split's football stadium grass, so huge that could be seen from an airplane, would you still insist it's an

“incident”?! In other words, it all depends on “our, European, moral standards”: are we going to tolerate Croatian, Serbian, Orban’s fascist (or these in Norway and in Finland, and all over Europe) and call these movements just incidents done by “bad boys”, or are we going to recall our European past and revise what happened a couple of decades ago and then morally and politically reset ourselves while we still have time.

That is precisely my question – are these only incidents or signs of a more profound change that may have serious consequences?

In my opinion more serious consequences are possible. And we will from now on probably live in difficult, annoying times of constant negotiations. Symbols and their meanings are going to be blurred (again because of educational system and media and lack of common system of values), we are going to be easily manipulated. We will have to constantly fight for clear meanings and right decisions.

On one hand you say that we are somehow going to muddle through the crisis, on the other your diagnosis is very grim...

It is, but I still don’t believe that an apocalypse like a World War III is going to fall upon us. People who are in power will try to keep the *status quo*. And fear, which is behind all these things, will not allow people to go for fundamental change. That’s why people will try to solve only little problems. We are not going to change our house because it is too expensive and too risky, so instead we will only try to fix some minor faults every now and then.

Europe obviously does not see raising fascism (in Croatia, for instance) as a big problem, probably because Croatia is small and then because of its’ policy: nobody would interfere into democratically chosen ideological preferences of particular member countries. I could not agree less with it. We are constantly discussing our common currency, Euro. Instead, people of Europe should start building our non-negotiable common set of values. Only having such non-negotiable set of values, a citizen of Europe would be able to say: “Yes, I am in”; or “No, I am out”.