

Croatia

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In Croatian California

Several years before the great changes, the people living in that large country called the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia began to find it increasingly hard to endure the certainty and predictability which were meant to accompany them from the cradle to the grave. They worked in the same place until retirement, in summer they went to the seaside and stayed in workers' holiday homes, in winter they bought half a pig through their trade union, there was no problem with health care, wages were low but loans were cheap and as a rule were eventually eaten away by inflation.

However, what the people found especially hard to endure was the stagnant political quagmire which guarded them against the rest of the world. Since Yugoslavia was also a federal state, people found it unbelievably easy to despise the way of life pursued in the neighbouring federal entities, although it was virtually indistinguishable from their own. They began to hate one another and blame one another for their pointless, worthless fate. Everyone dreamed of their own republic becoming an independent capitalist state; there was every likelihood that in this new world you could become an ambassador, a minister, a deputy minister or at the very least a civil servant. It would also be tempting to establish some out-of-the-ordinary political party and get elected to parliament. After all, why not? You could then defeat everyone in democratic elections and become president. At any rate, the people were fed up with socialism and even the thought of returning to the old ways made them sick.

It was, for instance, utterly grotesque when a writer published a thriller about a bank robbery, but there was only one thing more worthless than a work of art of this kind, and that was a film made from the book. In real life, you simply could not imagine a bank or a post office being robbed. Robbery was the exclusive privilege of those in power. The pinnacle of "socialist"

robbery was to break into a kiosk and make off with cigarettes, chewing gum and toilet paper. Or else you could rob dachas, but that involved no risk. You simply turned up in the middle of the night, ate and drank your fill, slept the night and in the morning took home with you whatever took your fancy. It didn't even count as real robbery, but was thought of more like a grown-up prank. As for ordinary people, they loved exciting Western films with rivers of blood, sweat and sperm and with the throbbing of real life in the streets – none of your stagnant quagmire. Those streets were home to picturesque crime in all its manifestations: from ordinary robbery, murder, prostitution, drug peddling and smuggling to blackmail, kidnapping and bombing, up to and including minor domestic massacres and clan warfare. “There is real life for you, and not this pretence which bores you to death,” sighed the intelligentsia and the semi-literate alike.

Finally the long-awaited day dawned and the communist empire and its communist colonies started to implode. The people could finally tremble with joy as they stood before the gateway to freedom and before the true unknown, and faced the temptations which in capitalism abounded.

Had it been independent at the time, my own Croatia would have been the richest country in the entire former socialist world, something like California in the United States – how much for the huge, beautiful seaside alone? In addition, every other citizen had a ready-made recipe for success: how to set up your own business fast and become a successful capitalist with nothing else to do but to supervise the business and skim off the fat profits each day.

The fourth estate proclaimed in all the media at its disposal that we would all be made rich simply because, being a developed republic, we would no longer have to deprive ourselves in order to help the backward provinces in the other republics. What was especially thrilling was that the republic

containing the capital of the unloved federation would lose all possibility of confiscating half of our annual income from tourism – yet another industry we could all live off without doing a stroke of work, if all this money were distributed among the citizens.

However, since all the other countries also regarded the sea as their own (and anyway what kind of country doesn't have its own seaboard and navy?), separation from Mother Yugoslavia was accompanied by a series of wars on a larger or smaller scale. After all, Serbia too, after its isolation and the NATO attacks, paid a high price for the war. Bosnia and Herzegovina also paid a high price for self-determination, as did my own Croatia. The four-year war brought suffering both to the Croatian majority, which had achieved victory with America's help, and to the rebelling Serbian minority, which knew no homeland other than Croatia and against which that very Croatia fomented national and religious hatred. At the same time, the same minority was being armed and encouraged to fight by its historical homeland, Serbia. Those two secret allies, Croatia and Serbia, are guilty of many internecine killings and blood baths which were intended to arouse hatred and thus mobilise their own citizens for war. They conspired to carve up Bosnia and Herzegovina, the countries that separated them from each other. Fortunately they were prevented from achieving their aim by the peace enforced by the international community, but the chaos they left behind continued in Bosnia and Herzegovina for a long time.

After the war, the wonderful Croatian belief that we really were California, that we really were the most desirable corner of this fine world disappeared – and with it the reason for our arrogance. While soldiers and civilians died at the front, the nouveau riche privatised everything of any value for next-to-nothing. The Croat and Serb nouveau riche even traded with one another to

great mutual benefit, even though they were on opposing sides during the war. And at last crime, so long awaited, began to flourish. American thrillers now seemed like fairy tales. Every day the papers and television brought news of murders, shoot-outs, robberies, swindles, prostitution and drugs. People pined for social protection only when someone reminisced about the time when we had lived in the grey, motionless quagmire. The post-war depression was almost impossible to survive.

Thirteen years after the war it seems nothing short of a miracle that we are again living well in Croatia. It seems like a lucky and accidental lottery win, but each one of us has been left with a scar on our hearts. However, criminality has again had its wings clipped. The air is clean. On the other hand, very few have become capitalists with nothing to do other than supervise the business and skim off the fat profits each day. To be honest, we spend quite a lot, not because we have too much, but because we have too little. We have acquired a celebrated and all-powerful facility – the overdraft. There is no life without an overdraft. We are hoping that when we join the European Union the authorised overdraft on our credit cards will become at least twice or, God willing, three times as large as before.

To this end, we are changing our laws and bringing our standards into line with the European Union because, dear citizens, once you have become part of the European Union's authorised overdraft, you will feel that you have finally been given what is due to you. And since you have done everything in your power to reach this status, you will be overcome by the feeling that you have every right to get a thrill out of this hard-won, fat overdraft, and are lucky to be able to enjoy it.