

*The "powder keg" of Europe wants to become a normal country*

***Serbia, the mist of the past ghosts***

*In the collective imagination, Serbs were the "bad guys" of Yugoslavia history end. Today there is hardly any trace of the dramatic decades lived under Milosevic, nor the gloom of many post-communist countries. Yet Serbian politics fails to become European, despite an advanced society. Serbia needs to wake up from the nationalism nightmare.*

(published in the monthly newsmagazine "Galatea", October 2006)

Belgrade is an amazing city. It has the grandeur of great European capitals, but also the pleasant "Latin" quiet rhythms, in its cafes and its local full of beautiful girls and smoke (here anti-tobacco Puritanism has not yet arrived).

It is purely a Central European city in its district on the Danube, like Zemun, it is deeply Slavic in its Orthodox churches, it is Balkan in the scent of grilled meat found almost everywhere, it is socialist in the suburb slums and in the mausoleums of Power, it is modernist and capitalist in New Belgrade, the district where the transition from the famous self-management to a market economy, the multinationals and the new rich, is achieved seamlessly.

Everyone can see what he wants, everyone can find confirmation of his idea, just as in crazy puzzle called Yugoslavia. One thing is certain, however: Belgrade no longer resembles that sad, alienated and hallucinating city that emerges in the film "Cabaret Balkan" of Goran Paskavljevic, an extraordinary testimony of the dark period, that of Milosevic regime, which lasted thirteen years (1987 - 2000).

Belgrade, however, is not Serbia, and one might add "unfortunately".

Paolo Rumiz, probably the best chronicler of Yugoslav tragedy, so much insisted on aggression to the cities, the urban spirit, by the deep soul that came from the countryside and mountains, properly manipulated by political leaders (including Tito), in Belgrade as in Zagreb, in Sarajevo as in Novi Sad.

Serbian capital was not disfigured by bombs, not even by those of NATO in 1999, but by a political and cultural change first, then even anthropological one, that made it unrecognizable to its own eyes. Isolated from the world for a decade, impoverished by the international sanctions, humiliated by a criminal government, with a South American inflation, rationed goods, black market, the fear of leaving the street (because in Belgrade, in the nineties, the kids were attacked for a pair of shoes), Belgrade people, accustomed to better standards of life than every other communist country, educated by cosmopolitanism and culture, modernity and emancipation of women, saw the pattern of life imposed by big and small boss: luxury cars, guns, gorillas, nightclub women in the district that is still called "Silicon Valley" (with reference to the plastic surgery), violence, drugs, bullying, easy money in the general misery. A model embodied perfectly by the couple formed by the commander Arkan, who, as the head of the Red Star ultras with criminal records, became the wealthy leader of a paramilitary group ("Tigers"), and the singer Ceca, queen of "turbofolk", the music that was the soundtrack to those dark and kitsch years.

With dismay, disbelief, an entire society had to ask "how could we fall?", And the answers were never clear enough.

"The ignorance and confusion are incredible in our recent history - said Borka Pavicevic, former activist in 1968 protest movement, director of a cultural center for the promotion of peace - "for many people, Yugoslavia history seems to be reduce to Tito and Milosevic. They change the names of streets, mingle events, they obscure responsibilities, so there are still people who deny Srebrenica and other crimes. "

Borka has the sincerity of those who remained on the balance in right positions, and the bitterness of those who saw an entire class of intellectuals for years cultivating the seeds of hatred and madness. The fruits were regularly collected by a devilish leaders like Milosevic, a representative of

the communist leadership, which still exists in institutions, the judiciary police, and seriously affects the life of the country.

Serbian intelligentsia is now a shadow. The "glory" of the eighties became infamy, Serbia has no longer credible voices, and maybe that's why it seems so hard to give light on the recent past, metabolize the lesson of the tragedy in Yugoslavia. A tragedy that is perfectly embodied in the shape of Milovan Djilas, the greatest and most misunderstood Serbian intellectual (in this case it would be more correct to say "Yugoslav"). His life sums up the greatness and the failure of a generation and a nation.

Djilas, born in 1911, was primarily a protagonist in the partisan struggle during the Second World War. No other European country had a strong anti-Nazi resistance movement like Yugoslav one: an army of one million people, able to free themselves from German occupation, without waiting for Russians or Americans. But the heroism of Tito's partisans soils its hands with a fool deed in the ferocious purge of any possible opponent, not only of criminal collaborators such as "Ustasha": Second Yugoslavia, Yugoslavia of socialist "unity and brotherhood", was born with the imprinting of violent totalitarianism, and the total removal of those dramatic years made by the Tito regime will have negative effects forty years later, when intellectuals like Dobrica Cosic, Djilas' negative stunt double, begin to rewrite history to legitimize delirious theories.

The great sympathy that Yugoslavia received in the West for its opposition to Stalin's Soviet Union, contributed for years to hide the crimes of the period 1943 - 1948 (including the infamous Trieste sinkholes) and to feed the positive myth about the nation forged by Tito.

In second Yugoslavia that wants at all costs overcome the legacy of the former monarchy, the domain of Serbia (lasting more than twenty years), Djilas was the only lone voice. Already in 1952 he denounces the distortions of system, which, in the name of an abstract ideal, claims to rule undisputed in every sector of social life, providing privileges to its untouchable bureaucrats, the "new class". In his book *"The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System"* Djilas describes the decline of ethical values of Yugoslav communists, through the story of a former partisan commander who marries a showgirl. Almost prophetically it anticipates the image of Arkan and Ceca; adding only the elements of farce, immortalized in the spectacular marriage between the warrior and the star, in the midst of dozens of luxury Mercedes, rivers of champagne and kalashnikov shooting happily.

For Djilas, after his expulsion from the party and total ostracism, the doors of the jail are open. At the same time, however, the writer Dobrica Cosic, one of the fathers of future Serbian nationalism, is the personal advisor of Tito, and accompanies him on his first African tour (1961). It is a strange relationship, the one between the intellectuals and Yugoslav communist regime. There is no dissidence in the strict sense, because Tito admits a certain amount of criticism, he encourages anyone involved in arts and sciences, and also gets to speak directly with the student rebels of 1968, as described in an excellent essay by Jasna Dragovic-Soso "Saviours of the Nation," a lucid analysis of the role of intellectuals in the rise of nationalism.

The critical movements of the sixties, as the so-called "Black Wave" (which was expressed mostly in movies, showing the dark side of Yugoslavia in a sort of neo-realism), never really put into question the foundations of the system, Tito's leadership, or the monopoly of the Communist Party. But just in those years separatists turmoil of many republics, compounded by the first rebellion of Albanians in Kosovo (1968). Instead of saying that the problem was Tito and the Communist regime, people started to say that the problem was Yugoslavia, the federal state with "six republics, five races, four languages and three religions, two alphabets and one flag" according to a definition attributed to Tito himself.

Here lies the fundamental error, which unfortunately is repeated until the exasperation: confusing the national aspirations, the tendency to self-determination of the various republics, with the real issue, which was the absence of democracy for all, Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, and various minorities. Yugoslavia was to get rid of the communist dictatorship first, and only then, democratically, to address the issue of national unity and possibly agree about a consensual separation.

It was just the opposite, so at the top as the base, with an obstinacy that does not allow any kind of justification.

The first to follow this way was the ineffable Marshal Tito: on the one hand, supporting the centrifugal tendencies of the various republics in the new constitution of 1974 (in which for the first time Bosnian Muslims were considered ethnic group, another fatal error): on the other, severely repressing all dissidence, exacerbating the control of the party over institutions and promoting a range of new hierarchy, that is the architects and perpetrators of horror.

On the death of Tito in 1980 Yugoslavia entered a deep crisis, with its complicated federal system and the economy of self-management that no longer worked, the increasingly unstoppable corruption of the regime.

The only positive thing was the return to a fair amount of expression freedom, which, paradoxically, is expanded just by Milosevic in Serbia.

But instead of using it to force democratic change, as in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and even in the vilified Soviet Union, Yugoslav intellectuals are taken by the demon of nationalism, Serbs most of all.

Of course, Serbia is in a very special position compared to other republics: over three million Serbs (that is 40 percent of ethnic group) live outside the country, throughout the rest of Yugoslavia (especially in Croatia and Bosnia), and Serbia is the only republic that has autonomous regions (Vojvodina and Kosovo, which is the real detonator of any later conflicts). A disadvantage that feeds Serbian victimization, gradually led to paranoid levels.

The myth that "the Serbs have won the war but lost the peace" start to be spread. Dobrica Cosic is the undisputed master of this new trend, the first to create the ghost of the historical sacrifice of Serbs: "How can so worthy, proud and brave in war people be so docile and humble in peace?", he states already in 1977, in his entry in the Academy of Arts and Sciences in Belgrade, which will be the hotbed of Serbian nationalism.

The poor Milovan Djilas, between a prison and the other, already warns in 1982 that the communist regime is beginning to use the card of nationalism as a substitute for democracy. He preaches in the desert. At the same time, another dissident writer, Vuk Draskovic, who is one of the protagonists of Serbian politics in the years to come (and he is now foreign minister) claims that Muslims of Bosnia are only Serbs who were converted to Islam, cowards traitors, and that "precisely because they have the same blood, their hatred knows no bounds, as well as their folly".

Now that there is no more censure about the bloody years that led to the creation of Yugoslavia, they rediscover Serbs genocide not by Ustasha regime, and by the Nazi-Fascism, according to the accepted politically correct vision for years, but by "Croats and Bosnians".

Meanwhile, in Croatia, some intellectuals begin to spread revisionist thesis about the atrocities committed during the Second World War, and, on the other side, reinforce the theory that Serbs were historical victims, people threatened by everything and everyone.

The Orthodox Church, which is raising its head after years of forced immersion, gives its valuable contribution to general madness, reading history as anti-Serbian plot: in Kosovo, according to Bishop Atanasio Jevtic, "Nazi Albanians" are just completing the work begun centuries before by Ottomans, to sweep away the last vestiges of Christianity and of Serbian people. In the indigestible cultural and ideological soup they are preparing, everything is mixed: royalist nostalgia and socialist resurgence, comparisons with persecuted Jews and Nazi-style myth of "blood and soil", defense of Christian identity and defense of the laity from the threat of (nonexistent) Islamic fundamentalism, the desire to maintain the liberal capitalism and pure statism.

In the cacophony of so many misconceptions, one common conviction: as it is, Yugoslavia has no future.

All this happened in the first half of the eighties: when Milosevic came to power, he does not invent anything, the intellectuals have paved the way (the same happens, conversely, in other republics, but to varying degrees). If Serbs are in danger everywhere, here is the Man of Providence, the Savior of the Fatherland: the level of support enjoyed by Milosevic in his debut is incredible, enthusiastic: just Tito was more popular.

The advent of political pluralism, with the "free" elections in 1990, is useful only to confirm the trend, to give Western-style legitimacy to "Slobo", which starts doing a roaring trade with all the capitalist countries, privatizing his way.

Where he brought this kind of collective insanity we all know, even if it would be unfair not to mention a brave and strong minority immune to the nationalism of the war that humiliated Serbia for ten years. But it is also important to remember that when Milovan Djilas, who had widely predicted the catastrophe, died in 1995, Serbian parliament denied him even a minute of silence in memory: fearless partisan leader, one of the fathers of the nation, has never been rehabilitated. Leading the redemption of Serbia and the rebellion against Milosevic there were two intellectuals of the liberal front Vojislav Kostunica and, above all, Zoran Djindjic. No one of two was completely "virgin" in terms of nationalism: during the years of conflict they had ambiguous positions regarding the war. But they were fierce opponents of Milosevic, and they led the democratic opposition in election victory first, then the spontaneous uprising against the tyrant. "That was the right time to make a clean sweep of the old regime. No one would dare oppose. At that time we asked unsuccessfully for banning the party of Milosevic and the radicals", complains Borka Pavicevic.

But Kostunica, in the name of a strange idea of "national reconciliation" that saved them all, adopts a compromise line that marks him even now.

Obsessed with the form rather than the substance, according to his training as a jurist, Kostunica is now over, without ideas and without consent. His playing hide and seek with war criminals, including General Mladic, made Carla Del Ponte (prosecutor of the Hague Tribunal ) furious, and caused a halt in the process of Serbia's enter to European Union.

Djindjic was different. Strong, dynamic, he wanted to pursue economic and political reforms and accelerate the process of European integration. And he let Milosevic was arrested, he handed over him to the Hague tribunal in 2001.

Unfortunately for Serbia, Zoran Djindjic was assassinated on March 12, 2003, and we still do not know the instigators of his murder.

Serbia has not yet recovered from this shock. No other democratic leader emerged on the political scene: only the incumbent president Boris Tadic, who is separated from Kostunica, has some credibility, but he is too weak to force the breakthrough that the country needs. Also because in the opposition, the Radical Party has continued to grow like a poisonous mushroom, the party of Vojislav Seselj, historical leader of the ultra-nationalists, currently on trial at The Hague as a war criminal.

At the last election three years ago, radicals have gained 28 percent of the vote, clearly coming out as the largest party. Today the polls even give it to 40 percent. And even the party of Milosevic (ie the former Communist Party of Serbia) can still count on seven percent of the vote. It seems incredible, but true.

"The Radicals exploit the economic crisis, the painful transition to a market economy that is leaving whole classes without certainties - says Igor Bogic, 36, journalist of Radio B92, the only critical voice in the war years -" Kostunica and the Democrats disappointed many people, many people no longer went to vote, and in this climate of distrust with the government involved in financial scandals, the Radical Party can use populism, relying once again on the victimization of deep Serbia, that of the province, the elderly, the unemployed people".

In fact, at least in Belgrade, the younger generation seem more "healthy": young people speak English, and they are accustomed to Latin characters. The traditional cultural openness, cosmopolitanism, the desire to travel have the upper hand over again, and certainly the atmosphere is European, the desire to emerge from isolation, from the obsession with Serbian identity.

Nobody wants to talk about war, and even Kosovo issue now seems rather a mania of politician and the Orthodox Church than a common people issue.

But this desire for normalcy is not translated into a political project.

In Balkans there is a tendency to move ahead by force of inertia, at this stage, and certainly European Union is not accelerating the integration process, it is assumed that all former Yugoslavia

countries, Kosovo included will enter.

Media do not help much. Many journalists involved with the old regime are gone, someone has been recycled into Radicals radio ("Focus"); only one was convicted, Milanovic, former director of state television, for deliberately left to die his editors in the bombing of the public broadcast (the government of Serbia had been warned by NATO). But a commercial and tabloid trend has become apparent, both in press and in private television, which does not help the maturation of the collective consciousness. As the ambiguous attitudes of the Orthodox Church does not help, it tends to endorse a kind of "all guilty, no guilt".

The funeral of Milosevic was a litmus test: the majority of Belgrade people, especially young people, ignored it, but authorities allowed the ceremony should take place in front of the mausoleum of Tito, they allowed "veterans" to do their grim parade. The image of "Slobo" is on display in the center, in a crosspiece of Kneza Mihaila, which is the core of the city, over Socialist Party of Serbia place.

All the past was poorly and hastily buried. But its mocking ghosts twirl in the present. Among many monuments, among many places that honor even the obscurantist of reactionary kings like Alexander Karageorgevic, surely one of them is missing, the one to be dedicated to the "deserters" of the nineties, to many young Serbs who preferred prison to military uniform. It is time to understand that the real heroes are those who do not go to war.

**Cesare Sangalli**