

The Transition from Democracy to Populism

by Adrian Severin

1. Shock without Therapy

The collapse of the real communism order in Central and Eastern Europe, at the end of the penultimate decade of the last century, has inaugurated in the states from the respective region the transition from totalitarianism to democracy, from planned economy to market economy and from closed society to open and free society. At global level this meant the collapse of world communism and the end of the bipolar world order, drawing to a halt the Cold War – mostly due to a lack of combatants than to a clear victory of the western capitalist camp – and starting transition of mankind towards a new world order. The radical changes occurring within the former communist bloc and at global level inevitably led to changes of lifestyle and strategic objectives among western democracies, also forcing them to undertake internal structural reforms and consequently involving them in a specific process of transition.

According to analyses contemporary to the abovementioned events, within Central and Eastern European countries transition witnessed two models, each indicating a different degree of political will for a change – that is braking up with the communist totalitarian past: the shock therapy and the gradual therapy. This was the basis on which the Visegrad Group was formed – Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia – regarded as the champion of shock therapy and thus more apt for a rapid integration in the Euro-Atlantic order. Bulgaria and especially Romania were regarded as exponents of the gradual therapy. The Visegrad Group states are supposed to have consumed their transition in a post-communist period while Bulgaria and Romania have delayed it in at best a neo-communist phase or even worse, in a crypto-communist era. In fact, that distinction had more to do with external geopolitical explanations than with internal policy. Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were countries having a common border with the Euro-Atlantic bloc and therefore they seemed the more susceptible and desirable to be the object of its first eastern enlargement. The influence vacuum left by the precipitated Soviet retreat needed to be filled and the West, taken by surprise, did not manage to imagine more than a minimal and prudent *drang nach Osten* (jump to the East). The same unread and short-sighted prudence has also generated the projects that, in a way or another, identified the optimum management of the Soviet succession in Central and Eastern Europe with the re-establishment of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation; which was equal to building a European Union on religious bases – mainly Catholic and Protestant – by the (re)integration in the European Community of all former Habsburg (Austro-Hungarian) provinces. Samuel Huntington with his clash of

civilisations (more of a clash of cultures) only offered theoretical arguments to such a political agenda.

Shortly after the beginning of transition, when, in the Visegrad Group countries, leftist governments were brought in power on the wave of social discontents subsequent to radical economic reforms and to the implementation of unpopular macroeconomic policies, some voice appeared which criticised the shock therapy. Because of it and the social sufferance it had caused, it was supposed that communists – be they reformed – returned to the political downstage with the risk of compromising the rapid and total transfer of the western lifestyle. Anyway, Polish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovakian “reformed communists” were slowly slipping towards nationalism and that is why they represented the worst species of transition, “national-communists”, as national-communism was “the last stage of development of communism”, but they were nevertheless preferred over Romanian and eventually Bulgarian “unreformed communists” (The distinction criterion between “reformed communist” and “unreformed communist” parties was simply the fact that the first category formed on the ruins of the former Soviet communist parties under the action of their dissident Marxist wing. As the Romanian Communist Party did not have such a wing and Romanian post-communist leftist parties were formed outside such a succession line of the single party, they were abnormally qualified as “unreformed communist parties”. Thus all parties of the modern left were unreformed communist parties as they were not born from reformed communists, that is, from dissidents!).

What was demanded to the “reformed communist” left, in exchange for the western support in order to insure the irreversible emancipation of their countries from the trusteeship of the falling Soviet empire, by integrating into the Euro-Atlantic, was to apply the economic policies of the neo-liberal right, synthesised in the so-called “Washington Consensus” and the democratic reforms listed in the so-called “Copenhagen Document”.

Today, when most states from the former Central and Eastern European communist bloc (including the Baltic states) have become NATO and EU members and the USSR has disappeared, measurements show that the results they achieved are approximately the same regardless of the therapy they applied, shock or gradual. The levels of economic growth and democratic liberties, as well as those of social dissatisfaction are equivalent. Hence the conclusion of some analysts, according to which the chosen model of transition did not matter eventually. Lack of significant gaps concerning the results can be explained by the fact that, in reality, the model applied was not different but in the mind – often marked by prejudices and geopolitical interests – of those who contemplated and described them. Everywhere, there was a shock. Otherwise

change could not have taken place in the necessary depth, direction and time. The intensity and effects of the shock have differed according to the size of the country / society, to the volume and rhythm of foreign investments and cultural traditions of the post-communist national political elite. The problem is that anywhere the shock – more or less powerful – was not associated to a specific therapy. Everywhere in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe we had to deal with a shock without a therapy. This explained a large part of the essential post-transition problems.

2. The Post-Communist Epistemological Crisis

By placing equality in the position of supreme value and perfect pattern of societal organization, communism has offered a sense of existence for the people's lives, mobilizing them in the fight against any expression of equality. According to the communist doctrine it was not a matter of equality as a means – as in the liberal equality of chances formula – and not even a matter of equality as a purpose – as in the social democratic welfare redistribution through public policy formula – but of equality as a result – granted by the almighty and unique leader. To this sense, hostile or competing social classes should have been abolished by reducing everyone to the status of proletarian, each one's force being reduced to his labour. It was believed that such equality could naturally guarantee societal cohesion and coherence, thus spontaneously generating collectivist solidarity. Many believed in this theory and it had become almost a substitute of religion.

From a certain point it was however noticed that compulsory equality is synonym with a denial of freedom and that without freedom only stagnation results, leading to a halt in the progress. In such conditions forced equality could only be maintained by penury. The fight for survival that poverty forced some people into had in the first phase destroyed solidarity and in the next phase the same happened to equality itself. Lacking financial capital, the members of the communist society tried to solve their existential problems by accumulating and using “social capital” (the capital of connections, friends, information). The “great capitalists of communism” – exhibiting monopolistic leanings as any other capitalist – created a category of privileged people (of fate and of the totalitarian state) commonly known under the title of “nomenclature”. They were not able to operate but by corrupting the communist system which they also controlled and led. Thus, corruption became a very system of managing public works. The communist order which should have been one of equals, and thus an essentially honest system, became objectively corrupt. Therefore, instead of equality and solidarity, there was inequality, selfishness by sacrificing freedom and honesty. The myth built around the communist set of values collapsed and left all who believed in it without a reason of existence and without a model that would guide their thoughts and actions.

Post-communism proposed another set of values and promised that it could be applied in practice as it was not utopian, as the communist dream was. The “post-communist” or, maybe, the “capitalist dream” – placed in its centre – almost symmetrically to communism – the ideas of freedom, prosperity and solidarity. Freedom produces prosperity and prosperity is the only resource that allows solidarity to create, by redistribution and public services, a “welfare state”. Communism distributed through the instrument of poverty dictatorship; capitalism redistributes through the instrument of democracy the fortune produced in and through freedom. The (surrogate) religion of communism was replaced, once communism collapsed, with the (surrogate) religion of capitalism.

According to certain estimations, although discontents concerning practices and performances of communist political regimes were widely spread, the conscious and active participation to the dismantlement of these regimes was reduced to 4% of population. The rest of the population mostly considered that the political factor must be condemned for alienating itself from the values, but also that the values remain valid. They indicate the attitude a social order must promote and explain why that order is just. In such a context one can understand the epistemological shock suffered by societies entering transition, as a result of altering the official system of values. The old values in which important masses of population still believed have begun to trivialize until deterioration under the effect of the public discourse which became pluralist (which in itself was a shock after the previous monopoly), but also after comparing the ideas supporting and explaining life in communism with those replacing them in the emerging capitalism.

The post-communist society in transition, which struggled to become capitalist, was nevertheless characterised by the absence of private capital, of middle class and civil society. The collectivism previously imposed through totalitarian means was completely different from the communitarianism required by the well functioning of pluralist democracy. In these conditions, it was almost impossible for the mechanisms of transition to exclude the primitive accumulation of capital, transformation of the communist type of “social capital” into financial capital to be used on an insufficiently regulated free market and structural corruption as a means to manage public affairs. In the context in which the use of over-regulation was replaced by the shock of de-regulation, common people felt – justly or wrongly – abandoned by the state and after losing their trust in public institutions they searched for protection from the private local magnates, a product of the abovementioned transformation processes. The latter began to compete with the state trying, at the same time, to weaken and control it, to control it and enjoy the privilege of its protection. Thus, the state

could not function unless a significant part of the public money became private money and entered the circuit of a secondary or tertiary redistribution.

Thus, trust in the values of capitalism, transformed in their turn into myth – that is exemplary but unreal histories – also collapsed. Freedom as a mechanism of organization and activation of the society was increasingly felt as a useless burden, as long as its concrete benefits are, at best and for most, frugal. The mobilizing and inspiring promise of prosperity was disqualified by the worrying contrast with the reality of permanent uncertainties, economic, financial and monetary crises, bankruptcies, detrimental privatizations and unemployment (both corrective and structural), the precariousness of social protection and assistance and the skyrocketing costs of public services. Compared with the certainties of the communist “desert” the capitalist “jungle” seems to many as unleashing an Armageddon. Such a comparison in itself trivializes the values which legitimized post-communism. Eventually, the expectation of solidarity was compromised by the terrible social polarization resulting from transition. It led not only to the exclusion of a large portion of the poor but also to the isolation, or auto-isolation of the rich, in a society in which fortune arouses hatred and is regarded as the lawful expression of corruption.

The European integration – and external pressure, in general – has determined an adjustment of the transition product, as it was described above, imposing a certain guard, order, balance and transparency, rationalism and positive spirit to the process of post-transition. Thus, anarchic democracy approached participative democracy and prey economy acquired the main standards of a functional market economy. However, this has not changed too much – and it couldn't have done it – the things at epistemological level, in the areas of values and the capacity to find, starting from them and through them, the meaning of life, the purpose and explanation of existence.

The deepening of the epistemological crisis that followed trivialization of the post-communist values and the loss of confidence into them has two additional explanations. On one hand it concerns the bureaucratic framework in which the preparation for NATO and EU accession of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe took place. The necessary reforms were rather imposed than explained. The population was rather forced to accumulate them than helped to understand and assimilate them. The strategy of progress by introducing foreign forms – be they superior in their modernity – without a domestic content, instead of inspiring and mobilizing the population, it only confused and alienated it. Moreover, as very often the integration policies contradicted the growth policies of the countries aspiring to integration, a feeling was generated that NATO and EU enlargement are not the expression of a superior ideal of reuniting Europe and of reconciling the Euro-Atlantic geography with the history of the Euro-

Atlantic space, but a new form of foreign occupation, it is true, though, that a more reverential one to individual rights and more promising for his existence. On such bases, the EU that was hoped to offer a new religion did not provide but a new litany; and this one was performed by priests who have forgotten the values symbolised by the ritual or who no longer believe in them.

On the other hand, the epistemological crisis from Central and Eastern Europe overlapped with a similar crisis of the West and the entire world. After losing their enemy – Soviet communism – the western democracies, which had especially defined themselves in contrast to it, had lost their meaning of identity and target. They no longer know who they are and where are they going. What had previously seemed a self-evident fact is now a matter of debate. Lacking the outer pressure of world communism, democracy and liberty begin to internally shrink in the countries of western capitalism. Citizens have the feeling that an order died without another one to be born; and they don't even know in what direction to look for this new order.

If, at national level, the feeling of “end of century” (of the Apocalypse) is very present – but not necessarily acknowledged – things are most serious at global level. While the democracy of international relations was brought to crisis, simultaneously with international law, by the outburst of post-bipolar conflicts – from Chechnya to Kosovo, from Iraq to Transnistria and from Nagorno-Karabakh to Afghanistan – trans-national democracy does not manage to affirm itself. The common man has the impression that the plane flies to an unknown destination and the pilot is missing from the cockpit.

On this background all kinds of fundamentalism and the vilest populism are developing. They are the consequence of the generalised epistemological crisis. Their echo in the Central and Eastern European countries is all the more powerful as questioning values was more dramatic in that region and the hope that change will bring quick clarifications has created unreasonable expectations followed by symmetric disappointments.

3. Populism and the Need for Myths

Populism is a technique by which democratic instruments, mechanisms and procedures are used in contempt to the purposes of democracy, as well as at the cost, if not for the very intention, of sacrificing / undermining them. For this reason populism is a fatal danger for democracy. Between them there is a substantial contradiction imposing to democracies – rightist, centrist or leftist – to fight populism without hesitation and with the same energy they fought against extremism – right wing (fascist) or left wing (communist).

Populism is an indisputable reality of today's Europe. The question is why do they enjoy such popularity, such an appeal to the public? The answer cannot be but that populism answers a profound need, essential to the human being. Otherwise it wouldn't exert such an attraction for the masses and wouldn't be so dangerous. What is that need? The need for myths! That means a need for a life model supposed to have been confirmed in practice and having the reputation of being complete, whose accomplishment or copy would offer a superior motivation to human existence and an explanation or direction to social action.

By trying to identify the defining essence of the human being, there was much debate around *homo sapiens*, *homo faber*, *homo ludens* or *homo religiosus*. In this sense we can add the concept of *homo mitologycus*. It affirms the truth according to which a human being has not only the right to eat, dress and dwell, but also to believe in what he does, that is believing that what he does has a meaning, an explanation and a respectable utility. The myth offers grounds for such a belief.

The ideal is that the human being establishes real and realistic targets. In principle, nobody pursues unrealistic targets. But as one cannot tell for sure what is realistic and what is not, the realism of a present project can be measured by reference to the situation that the project was achieved or not in the past. If a target was once reached it means that it is reasonable to think that it can be reached again. If in the past reaching a target has brought happiness, then, reaching it in the future will have the same consequences.

Such logic is not bad. However, the myth is not a real but a fictional history. It does not describe the past as it was but as we wish it was. In terms of aspiration and mobilization tool towards self-improvement the myth has the aptitude to play a positive role in history. The problem appears when the human being takes the myth for history; and this occurs when he does not like reality and therefore he refuses to believe in it, choosing to take shelter in illusion, in dream, in possibility, in the virtual space. Those who cannot insure their material security, those unhappy with the results of concrete action take refuge in symbolic security, they hide in myths.

Myths can be grouped in two categories: tribal myths and archetypal myths. Tribal myths are myths promoting the model of differentiation and confrontation. Archetypal myths propose a target that unites, that gathers, people around a superior idea dedicated to the common good, for supporting a federalizing project according to an initial model (archetype) which is unanimously accepted as exemplary, perfect.

Archetypal myths are used as propelling force in the "strategy of common projects". Such a project is not necessarily inspiring. It can convince but cannot

produce emotions, enthusiasm and affective mobilization. For this the project needs to be associated to a myth. The European Community of Coal and Steel was a federalizing project associated with the archetypal myth of eternal peace. That association has insured its success. The EU - successor of the Community - is a project of the same nature but lacking the myth. That is why the population is indifferent to it, if not hostile, and elites are obliged to promote it through deceiving manoeuvres; those measures can bring some tactical successes but are condemned to a strategic failure.

Tribal myths are those adopted by the exponents of populism. Their morphology comprises four elements: the doomed enemy; the chosen people who must and can be saved; the providential saviour; the solution of salvation, the more efficient - or rather more convincing - as it is simple and comprehensible for all. The enemy can be anyone who is identified with the "other": another people, a neighbour, a competitor, Europe, America, Russia, the Arabs, the Muslims, the dark, the sea, the wolves, the corrupt, the wizards, the immigrants, the neo-protestants, the rich, the poor, the elites, the illiterates, those who make it, those who lose, etc. The list is practically infinite and it is arranged according to the needs. All that it takes is for an enemy to be identified. He is as irretrievably condemned as he is vicious. But the execution of the condemnation doesn't come of itself. The "mass" - that is the releaser of the power constituting the stake of the populist bet - would be, in its turn, "condemned" to happiness, but this happiness cannot be obtained without sacrifice. Until the sacrifice, the "mass of the chosen ones" is the victim of the "public enemy", being thus punished, by virtue of immanent justice, for its passivity, for accepted the injustice. The "Saviour" - in fact, the populist leader - is not only the one not accepting the existence of the opponent - because we are talking about the latter's interment and not about his castigation, by definition, impossible - but also he is ready to sacrifice himself into the battle in order to achieve the positive destiny of saving the mass. A sacrifice which - isn't it so? - is always received with joy by those who are to be saved without assuming personal risks. Eventually, the solution proposed by the Saviour is appreciated not according to the capacity to adequate means to data of the problems to be solved but taking into account the degree in which it confirms the expectations of the mass and legitimates its options. Therefore, failure is almost never the fault of the populist leader. As the mythical behaviour is based on the confusion between real and possible, the mass is completely satisfied by the simple fact of indication by the populist leader of the remedy or favoured itinerary between the multiple possibilities. The satisfaction of having its dream confirmed is sufficient. Most of them are not even expecting a confirmation of the dream. Unfulfillment does not kill the dream or the one maintaining it. A dream can only be killed by another dream. A myth can only be destroyed by another myth. Until then, solutions which seem to be efficient prove to be counterproductive, on the medium and longer term, rather

contributing to the alienation from the target than to the people's propinquity to it. For such a result any democratic leader would be submitted to popular sanction. The populist leader does not account for concrete results but only for maintenance of the refreshing feeling that they can be accomplished. That practically means he is not at all accountable; or, at least, he is not held accountable by the masses, through democratic procedures. The populist and populism can only be overthrown by the symbols they have created, when they lose control over their evolution, or by the replacing myths and symbols.

Regarding populism there are a series of preconceived ideas that have to be discarded or, according to the case, nuanced. Thus, it is stated that: a) populism goes hand in hand with illiteracy; b) populism goes hand in hand with poverty; c) populism goes hand in hand with aging (in the sense that the youth would be less vulnerable to the populist message); d) populism goes hand in hand with nationalism; e) populism goes hand in hand with anti-Europeanism; f) populism goes hand in hand with extremism. In the confrontation with practice of these theses do not stand; at least not in such clear-cut formulation. There are numerous personalities with a high education and training who are populists (an example in this direction is the so called "group of presidential intellectuals" in Romania). At the same time, among populist leaders or among those that let themselves to be seduced by populism we encounter many people with considerable fortunes. The rich also need myths, as they can also make the object of marginalization and exclusion in a certain social context. Also, the number of youth seized by the current of populism is greater as confusion of values, impatience and frustrations are greater among the young generation. Especially the present young generation can be called the "now! generation". It does not accept that reaching a goal needs ever more time as it is more complex. For those demanding immediate satisfactions populism exercises a powerful attraction. It is also not true that populism is intrinsically linked with nationalism. Even if national-populism is the most common and dangerous form of populism, there can be populisms lacking a national dimension. Thus, there are trans-national and infra-national populisms postulating the idea that happiness can be insured by suppressing or reducing the nation-states to symbols (examples of this type are the theories of territorial autonomy on ethno-cultural criteria or those promoting European regionalization following purely geopolitical criteria). As there are populisms lacking any ethnic connotation (for example populism centred around fighting corruption in the context in which the corrupt are identified with all those managing to get rich or to climb with the social elevator, reduced, on the other hand to the circle of political adversaries). To the extent that the future of EU depends on the capacity of the citizens in the member states to define the "other" - as Emanuel Todd considers - any kind of tribal myth is, in essence and ultimately, anti-European. However, there is also a European populism. It is the populism of those trying to promote the European idea

through Americanophobia and Russophobia. Ultimately, populism can be identified with extremism to the extent to which it underlies anti-system (and anti-democratic) attitudes and policies.

Populism uses the motion rules of the system it denies. Therefore, sometimes populists achieve the performance of being at the same time in government and in opposition. The victim is always the system and that is why the system has to endow itself with the norms and methods to forbid populism. Otherwise, it is precisely such a perverse ambivalence that makes populism not to be always extremist in form. The apparently reasonable character – populists often hypocritically refer to reason – associated with a radical content challenge increase the aptitude of populism to seduce masses, in fact abandoning their interest. Moral decline and corruption of the social cohesion thus resulting make corruption a *sine qua non* law of populism, and populism an extreme danger for any social order and especially for democratic order.

All these nuances are important because, on one hand they show the limited efficiency of some remedies otherwise considered as exceptional – such as increasing the general level of education and information of the population – and, on the other hand, indicate the high rate of danger in any form of complacency towards populism or cohabitation and cooperation with it. Fighting populism cannot take place by adopting – not even *cum granum salis* or with provisional title – the populist slogans, themes or methods, but by offering distinct agendas capable of inspiring the mass and by developing different attitudes which will extricate the same inflexible authenticity which populism only mimes.

4. The European Dream

Fighting populism implies replacing tribal myths, which it uses, with archetypal myths. After decades of absence of major conflagrations on the European territory peace is no longer a federalizing idea. This vacant space must thus be filled by defining a new “European dream”.

On this reasoning line, ideas such as “reunification of Europe”, building a “European demos” – erected in the same way as nations were created from almost nothing, “European identity” are essential. National democracy is indisputably in a crisis which it cannot surpass by re-warming the myths of the 19th century. Confronted with increasingly numerous material failures and with the impotence of satisfying with limited national resources the expectations of a population effectively living in a global world, the governments of nation-states must reinvent national democracy, articulating it with a trans-national democracy and with a local one. As democracy without demos cannot exist, it is imperiously necessary that, beside the national demos and the local

communities, as well as joining them, a “European cosmopolitan nation” is invented. Such a nation does not destroy cultural nations or civic nations but it creates a new space of security and evolution for them. Therefore, the exclusion from the European Treaty of Lisbon of the ensigns and symbols of the EU (the “living soul” of the Treaty, as some called them) was a populist act that, similarly to all populism, seemed to quickly solve the problem but eventually came against its very purpose. Reducing European symbols does not allow more space for affirmation of national symbols, ever emptier of content and with forgotten significances. The cohesion elements of a trans-national political structure, once discovered and adopted, will create conditions for rehabilitation of national cohesion, offering more real national security to real citizens.

As a title of hypothesis that remains to be demonstrated, one can advance the idea that “security” may lie at the centre of the definition for the present federalizing “European dream”. It concerns a four-dimensional security: individual or personal; collective or social; national or cultural; international or global. Starting from this point citizens must be explained that:

- a) Security of each against the aggression of organised crime, terrorism, illicit migration, illicit trafficking and other unconventional threats which have globalised can be better insured through the joint effort of all Europeans, on a territory where state border are no longer a barrier against criminals;
- b) Labour, education, health, environment, security and others of the same kind, interesting communities of individuals, can be insured only by gathering resources of member states and jointly managing them; in such a context the migration phenomenon can be turned from a danger into a challenge and from a challenge into an opportunity for the development of European civilization and cultures;
- c) Ethno-cultural security in a Europe with spiritualised national borders, without internal political dividing lines and lacking the potentially conflictual duality between “national majority” and “national minorities” (therefore into a Europe of minorities or national communities), can be promoted without restrictions, tensions or fears, as cultural rights will have separated from territorial rights and “cultural nations”, reunited without resorting to border modifications, will replace the old asymmetrical relations resulting from quantitative disparities with symmetrical relations established according to qualitative criteria;
- d) International relations security will certainly consolidate as a result of transforming the Europe-market into a Europe-power capable to compete with the other major global actors, to protect and promote the specific interests of Europeans, represented by the European values and lifestyle.

The ever-increasing insecurity of European citizens, emphasized by their epistemological crisis, will determine them to seek shelter in environments different from the national one, which is presently characterised by a crisis of values, mechanisms (institutions) and efficiency. The direction they will choose may be the one indicated by populism and which will take them into neo-feudalism or that indicated by the spirits of visionary democracy, which can take them into post-modernism. Ultimately, the choice will depend upon the capacity to associate the science of managing with the art of inspiring. The “European dream” centred on the archetype of security could make the difference.