

Europe vs. racism - who wins?

Author: Jānis Urbanovičs

Leader of "Concord" parliamentary group of Latvian Saeima

President of "The Baltic Forum"

An important component of a serious problem is that it cannot be resolved. In the best case - complexity of the solution and huge amount of resources has to be invested. It is a waste not only of money, but also of human effort and time, which is always in short supply. That is why the Conference on Climate Change (COP21) in Paris has made it possible for Europe and the world to understand a very important thing – at present the climate change is not our main problem - if the compromise in this respect can be reached this easily. For more impression, this was announced after a demonstratively extended discussion; clamour caused by the media and NGOs, and it was hailed as a significant achievement - at the same time being aware that another eruption of a volcano can be comparable to industrial pollution of a decade.

Quite a different depth of problems is presented by increasing dysfunctionality of the European Union, which is currently undergoing a profound internal crisis. This organization is one of the most important players and guardians of the "world order" in the global politics, however specifically at this moment it has to first obtain a clear understanding of its own internal defects. At the heart of the crisis there is not just the struggle between the supporters of further federalization and the defenders of the sovereignty of the Member States, while this traditional struggle overlaps with the efforts of the regions of the EU member states to achieve sovereignty. This is a complimentary background, against which under the influence of the problems caused by the influx of refugees, a civil and moral, and even humanitarian crisis is shaping, because the ideals of the united Europe, the values it defends and implements are subject to erosion. In several EU countries - particularly in the eastern part – as well as in its' partner countries xenophobia, intolerance, and still camouflaged for the moment Nazism becomes 'normal' political proposal, hate speech is becoming a proper part of the public debate.

President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz in his resonant and already paradigmatic* forecast on the future of the united Europe warns us about nationalism and populism that strive to fragment this part of the world by fences and walls. Agreeing with what was said by him in principle, at the same time it seems to be surprising to realize that this in other cases militant defender of the unity of Europe and the European values has been so tactful.

The dark force that is now coming back to life and strives to destroy Europe, which only recently was recognized, respected and valued by the entire world, does not deserve such an euphemistic definition as "nationalism". This is real, open and blunt RACISM. Because nationalism is trying to preach superiority over others, at the same time recognizing the equality of the "others". In turn, at present unwillingness to consider "other, foreign" people as similar to themselves is openly proclaimed, presenting those people as biologically different beings. Citing the classic, the belief is that if "those others" are pricked, they would not bleed.*

Furthermore, in Europe today, racism is not "classic", because it is directed not only against people with a different colour (or shade) of the skin. It covers all the features defined by the

International Convention of the United Nations, adopted on 21 December 1965, on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination: "... the term 'racial discrimination' shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, skin, descent, or national or ethnic origin ...". We must not succumb to the misleading illusion that violent outbreaks of ethnic hatred remain in the distant past - like the massive war crimes on the territory of former Yugoslavia - or that they are smouldering somewhere else in the world - like the animosity between the people of Hutu and Tutsi in Central Africa. Right here, next to the EU, the partially frozen conflict between Ukraine and Russia continues to exist. Even though the guns are silent in Donbas at the moment, mutual incitement of hatred continues, while the party and state propaganda in the public consciousness turns the neighbouring peoples - fraternal peoples! – into non-human "Muscovites" and "Ukrops, Hohols". This trivialization of intolerance seriously affects the EU eastern bordering states - Poland and the Baltic States, "assisting" their politicians in losing their immunity to intolerance and their loyalty to European values.

We in Latvia have not yet seen the arrival of at least a single Syrian refugee in the framework of the quota allocated by the EU, but the suddenly emerging groups of "citizens' initiative" already proclaim those refugees enemies, who threaten our security, morals, welfare. Campaign against refugees is closely connected with the nationalist party represented in the government (whose participation also in the next coalition even "pro-European" politicians consider to be mandatory - as a guarantee of "patriotism" of the government) and therefore at present xenophobia is presented with devastating efficiency as the dominant and "the single correct" point of view in the society of Latvia. Incitement to hatred towards refugees as an "external enemy" is carried out in parallel with the struggle against the "internal enemy" - the part of a nation that does not belong to the Latvian ethnicity. The confrontation of Russia with the EU and NATO serves for the state power of Latvia as an excuse for complete removal and alienation of the minority of Russian-speaking citizens (and non-citizens) from the implementation of policy and from their parliamentary representation, unjustifiably stigmatizing them as disloyal to the state, as the "fifth column" of Moscow. When the Russian bomber was shot down and NATO had to side with Turkey, the Latvian ethnocracy perceived in this incident support for themselves and no longer even conceals efforts to carry out purely racist discrimination.

The quaint nationalism, that existed hitherto in Eastern Europe (and other "peripheral" EU countries) - the preaching of some political forces, or even the government of "historically justified", or just imaginary superiority of their nation over its neighbours and other Europeans - was based on relatively harmless efforts to at least psychologically compensate for their societies the shock of having experienced European integration. It was caused by the revelation that EU membership does not automatically guarantee rapid economic growth and rising living standards. Brussels cannot (it even is not the duty of European bureaucracy!) to provide these governments with a magic wand - the ability (and the will) to eradicate poverty and to increase welfare. Most clearly the effectiveness of this "compensatory" psychological mechanism was displayed during the crisis in Greece, when protesters against "the dictation of the committee of three" of the financial discipline interviewed in the streets justified the right of their country to live beyond its means by the significance of the ancient culture in the development of Europe.

The ability of politicians to implement competent and creative economic policies is a deep divide that separates the member states of the EU and Europe as a whole. Therefore, for example, the

United Kingdom becomes a magnet, which by well-paid job opportunities attracts people from Latvia (Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and so on), who find there opportunities that their home countries do not offer - while the politicians of these countries are trying to find ideological, historical or just demagogic justification for their incompetence. Unfortunately, at present this as if harmless “psychotherapeutic” nationalism becomes a breeding ground for racism, reviving the ‘tradition’ of intolerance, lurking deep in the subconscious of the nations. One of the authors or implementers of the presently bawled out slogans is shamefully concealed (Adolf Hitler), while others become icons of “patriotism” (the most “prominent” of them being Stepan Bandera, Josif Stalin, and in Latvia – the “innocent victim” Herberts Cukurs, labourer of the Holocaust *Sonderkommando Arajs*).

The veteran “club” of the EU – the Western countries - should not turn a blind eye to the seriousness of these changes in some Member States or write them off as temporary growing pains “puberty pimples”. While racism becomes everyday life of “the new / Eastern Europeans”, it can become a bad example to follow and revive the “historical tradition” also for the “old Europeans”. Mr. Schultz, should Europe once again make sure if the society residing in the eastern regions of Germany is immune to the “brown bacillus”?

In addition to all the other problems that currently the EU has to deal with, its institutions should be prepared to respond if any of the member states of the of the European Council or partner countries flagrantly violate the UN Convention from 21 December 1965, or the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action from 25 June 1993 – by effectively punishing the State in question for the implementation of racist, xenophobic policies, compelling it to abandon such policies. Otherwise, these documents by losing international guarantees for their implementation become waste paper.

New challenges caused by the refugee influx to Europe and the awakening spectres of the past concentrate the political struggle in this part of the world to a fundamental clash between the defending of European values and animosity towards “others”. New and impassable separation lines are drawn, often among former associates - new alliances are formed between politicians and parties that recently argued about customs tariffs or the retirement age. Thus, German Chancellor Angela Merkel had to experience that she can rely on partners in the government coalition, the Social Democrats, while experiencing resistance from the members of her own party. Either Europe will be able to overcome animosity and drive it back into the darkness of the human subconscious - or this animosity will crush Europe and will throw the world back into the age-old past.

* <http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article149696117/Die-Europaeische-Union-ist-in-Gefahr.html>

** "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" (William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene I)