

A forgotten country in the heart of Europe

Slovakia, the Age of Innocence

Independent for seven years, the youngest nation in Europe lives peacefully away from the media spotlight. Portrayed as pro-Nazi first and iron Communists then, Slovaks left behind the horrors of the twentieth century and they are now living without many "Western" anxieties

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Sometimes normality surprises. Arriving by train from Vienna to Bratislava is trivial: there are only sixty kilometers, few stops, few people, just a quick check of passports to remember that there is a border. Yet this was the Iron Curtain until 1989, and with quite different emotions thousands of young people for the first time went to see the "free world" (a recurring expression here) going in the opposite direction.

The imagery is often more colorful than reality: the wonder in seeing the Land of Toys was then tempered by a certain disappointment.

So, consciously or not, one expects to find the prosaic world of the post - Communism, perhaps disguised by the heavy plaster of dominant Capitalism. And in part, of course, that's it.

But there is immediately a feeling of familiarity, a diffused serenity, helped perhaps by a summer that here seems less hot and less agitated.

Few days or few hours later, you find that Bratislava is a beautiful city, even if ignored, because everyone goes to Prague and almost no one passes from the capital of Slovakia. Prague and Bratislava, Czech and Slovak Republics. Until December 31, 1992 there was only Czechoslovakia. And in this word, in this concept, there was already a history and perhaps a fate: much Czekia, little Slovakia.

In fact, one of the most bitter disputes before the final separation was about the famous (around here) "dash" of distinction between the words "Czech" and "Slovakia" referring to the state reborn from the ashes of communism. One issue that can make people smile, but indeed it hides the legitimate desire to "be" (someone would say the inferiority complex) of a people who had been denied an identity for too long.

To be exact, until 1918, the year of the end of World War I and of the Habsburg Empire, also known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Once again, the dash, two separate realities.

On the one hand, the Central European culture, German language, imbued with efficiency and good manners and daring in intellectual avant-garde (from Freud to Kafka), entered the "American Century" at waltz pace.

On the other the backward agrarian Hungarian feudalism, history marked by the bells of the immutable Catholic Church.

Slovaks are from this part of the "dash". They do not officially exist, they are simply "mountains Hungarian", their language, a Slavic dialect codified as a national language in the nineteenth century, was banned, universities closed, a very low access to education.

In Bratislava, already connected with Vienna by one of the first electric trains, they were forced to speak a language, Hungarian, who has no relatives in Europe if not with Finnish. Peasants and mountaineers, and poor Catholic bigots. These were Slovaks, in reality and popular perception. In practice, the idiot brothers of cultured and refined Bohemians. Because the region of Prague was one of the most developed areas of the Empire of Franz Joseph, with his basically secular and cosmopolitan bourgeoisie, the same who you could meet in Vienna, Trieste, Zagreb. Czechs and Slovaks, however, fight together for independence, in a war in the war with mostly unknown steps (who has never known that a "Czechoslovak Legion" fought alongside Italians in 1917?). The heroes of the independence, the fathers of the nation are at least two, Masaryk, Czech, and Stefanyk, Slovak. But Stefanyk died aboard an Italian airplane in 1919, and eventually history only remembers Masaryk.

In genuine solidarity of Czechs with Slovaks, there is always the shadow of paternalism, which is almost always accepted by the second, as a younger brother accepts the protection of the older one. Masaryk sends an army of teachers to teach new national languages, Czech and Slovak, very similar to each other. They try to bring education to bridge the gap, but the center of power is always in Prague.

For twenty years, the experiment of Czechoslovak nation, works well. While the continent gradually lapses into the totalitarian madness, Czechoslovakia is an oasis of peace and democracy in the true "Western" spirit. Yet, when Hitler asks for and gets the go-ahead to Monaco for the invasion, Czechoslovakia is disposed by British Prime Minister Chamberlain as "a faraway country of which we know nothing". At that time (1938) they said that you could not "die for Prague", but in the darkest night of modern humanity, almost no one is innocent.

Slovaks were not, because they saved themselves from German occupation and the imminent war, they accepted the infamy of collaboration, the shame of the alliance with Hitler of a puppet governments, which identified itself in Bratislava in a Catholic priest with political aspirations: Monsignor Josef Tiso, who proclaimed the independence of Slovakia in 1939. At this point, it would be too easy to make the comparison between Nazi ally of Slovakia and Croatia of Ante Pavelic and his bloody Ustasha: two Slavic and Catholic states, in good relations with Mussolini's Italy, which find a grotesque independence, mirror of German hegemony.

But things are not that way: in Slovakia there has never been a phenomenon comparable to that of Croatian nationalism, either before or after the Second World War.

The figure of Josef Tiso, who is hanged by the communists in 1947, in common and historical perception, is primarily seen as a symbol of ambiguity, compromise, a "lesser evil". Tiso would seem closer to Croatian Bishop Stepinac and Pope Pius XII at the same (although, thank God, no one has proposed his beatification) than to Marshal Pétain or Norwegian Quisling. "Nothing was normal in those days", "Tiso did not have many other options", one says today in Bratislava: no one defends the experience, but especially for the younger generation, that past is quite far from being able to speak without embarrassment. Of course, in Slovakia the "lesser evil" has meant the handover of 70 thousand Jews, arrested by police collaborator ("*Linka Garda*"), with the benefit of the local population, just as in Hungary, Poland, Austria. The Nazi monster had a Catholic cradle, and this so neat and clean, so quiet country, there was not an exception. But unlike the neighboring Austria, for example, Slovakia can commemorate today, every 29 August, the national uprising against Nazis in 1944, one of the largest on the continent. Slovakia also had the dubious privilege of knowing the liberation (April 1945) by the Red Army, while Americans arrived in Bohemia.

The former president Benes had already declared independence of Czechoslovakia from Kosice, that namely, from the far eastern edge of the country, not far from Ukraine. In the logic of Yalta, of the division of Europe, Czechoslovakia was in the balance between the United States and the Soviet Union, between two worlds, two systems.

"But Communism has come to us from the West", says Michal Zoldy, 47, responsible for international relations of the Movement for Democratic Slovakia. It sounds like a joke, but it is not. "In the 1946 elections, the Communists won at Prague, in Bohemia and Moravia, not here", said Zoldy.

Slovakia was too Catholic and conservative to jump into the arms of the "sun of the future", whereas "what was announced in Prague in 1948 as thoroughly modern was the socialist revolution" (Milan Kundera, "Immortality"). The choice of communism was essentially a free choice, carried out by intellectuals and middle-class sectors in the name of progressivism. "I'm still touched - says Zoldy - when I see in movies of the time, Prague people exultation for the coming of communism, while in Slovakia everyone was sad. Even because they seem identical to those celebrating the Velvet Revolution in 1989 under Havel's balcony".

Always in the avant-garde, Czechs, always explaining the future to the slow, recalcitrant Slovaks. Milan Kundera knows this side of the coin, and in almost all his books (more than any other "The Joke") there is the bitter irony of the dissident banned by the "revolutionary vanguards", the sarcasm

against the intellectuals whom to chase at all costs the new, become, almost tragically, "their gravediggers' allies."

The pendulum of history moves again in contrast to Czechoslovakia, with an impressive accuracy. Twenty years of democracy (while in the West the dictatorship triumphed), twenty years of Stalinism (while the West rediscovered freedom).

Any need for autonomy in Slovakia had been canceled: Husak, Slovak Communist leader, was arrested on charges of separatism; the prestigious Institute of Slovak culture moved from Bratislava to Prague by order of Antonin Novotny, a gloomy and dull bureaucrat, party secretary and protégé of Brezhnev who led the USSR.

Then, in January 1968, the turning point: instead of Novotny the Communist Party appointed Aleksander Dubcek, destined to remain in history as the hero of the "Prague Spring".

But Dubcek was not from Prague: he was born in 1921 in the heart of Slovakia, in the same house of Ludovit Stuhar, the father of Slovak language. His parents, Communists all along, had emigrated to the United States at first, but then they had chosen to settle in the Soviet Union. Dubcek's brother had died as a partisan in Slovak national uprising against the Nazis. The new secretary had a respectable "pedigree".

Dubcek starts, since March 1968, a series of increasingly bold reforms. His political project, supported from the reformer wing which had gained the upper hand, went far beyond the introduction of "socialism with a human face" (formula passed into history): without denying the basic principles of Marxism, they wanted to give space to pluralism of opinions, a definitive break with orthodoxy imposed from the top.

Among the basic points of his program there was also the end of Prague centralism, the federal choice to give equal status to "his" Slovakia.

The dream of reforming communism ended in August, with the Soviet invasion. It was a shock for everyone, but eventually Slovaks were excluded from the memory of those days: the absurd version, for which the eternal conservatives were afraid of change, was passed and Brezhnev rewarded Slovak loyalty by imposing a few years later, the federation. In essence, just another mystification against Slovaks, who had everything to gain by the leadership of Dubcek and they saw instead a federal reform of pure formal value (nothing mattered that much Slovak leadership was recalled to power, including old Husak).

About twenty years later, almost the usual cycle of history, the experience of communism comes to an end. The trauma of 1968 had dug an unbridgeable ditch between the party and people. Czechoslovakian society lived for years as if there was no regime. The important thing was not to stand against, not to be noticed: you did not advance your career, but you could live peacefully. Thus, when Gorbachev launched perestroika in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakian ruling class was unprepared, a far cry from civil society, totally unable to read the demands of change, dramatically silent in front of freedom and democracy need.

The "velvet revolution" became an accomplished fact, when the police did not know how to deal with demonstrators. "I remember the snipers on the roofs of the houses, here in Bratislava, while the crowd manifested peacefully", says Martin, 27, researcher at the University, "and the joy, some time later, to finally go to Vienna, which seemed far away for us, impossible to reach". The regime crumbled, helpless. There were no well-defined political parties to fight it, but coalitions of dissidents calling mostly for a peaceful transition (in Prague police had fired on the crowd).

Slovak coalition, sister of Czech "Civic Forum", was called simply "The public against violence": a mix of moderate parties, of Christian Democratic inspiration.

Vladimir Meciar was a member of it, he would soon become the emerging figure of Slovakia, to confuse (wrongly) the country with him.

Meciar was at the time a rampant lawyer, one who felt in the right place at the right time. Communist in his youth, he had been expelled from the party, like many others, after the events of 1968. Massive body, huge ambition, full-blooded character of "man of people", Meciar seemed the anthropological opposite of Vaclav Havel, Prague brilliant playwright, admired abroad for his long

opposition to the regime (while Mr Meciar was criticized for a dark period of training in the Soviet Union).

"Meciar has the gift of communication. He always seemed sincere, direct, simple: people immediately understood him " said Monika, 27, graduated in International Relations, "but he has always been like an authoritarian despot, young people today can not stand anymore". Meciar wins hands down Slovak Parliament elections in June 1992: his populism, in a delicate period of transition, is opposed to capitalism desire of the Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus. In the vision of Klaus, who seems like a clone of Margaret Thatcher, just an ultra-liberal recipe led with an iron fist by Prague can lead the country in Europe. He clearly understands that Slovakia is considered, once again, a ball and chain for the modernization, with its old industries, the backward agricultural sector, its desire to state protection.

The separation of the two republics occurs in a Kafkaesque atmosphere: officially none wants it, however, they argue about everything, they hammer at the famous "dash" of the name, President Havel would like a referendum, but the federal parliament is afraid of a schizophrenic outcome in the two countries. In the end, the stubborn intransigence of Prague (which is equivalent to an ultimatum: "or under us or without us"), plays Meciar's game: he definitely prefers to be the first in Bratislava than the second in Prague.

On January 1, 1993 the havoc is created: Czech Republic and Slovak one roused. The world welcomes stunned the birth of the new nation: they are all affected by the tragedy of Yugoslavia, Slovakia is immediately accused of "nationalism" and Meciar is compared to Milosevic. Slovakia is depicted as a Vendee, where, in the name of national identity, the conservative and anti-Semitic Catholic fundamentalism joins with the worst Bolshevik tradition.

Catholic-Nazi-Communist Slovaks; secular, democratic, modern liberal Czechs. "Nobody thought that Slovakia could make the grade all alone", said Italian ambassador in Bratislava, Egone Ratzenberger, "but Meciar, like it or not, did very important things for this country."

Meciar definitely slows privatization, favoring his friends and recycle much of the communist leadership, especially in intelligence. He maintains good relations with Russia, which on the other hand is a country that provides for Slovakia (with which it has a huge financial debt) raw materials. He continues to collect a bad impression at international level for his attitude as a cantankerous despot. West loves Havel, Meciar hates him: he considers him a poser, he makes jokes about his alleged homosexuality.

This is why Slovakia loses the first train for European integration and NATO membership (which Meciar, considered pro-Russian, has called for since 1995). In Prague they are convinced that the value of Slovak koruna will not go more than a third of the Czech one.

Together with Poland and Hungary, Czech Republic was promoted by European Union: as usual they are the top of the class, and Slovaks are, as always, the dunces. But, thanks to Meciar, or despite Meciar, Slovak economy grows in 1996 and in 1997 to record pace and Slovak koruna is close to the exchange rate at par with Czech one. With the economy, it also stabilizes the political life, after a long period of constitutional conflict between the president of the republic, Kovac and Meciar-led government, between ministers and Parliament, between Parliament and the Constitutional Court.

In the end, the intractable Vladimir succeeds to create a coalition in half Slovakia (and throughout the West) against himself: at the political elections in September of 1998 his party (the Movement for Democratic Slovakia) holds a slim majority, but in the government there is a strange coalition that ranges from the liberal right to former communists of the Democratic Party of the Left, through the Christian Democrats, Greens and even the strong party of Hungarian minority. The suffered victory of the opposition is greeted in Europe as if it was the advent of democracy.

In Bratislava there are many people today to be sure that Mr. Meciar has gone on Sunset Boulevard, now only supported by older generations. At the headquarters of the Movement for Democratic Slovakia they argue that this "rainbow coalition" will not last long, because "they have no other program except to sell off every activity to foreign capital".

In fact, the reorganization of Slovakia, which began under Meciar, has had a further surge. The center of Bratislava, of Kosice, and other cities has been completely restored. The heavy architecture of real socialism, as far as possible, has been embellished. And gradually you realize that perhaps the delay of Slovakia could become an advantage.

The American-style vulgarity that touched many European cities seem to have spared Slovakia and its capital, Bratislava. The luxury is not loud and offensive as in other Eastern European countries, especially because it is not opposed to the misery of anyone (even though there is a percentage of great poverty within the country and unemployment to 15 per cent).

Next to the hotel with Western prices, there are decent hostels, as Kosmalt of Kosice, which are ugly to look at, but where a double room costs around six thousand liras (3 euros). In the center of Bratislava there are more people at the socialist-type canteen, remade as a self - service, than to McDonald's. The average salary is around 700 thousand liras (350 euros) but a three-room apartment is rented for 60 thousand liras (30 euros) per month.

In short, life is good in Bratislava. Indeed, they live better. Without the stress and the hellish traffic of our "modernity", with no giant shopping center or megastore, with less luxury cars in double park and less people attached to the phone.

The streets of Bratislava are filled with young, beautiful elegant women, but always with sobriety. Watching them, you have the feeling that all the dramatic passages of the last century have now been metabolized. This is especially true for those with less than thirty years. The others, in particular the generation of the fifties, seem to bring a shadow of regret as "missed opportunities". Someone says that ten years ago there was more ideal tension, now people are starting to turn their backs on politics and expect EU enter without enthusiasm, because Slovakia is already European. The Catholic Church also complained about the danger of consumerism materialism, a hundred times more insidious than the Marxist one: the "booming" religious registered with the end of communism seems to have waned. But in many cases it was to seek a moral identity at any cost, almost to give the message "I was not a Communist", even when it was not true.

Everything is normal now, even banal. But Slovakia can also have this "*aurea mediocritas*" after all the traumas experienced. Unjustly despised for too long or completely ignored, to be confused with Slovenia, "Slovenska Republika" can enjoy, finally, the age of innocence.

Cesare Sangalli