

The sirens of capitalism do not enchant anymore.

Latvia, is the party here?

The highest growth among all European countries. A magnificent capital, Riga, which promises any kind of satisfaction to tourists. A discreet and efficient banking system, which recycles money all the time. The triumph of free market. But behind apparent Latvia euphoria, a depressing reality lies.

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"Now you see the difference between rich and poor: it is what they call democracy". The statement is slashing like a whip, because it comes from a Latvian young teacher, Helena Gridina, 27, of the Italian language course at Riga Faculty of Foreign Languages. And it sounds even harder, after spending some days in the beautiful downtown of this great European capital, compared to it, other Baltic capitals, Tallinn and Vilnius, seem nice provincial town.

Riga. Virtually a city-state, because almost half of Latvians (about one million in two million and 300 thousand of total population) lives here. The rest of the country is countryside and woods.

Riga has the grandeur and elegance of an ancient northern Europe city (weighted down in the suburbs for half a century of Soviet rule), and the frenetic nightlife of a modern Babylon. On the free guide "Riga this week", there are 18 advertisements for strip tease and lap-dancing club, erotic massage, call center for escorts in the joys of the city. Then there are various entertainments: from go-karts to the firing ranges, from simulated war with paint bullets to the classic disco, and then pubs, restaurants, night clubs.

Riga promises all, and not in a chaotic and tacky atmosphere, but in the relaxed atmosphere of a city that, before being Latvian or Russian, was German, sea port of the Hanseatic League, the residence of Baltic barons, great German landowners who were descended from the fearsome Teutonic Knights. Well, at least in appearance, Riga is the best of the best. Just pay. There are banks and money changers everywhere. After all, for the English (mostly) and Italians (a little less) who come here the prices are the same they would pay at home, and a low-cost flight is within everyone's reach. Latvian Babylon, then, is so elegant that it relieves any guilt.

But for someone like Helen, or any Latvian teacher, people who earn at the utmost 300 dollars a month, the Land of Toys is a mocking mirage. Just like the independence here, or the entry into European Union, not to mention the famous democracy. Even in such a small country, where you can normally meet political leaders in the streets, people do not seem to count for nothing.

"It's economy, baby" those who succeeded answer, everybody in the ancient heart of the city, where you see more luxury cars than in Italian cities. The numbers are on their side: the economy has grown at a dizzying rate for years, especially when compared to those of old Europe.

A boom, which should trigger the general euphoria, or nearly so, and yet, paradoxically, causes especially the continuing emigration of young Latvians from their land (30 thousand only last year).

It does not take long to realize what is the mystery.

The boom of Latvian economy is largely financial. A large speculative bubble, determined by the constant recycling of capital (mostly Russian, and often from dubious origin), by real estate investments, by the tourist circuit. The speculative bubble, ephemeral wealth for yet another "liquid society" (see report on Estonia), is blown up by inflation that goes beyond 10 percent, a figure that, for the moment, postpones the adhesion to the euro of the strong national currency, lat (which has almost the value of the pound sterling).

The strong currency is to promote imports, because here almost nothing is produced: the trade balance is in deep red. On the contrary, loans go well, Latvian families are up to their necks in debt, like Americans or the British. About banks, Italian ambassador in Riga, Ferdinando Zezza, reminds the answer of the Central Bank of Latvia young governor, against doubts about the large number of institutes and branches in such a small country: "Our banks are nothing compared to Luxembourg, which has 400 for half a million people...". The governor is right. Of course, it could be pointed out

that Latvia has half GDP per capita of European average, which, after all, has decreased, after the entry of Eastern European countries. But these countries show better than others that the direction Europe is moving in, since it was established long time ago that capital and goods are more important than people. If the opposite was true, Latvia would still be knocking on the Union door, like Turkey. Just look at the issue of Russian minority, easily surpassed by Brussels, as it were a secondary problem. As secondary as social justice. Or the historical memory. Or the core values of united Europe, which are eminently political, as well as its purposes: the economy should be the means to achieve them, but the relation dramatically reversed. The question of Russian minority in Latvia is an almost elementary example.

"Independent from Russia, Latvia would be even from its own history", writes Gabriele Romagnoli in his reportage for "Vanity Fair". And again: "Latvians were unable to choose actually between Nazis and Communists and they would like to bury the whole matter underground". An extreme synthesis, quite effective. Translated into Latvian politics of the last 16 years, those of the new independence, it is more or less like this: communism came from Russia, ergo Latvians from Russian origin are guilty in advance, while Latvian volunteers in Nazi SS, the former "legionnaires", who fought faithfully for the Third Reich until the end, were patriots, and not war criminals, and they can quietly celebrate their day every March 16.

With these distorted readings of history, an entire political class is legitimized as the sole defender of national values, marked by only two issues: the nationalism (known as "defense of Latvians") and economic liberalism. That is only the political right-wing, in a more moderate or more extreme variation. Reset all the social issues, made trade unions useless involved to save their old Soviet-era properties from the wild privatization wind, deleted the word "left" from the political dictionary, and above all, annihilated Russian minority, that is almost 40 percent of the population, at once deprived of political rights. Matter to embarrass the "witch hunt" of the U.S. Senator McCarthy in the fifties. But rights are only optional, in consumer and finance Europe: once guaranteed the freedom to capital and goods, and put in order the accounts of state, the work is done.

The same eternal Russian enemies are welcome, if they bring here their rubles, if they invest in real estate market that is constantly reevaluated, if they use the port of Riga in order to move everything (including weapons and drugs). Latvia washes whiter, just like Luxembourg, European Union model country, all banks and tax shelters, although very tedious. Here they added a lot of good life for those who can afford it, the struggle of everybody against everybody to earn more (and to fall into debt). Of course Latvians of Russian origin pay more: in many cases they lost, in addition to citizenship, even their jobs, and they still can not access a large part of public office. "Good" Latvians, for their part, have yet to understand that the social issue is before the ethnic one, and to banish the little left to the eternal opposition as "Russian party" means playing into the hands of parties that say and do pretty much all the same things. The hostility between Latvians and Russians, in fact almost invisible in everyday life, is a sure political capital, and it works so as to be adopted by Putin's Russia, with the exact same purpose: building consensus, touch one of the few emotional chords in the electorate who sees a world where everything is bought and everything is sold.

It is true that ethnic group and politics have always been confused here.

Take first Latvian independence, in 1918. The new European country carved out its own place in history slipping into between the defeat of Czar's troops, the following defeat of German Kaiser Wilhelm, and the Russian civil war between Lenin's Red Army and the White Army that wanted to cancel the October Revolution and were instead wiped out by the Bolsheviks. Karlis Ulmanis, the father of the Fatherland, moved deftly with great determination in a war of everyone against everyone, which also saw the intervention of Polish army, and a Latvian civil mini-war. A chaos of national belonging and political affiliation: Latvian aristocracy descending from Germans, who controlled the country, feared having to pay the bill for the feudal privileges that the Tsar of Russia had remained intact over the centuries. No coincidence that the Baron Von der Goltz is allied with Russians of the White Army against the communist countrymen, who in turn support the Red Army. Latvian nationalists of Ulmanis must defeat first ones and then the others,

and finally chase away the Red Army again over what will be the official border with the nascent Soviet Union until 1940.

The young Latvia, got out from its long war of independence, an extension of the First World War, is a parliamentary democracy that gets great results both in the social and economic fields. In the twenties a large agrarian reform is carried out, which in practice coincides with the expropriation of the old Teutonic nobility. The results are impressive, so much so that in the following years Latvia became one of the most prosperous countries of Europe, immune from the consequences of the Great Depression of 1929.

But the roaring thirties see the rise in the continent of the dictatorship ghosts of Hitler and Stalin. Baltic countries, like all Eastern European countries, swing between the expansion of Nazism and Communism. To avoid falling to one side or the other, Ulmanis, the great nationalist leader, an agronomist by training and writer by vocation, took power in 1934 in a bloodless coup, backed by the army, because he believes that parliamentary democracies can not withstand the impact of history, and he establishes a personalistic and authoritarian fascist regime (being careful of also pro-Nazi movements, ie throwing both the Communists and the right-wing extremists in jail). In other Baltic republics (Estonia and Lithuania) it is done the same thing: democracy is deleted by "strong men" of the national right, but this step will not help save any of three countries.

Hitler and Stalin agree to divide the entire region: to Germans the western part of Poland, including Warsaw; to Russians the rest of Poland and Baltic countries. In the summer of 1940 the occupation was in the bag.

But only a year later, the Soviets were expelled by the Nazis, and many Latvians thought to have been liberated, so that they hard work for the extermination of Jews, and for the war on the Eastern Front.

Three years later, the situation is reversed again, the Soviets returned, and once again a part of the population sided with the winners. And a part, instead, is deported to Siberia in an one way trip.

It happened everywhere, in these areas: to the Polish, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Russians. But also to Bulgarians, Romanians, Slovaks, Czechs, Hungarians: killed by the Nazis or Nazis collaborators and then killed by the Communists or Communist collaborators.

Each of these countries on the border between the two powerful European totalitarianism of the twentieth century has probably more shameful acts to forgive than heroism to be shown, and many Jews who lived in these lands could extensively testify it.

For some reason, however, the museums and monuments of the Shoah are small and almost hidden everywhere in Baltic countries.

Whereas the pompous, arrogant Soviet Union monuments still stay (apart from the poor Soviet unknown soldier removed in Estonia), against which someone wanted (and would like) oppose monuments of anti-communism, or at least its celebrations, like the grotesque, shameful parade of SS veterans, accompanied by Latvian nationalists.

Everyone regrets or defends an idea of country that no one knows.

Certainly, the (few) USSR nostalgic people do not know it, they maybe do not accept, more than poverty or marginalization, the truth about their wasted lives, about their forever dormant consciences. But at least they deserve the pity is granted to the losers.

Scoundrel nationalism, however, strong with the weak (Russian minority), and weak with the strong (international markets), which waffled about freedom and democracy whereas it thought only about how get richer in the privatization, did not deserve the understanding of European Union, but an harsh lesson, the same that many people would rightly give to Turkey on human rights. But Latvia will be forgiven of all.

The preparation for independence following step by step Gorbachev's perestroika, namely the progressive democratic openings that will bring the regime at the turn of 1991, when the attempt of a restorer coup fails and Boris Yeltsin gets rid of the leaders of the coup, Russian Communist Party and the Soviet Union in a few weeks.

The first groups of dissidents get organized in 1986, and since 1988 join together in a single independence movement, the Popular Front of Latvia. It also includes many citizens from Russian

origin, because they are convinced that, in an independent Latvia, building a true democracy will be easier.

All the first steps towards independence politically occur in the Soviet of Riga, where 26 out of 34 members of Parliament were elected in 1989 by the votes of the Popular Front. Even the old Latvian Communist Party now sides with independence positions, although it would like a gradual and not definitive separation from Moscow. Only the radical nationalists want to delegitimize the Soviet parliament, and elect their own Congress, reserving the right to vote to "good" Latvians.

Imagine the bewilderment of poor Latvian with Russian origin, who had participated in the struggle for independence and who in many cases came from families that suffered persecutions by the Soviet regime, when Ivars Godmanis, head of the Government of independent Latvia, announced, after a turbulent parliamentary session, that the first elections of the new country will be reserved for who was Latvian citizen before 1940 and his descendants. "One day, what you are deciding will be universally recognized as illegal", said Constantin Matveyev, a law professor at the University and member of parliament, who will be deprived of citizenship, as his wife, though born and raised in Riga.

Stories of people excluded from citizenship seem like a Kafka novel: sometimes to make a difference is enough a wrong grandfather, and the loss of citizenship means not only unable to vote, but also be fired from their jobs if they worked for the state, or be expelled from the Soviet era house to make way for new owners: the processes of privatization in many European countries were everything but clear (and the origin of many enrichment to come) . And often the state property passed into the hands of former communist leaders, suddenly become defenders of private property and capitalism.

Yuri Sokolovski young human rights party spokesman, knows well the attitude of Latvian nationalists: "I had a grandfather that was condemned to concentration camps by Stalin, I heard that I was responsible, as all Russians, of Stalinist crimes, by the exponent of the extreme right party "Fatherland and Freedom", Peteris Tabuns, who was an ideology responsible for Latvian Communist Party and worked on state radio at the time of the USSR".

The testimonies of Russian origin Latvians were collected in a book, significantly entitled "The last prisoners of the Cold War". Tales of ordinary injustice that still continue today.

To understand how the attitude of the European Union was condescending, suffice it to say that Latvia achieved the status of associate member in 1995, while the death penalty was still in force (Latvian parliament confirmed it in 1998, only to abolish it a year later).

All while among the most voted parties, there was Joachim Zigerists's one, a man close to neo-Nazis, already convicted in Germany for inciting racial hatred. A good example of democracy, Latvia.

The paradox is that the various right-wing parties constantly quarreled among themselves, governments came and went, in a climate of permanent instability. And despite all the emphasis on Latvian identity, to create a little harmony a woman was needed, Vaira Vike Freiberga, who until ten years ago, lived in Canada, where she worked as a psychologist. In fact, to understand the motivations of the many government crisis they needed more a psychologist than a politician, also because, in the absence of real ideological differences, the various leaders personalism were to create dissensions.

Energetic Vike Freiberga's charisma, much loved Latvian head of state, was also useful to remove the last doubts on the entry in European Union, which took place in perfect sync with the entry into NATO, three years ago. It is not a coincidence.

Many Eastern European countries, starting from not presentable Poland of Kascynski brothers, are much closer to Washington than to Brussels. In this part of Europe, unfortunately, the ghosts of the Cold War still work.

But the real Europe will come when our leaders can tell to the United States: "Goodbye and thank you, we no longer need your protection". Until that day, countries like Latvia can certainly be pointed as a model to follow. And tourists visiting Riga will confirm all the wonders of free market. Just do not ever wake up from the sweet forgetfulness of consumption, the music hangover,

beautiful cars and beautiful women. What do you want more from life?

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