

The Soviet Experiment and the "Future of Europe"

In Eurospeak, they call it the 'Convention on the Future of Europe'. Ceremoniously launched in Brussels on February 28, this Convention gives the impression that Europe's future is still wide open. It tends to reassure us Europeans that this is a participative debate that will eventually shape Europe's unknown future. In reality, the future of the European Union has long been sealed. The fundamental treaties are in place and the major supranational entities are being shaped towards the creation of a centralised European monolith with a political structure and an economic agenda that differ from those of the former Soviet Union only in the details.

EU Commission President, Romano Prodi, couldn't have been clearer when in October 1999 he told Euro-Parliamentarians: "We must now face the difficult task of moving towards a single economy, a single political entity . . . For the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire we have the opportunity to unite Europe."

It's ironic that Prodi should measure the timing of this "opportunity" in terms of the fall of the Roman Empire. But I need not venture into this ancient lane: the Soviet empire comes closer to the European Union, and not only in time . . . True, at first glance one finds it hard to compare the Soviet 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and the centralised economic system, with European 'democracy' and the 'free market' economy. But comprehensively and holistically the similarity is valid, especially as the true political nature of the evolving EU further unfolds and its economic regulatory system starts showing its true colours.

It is not my main purpose here to present a comparison between the two

Unions. What follows instead is a collage of sporadically interspersed reflections captured within a moving framework of time and space.

So let's forget the European Union for the moment and venture instead down a meandering memory lane to feel not the birth of the European empire, but the decay of the Soviet empire in its dwindling years: specifically just before a succession of rapid changes led to its final collapse.

The calm before the storm: the Soviet dream in decadence

It was at the oblivious age of 18 that I found myself enrolled as a foreign student in the Soviet Union. It was 1979. A whole decade was coming to an end, the Brezhnev era was in decline, and State apathy and corruption reigned supreme. The lack of public respect for Leonid Brezhnev was evident in the many Brezhnev jokes doing the rounds those days.

President Carter arrives in Moscow and Brezhnev frantically walks up to him.

"Did you bring jeenzi (jeans)?" Brezhnev asks while shaking hands.

Jimmy Carter nods affirmatively.

"What size, what size?" asks the eager Brezhnev.

"Size 36," replies Carter.

Brezhnev spits and swears: "Again it's for (Prime Minister) Kosygin!"

It's a stupid joke, but one that typifies the signs of those times. It was a time when although the Soviet experiment was in social decay, the Soviet power-pyramid still appeared as strong as ever.

In those days of 'Soviet Prohibition' (of private enterprise and free speech)

the spekulyanti were a criminalised lot. The spekulyanti, of course, were self-employed commodity traders and currency dealers (the word 'biznismyeni' had not yet been in vogue). But then, most Soviet citizens indulged in some form of illegal transaction. There was this sub-economy that had become a Soviet way of life and it was only loosely connected to the State economy that was centrally planned every 5 years. It was an unregulated economy that included private trading and corruption within a pervasive back-scratching network involving various znakomiye (acquaintances), as procurement contacts were called.

The Znakomiy economy

No matter how harsh Soviet penalties and caging conditions were, the Soviet authorities never quite got to grips with this underground economy. Indeed, the authorities themselves formed an integral part of it. Everyone seemed to indulge in some form of znakomiyism: from the factory girl who was in a position to procure the best drapery from the State enterprise she worked for, to the butcher who saved the best pieces of State pork for her in return. The higher your position in the State echelons of the Soviet pyramid, the better was the booty you could lay your hands on in order to trade, sell or be bribed for within the znakomiy economy. The food stores were near empty, yet every home I visited had its fridge bulging with a variety of food and drink. And if it was 4 a.m. and you ran out of vodka, you knew where to get some, provided you could pay 10 roubles instead of the 6-rouble State price. The same with particular train, plane and theatre tickets . . . and if all the taxis were taken, you'll find private cars willing to do the rounds for a pre-agreed fee. There were, of course, the unlucky ones who found themselves winning the State lottery of arrest and caging — but by 1979 this prize was generally reserved for the more uncultured street-spekulyanti who were regarded and treated as common thugs.

In 1979, the Soviet economy had become an unchanging dinosaur. Roubles were plentiful, but the supply of demanded goods was scarce. Unbeknown to anyone at the time the Soviet experiment was nearing its closure. It was waiting for Gorbachev to ease it from the pains of existing. Many were aware that the Soviet system was faltering, but no one had any inkling that the experiment was soon to be called off and the laboratory dismantled.

The effects of experimentation

The human species adapts to socio-political surroundings in mysterious ways. It reacts to State control and authoritarianism in ways that do not necessarily involve violence. By 1979, the social response to Soviet totalitarianism had evolved into a mainstream society that was generally apathetic towards politics. Yet it was still a mainstream that was patriotic and proud of the Soviet heritage. It was a mainstream that actually feared a NATO attack, that was disgusted with 'Western imperialism' and that justified the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Indeed, the Soviet media was doing a fine job — a better service than the KGB and the Soviet penal system could ever provide:

"How's it going with you these days?" one old classmate asks another when they meet in a line for milk.

"Really great!"

"Got any time to read the papers?"

"Sure! How else would I know?"

The Soviet mainstream had long learned that politics did not feed and clothe them: to be a political dissident meant being a foolish martyr. And while most Soviet citizens were disenchanted with their low- paying State jobs, they were quite motivated towards their secondary (illegal) earnings and dealings

within the *znakomiy* economy.

I found this underground economy to be the only economy that actually thrived in any form or manner. This people's economy was a living reality. It was a natural social reaction to the artificial economy created by the totalitarian Soviet regime. Out of Soviet bureaucratic centralisation there emerged a deregulated underground economy that permeated the whole of Soviet society and eventually became partially institutionalised. In other words, out of Soviet attempts to impose economic order there emerged economic disruption and disorder, and out of this disorder there emerged a *de facto* socio-economic order — one that was criminalised by the Soviet (dis)order that had unintentionally created it in the first place. And unlike the official Soviet economy, the *znakomiy* economy worked like clockwork — within the limits of criminalisation, of course.

In the Soviet Union through which my life-course happened to pass, you could tell a dissident joke and listen to Western music, and you could trade here and barter there . . . and as long as you kept to your own network of 'acquaintances', you had little to fear except for your own insatiable desire for worldly goods and services.

This harmonious bubble burst when Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* eventually lifted the prohibitions on free speech and free enterprise. What emerged was not a hybrid of the Soviet and the *znakomiy* economies, but a new type of cutthroat market-place. *Spekulyatsya*, the art of being a *spekulyant* (which was the more criminalised side of the *znakomiy* economy), was the informal Soviet version of capitalism. Together with State corruption, it was the only form of entrepreneurship known to the Russians upon their reawakening from the failed Soviet dream. The business acumen that emerged after *perestroika*, therefore, had to evolve from *spekulyatsya*, which had by then become 'legalized *spekulyatsya*'. Hence upon the

decriminalisation and legalization of private enterprise the *spekulyanti*, who were innately prone to law-breaking, became market-lords rather than businessmen. The *spekulyanti* had joined forces with corrupt ex-communist bosses forming groups that dominated the post-Soviet economic scene, battling one another in the process. This natural state of post-Soviet affairs was what the West had immediately come to term as 'the Russian mafia'.

The European dream in the 70s

Back in 1979, right across the 'Iron Curtain', the European Union was still a 9-member economic club known as the European Economic Community (EEC). Ambitions of political integration were still on the back burner. The political scene was characterised by a multitude of political parties inside a diverse array of nation-States each pursuing its cultural, economic and political course. Among the strong political movements of the time there were the Euro- communists. In Italy, where they were strongest, only a long lasting, corrupt, 5-party coalition (Il Pentapartito) kept the Italian Communist Party out of government.

The political scene in the Western European nation-States of the 70s hugely contrasted with that prevailing in America where communism was never trendy (perhaps the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s had created a legacy that could only fade after the red enemy had long fallen into oblivion). The Cold War was going strong, even if detente had become a buzzword. The USA and the USSR held sway over a divided Europe still licking its remnant wounds after its last war. The Euro-communists were an inherent part of this post-WWII Western European scene.

The Euro-communists of the 70s liked to believe that they were the democratic alternative to the totalitarian Soviet version shaped by Stalin the tyrannical Georgian. They liked to believe that they were keeping the Marxist

banner high after its betrayal by the Soviets. It did not seem to matter to the European rebels of the time that their concept of a democratic alternative to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was a contradiction in terms. The basic ideology was for most of them highly irrelevant. In those heady days of Euro-communism if you were a dissenter, an anti-establishment maverick, a progressive anti-cleric, or a militant trade unionist, then the Communist party was the place to be. It was a sort of international club for dissenters against the old Reactionary; a movement for 'progressive disdain', where thinkers could intellectually masturbate and instigate street battles with the State police in the name of the workers' cause.

Ultimately, notwithstanding the claimed differences between Euro-communism and Soviet communism, the collapse of Sovietism also meant the collapse of Euro-communism.

The 70s were indeed a strange lot for Europe. This was the last decade before the twilight years of the post-WWII era. Those were times when the European experience was passing through a socio-politically heuristic phase. There were times when life could have appeared to take any direction on the libertarian-authoritarian-totalitarian scale (even if the present authoritarian system was already written on the democratic walls . . . as was that of the demise of the Soviet empire). What followed instead was this distopian, post-rational, post-political age where Eurospeak defines the 'Rule of Political Correctness'.

In 1979 three different dreams were thus passing through different phases in their dream-courses. The heroic Soviet dream was clearly in tragicomic decline, the fabled American dream was becoming more elusive and the 'progressive' Euro-communist dream was gradually, but unknowingly, giving way to an arcane European dream of Empire.

1980: 'The Evil Empire'

Upon landing at the old Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow in the autumn of 1979, my first glimpse was that of armed soldiers. If this is the airport, I thought, I can only imagine what a gulag might look like. My first general impression was one of drab shabbiness. No style at all. No taste. No finesse. No colour . . . A desolate-grey sort of sadness overwhelmed my mind as I embarked on the long train journey to Kiev for a year-long "preparatory course".

Eventually, within the year, I came to know the Russians and their satellite Slavic nations as a jovially melancholic people. I grew to respect the Slavs as a deep nation of extreme contradictions, even if by the autumn of 1980 the Soviet routine was killing me.

Every morning, the sickening Mayak cable-radio bellowed out to the jingle of Moscow Nights for the usual grim voice to repeat the same old progress registered on collective farms and other State enterprises. The lectures at the Riga Institute of Aeronautical Engineering made me dose off, especially the totally unrelated yet compulsory subject called "Istoriya KPSS" (History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union). The wintry weather was depressing . . . as were the long lines . . . and the ubiquitous red banners trumpeting "Slava SSSR" (Glory to the USSR) or "Slava KPSS" . . . as were the Marx and Lenin busts and portraits, together with all the rest of this religion's holy saints . . .

And yet I felt as free as a lost sparrow. I was living in "the evil empire" and I didn't even know it!

It was November of 1980 when I tuned in to the BBC World Service late one evening, keen to find out whether the contesting former actor had won the US presidency. At the sound of the BBC one of my Russian roommates at the

hostel turned hostile. He ordered me to switch off the radio at once — which was a rather sad approach to alleviate his needs, since compliance and respect for authority were never my main qualities. And this was no ordinary student. Not only was he around 5 years my elder, he was also the Predsdatyel Studsovyeta — a sort of Soviet prefect whose actual powers were to me unknown and quite irrelevant. He tried to forcefully switch my radio off and a short scuffle ensued until the Predsdatyel would settle for only one option: I could listen to the BBC on the stairway outside our room but only under the threat that he would report me to higher authorities. Little did I care for this type of Soviet authority. Banishment was the ultimate punishment — which only meant going back home.

Little did the prefect know, that November evening, that the enemy had just elected a new president who would eventually force him and his comrades to spread a little less butter on their smaller pieces of bread. Little could we envisage then that the Soviet empire would soon have to give way. In truth, the Soviet colossus did not need Raegan's 'evil empire' crusade for it to implode. It had already been on the verge of collapse. Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev's death in 1982 did more to end the decadent empire than Ron's threats and Nancy's astrological charts could ever have accomplished.

1982: An end to an era

The morning Leonid Ilyich died, on 10 November 1982, I was purchasing a Soviet colour TV set — a small-screened fatso which cost me around 560 roubles. That was not much by my standards, although it was well over two salaries for the average Soviet earner. For me it just meant I had to sell three pairs of jeans at 180 roubles each. Jeans cost me nothing. My parents used to send me regular parcels with jeans, records, toiletries and anything you'd need to live the Soviet life with relative ease. The 90-rouble University stipend was treated as an extra tip in comparison to the lucrative

spekulyatsya in jeenzi. All foreign students were criminals. And we soon found out that the Soviets — from the police to the faculty deans — shut both eyes to foreign students' trading in Western goods.

I had already switched to Moscow State University that cold November day when I switched on my new TV set. Solemn eulogies to Brezhnev were of necessity dominating the screens. Two days later, Brezhnev's funeral characterised the slurring old man's life with two interlinked incidents that could just have been a parody of his final years and those of the Soviet Union:

"When the coffin was lifted to be placed on the catafalque for the lying-in-state on 12 November, the bottom collapsed and Brezhnev's body fell through the hole. Within a couple of hours, a new metal-plated coffin was produced as replacement. It was this change that caused the slip which millions of Soviet viewers watched in amazement. The two funeral attendants who had been selected to lower the coffin slowly into the grave suddenly found that the coffin was too heavy for them. One of them could not keep hold of his rope and the coffin dropped. It hit the ground with the sound of an explosion, at the very moment that the first gun salutes shook the air."

Zhores A. Medvedev in Andropov <http://anet.net/~upstart/brezhnev.html>

So ended the final moments of the long Brezhnev era. The Soviet clock ran faster after Brezhnev's death, even if decadence outlived him for some time thereafter. Brezhnev's successor, Yuri Andropov, was said to be for reform. If this is true, he was an ailing reformer and no one will ever know since he died in February 1984. Following Andropov's brief interlude, during which he elevated Mikhail Gorbachev to full membership of the Politburo, came the even briefer rule of Konstantin Chernenko. Chernenko, who was said to have emerged from the Brezhnevite school of thought, seemed to be on the verge of

dying even as he acceded the Soviet throne. By March of 1985 Gorbachev came to power and the old Soviet order was drastically altered. In 1989 the Berlin Wall came down and the Iron Curtain was lifted. By 1991 the Soviet empire had finally collapsed.

It's ironic that some of the best days of my life were spent behind the Iron Curtain. Having discontinued my studies, I left the Soviet Union in June of 1983 when Andropov was still alive but hardly kicking. Since that last day I've never revisited the Soviet laboratory and I know I will never be able to. For four years I had been a participant observer inside this vast laboratory called CCCP and I had witnessed the last of the decadent Brezhnev scenes.

1992: The European experiment unfolds

It is incidental, but still significant, that just one year after the collapse of the Soviet empire, the future of the European empire was consolidated and preordained by the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. Maastricht was the treaty that established political goals over and above purely economic gains. Europeanists had dreamed of this political shift since before the establishment of the EEC's precursor in 1951, the European Coal and Steel Community. As the founder of the European Movement, Jean Monnet, said in April 1952: "The fusion [of economic functions] would compel nations to fuse their sovereignty into that of a single European State."

Forty years later this reality was unfolding. A euphoric Helmut Kohl, then German Chancellor, describes the event in April 1992:

"In Maastricht we laid the foundation- stone for the completion of the European Union. The European Union Treaty introduces a new and decisive stage in the process of European union, which within a few years will lead to the creation of what the founding fathers dreamed of after the last war: the United States of Europe."

Herr Kohl, like many others, keeps forgetting that unlike the States making up the 'melting-pot' American federation, the European States are not just States but nation-States rooted in distinctly diverse cultures, even if they fall within a general European cultural fold. Perhaps rather than the 'United States of Europe', the 'Union of European Nation States' would have captured the irony better and it would have sounded closer to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

European integrationists would strongly disagree, of course. They maintain that Europe's integration will be a 'different kind of union': a democratic union that will ensure "subsidiarity" and "shared sovereignty" between the diverse nation-States of Europe.

But there are wide-ranging economic and political factors that European unification must contend with, and these may be categorised into two interrelated factors. First, there is the clear propensity towards an immensely bureaucratic and centralised system that aims to hegemonise and regulate the (free?) market forces. This collectivisation drastically stifles national diversity and creativity in the production of economic wealth. Second, the current on-going process of centralisation of governance from the nation-States to supranational entities within the European Union may be described as an evolving modern empire that is to be ruled from Brussels.

There is a similarity within this broad categorisation when compared to the economic and political factors characterising the failed Soviet experiment. First, there was a collectivist ideology that centralised economic regulation (which was to lead to a state of communism wherein the workers' State was to be so abundantly productive that money and private property would have no longer been required). Second, there existed a union of so-called Republics which on paper gave ample self-regulatory freedoms to a number of nationalities, but which in truth was a centralised empire ruled from Moscow

just like Caesar had ruled from Rome.

In both cases there exists a process of collectivisation of nations and nationalities.

The birth of Empire: the collectivisation of nations

Unlike the Soviet Union, the European Union has had to start from the actual collectivisation of nation-States into one centralised monolith (a process the Soviets had found partially complete in the Tsarist Russian Empire). Once you collectivise the nation-States, then you can collectivise the actual nations: the peoples forming those societies and communities that had hitherto enjoyed an element of healthy self-rule and diversified self-determination within their own cultural rooting.

Unlike the Soviet Union, the European Union does not outrightly prohibit free enterprise and free speech. Instead, it stifles them with a multitude of financial regulations and so-called 'anti-terrorist' laws which are in and of themselves also prohibitions. Europe's own znakomiy economy has long existed, but the more laws and regulations are euro-concocted, the more shall this sub-economy flourish within the limits (and in effect) of criminalisation.

Today the euro-integrationists are telling us how wonderful "subsidiarity" and "shared sovereignty" are. But what do these terms mean? Perhaps: 'One European State for all European nations and all European nations for one European State'? Is this not the same spurious 'one-for-all-and-all-for-one philosophy' that the Soviet Union had professed?

This utopia may look good on paper and it sounds even better through the lips of demagogues, but in reality it collectivises whole nations into an artificial, economically hegemonised, 'synthetic' State — an empire. This hegemonic rule, no matter how democratic it may appear to be, is

predisposed towards the creation of voiceless minorities.

The birth of the European 'democratic' empire is now in its Constitutional phase. Indeed, the main issue on the agenda of the much flaunted, year-long 'Convention on the Future of Europe' is the drafting of a European Constitution. Unless cataclysmic changes dissolve the EU any time soon, this new empire will complete its embryonic stage and live its own life-course until, like the Soviet empire, and like all other empires before it, it will eventually end in decadence and ultimately collapse.

It's a future the 'good Europeans' might not wish to think about.

Kevin Ellul Bonici is co-editor of *European MONITOR* in Malta. Email: euobserver@onvol.net.