

Concluding remarks: Is there an alternative to Europe?

„If the European Union goes on like this, it will fall apart within the next five years, and it will collapse just as the Soviet Union. One must not take decisions that do not take into account local particularities, because this will radicalize societies. For example, I can understand the Albanians quite well. They turn to Europe to find work there. For us Gagauz it's the same. But we do have values we cannot negotiate.“

This comment by Mikhail Formuzal, the leader of the Gagauz autonomous region within the Republic of Moldova, astonished a group of students from Regensburg and Munich who visited Romania and Moldova in Mai 2014. But Formuzal's statement is anything but occasional. Instead, it leads to one of the most principal questions of contemporary Europe – namely, how attractive is the European Union today? Back in the 1990s, few people were ready to ask a question like this, since the breakdown of communism seemed to be the clearest possible sign that besides Western values, nothing was to persist – at least not in Europe. When Serb Orthodox intellectuals challenged this notion and declared the Serbian warfare in Bosnia and Croatia to be a heroic struggle against the New World Order, they were either declared madmen or laughed at, but hardly taken for serious.

Today, one would be more cautious with such an assessment. Mikhail Formuzal has the reputation of a Russophile, even a Putinist. In 2006 he was elected *Başkan*, i.e. president of the Gagauz autonomy in Moldova. Thus, he is a leader of a small nation with about 110.000 Gagauz living in Moldova, 60.000 in Ukraine, 18.000 in Russia and another estimated 100.000 shattered around the world as migrants. Small nations tend to depend on outside factors, and they promptly adapt to changes in the international framework. The basic change today, as it becomes clear from Formuzal's statement, is the emergence of an alternative – of which there is one now, and its name is Russia. Thus, Francis Fukuyama's idea of history ending in a total spread of Western civilization is – once again, and once and for all? – revealed as an illusion, and words such as „alternativlos“ (‘without alternative’, in the words of German chancellor Angela Merkel) no longer make sense when it comes to integration processes in Europe.

But is Russia a real alternative? Currently, both Russia and the West predict that the other will perish should he continue like this. If this is true, sooner or later the current alternatives would cease to exist, since at least one of them would have to change profoundly or disappear altogether. Since the *decay* argument stretches back to polemics between Byzantium and the

Western medieval states but has never really come true, we have some reason to assume that today, just as in former times, it is a propaganda feature which we do not need to take it all too serious.

In the embattled region we visited, the alternatives have moral as well as economic aspects. On the one hand, Mikhail Formuzal stresses conservative family values, which he misses in the West. Thus, a new core difference is being constructed, partly replacing the former ideological opposition of capitalism vs. socialism:

„We have our traditions and Christian values and we do not wish to lose them. (...) If my ten years old son is watching a woman with a beard [Conchita Wurst] on TV, I don't know how to explain this to him. What frightens us most is the aggressive propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations. This is not what we want to import from Europe. Instead, we prefer to adapt Europe's struggle against corruption, good roads, solid courts and freedom of the press.“

On the other hand, Formuzal is a thorough pragmatic when it comes to economic development. With Moldova's GNP per capita ranging at 3900\$, the country's economical data are close to those of Ghana in Western Africa. Average pensions range about 60\$ per month, poverty is much more visible in Gagauzia than in the neighboring Dobruja region of Romania and would be even more so without the remittances of Moldova's army of labor migrants. Formuzal is aware that under the given circumstances, economical soundness is the top criterion for most political decisions. In his view, the European Union does not offer Moldova an adequate alternative for her integration into (post-)Soviet structures. While Putin's Russia reconstructed basic Soviet mechanisms of economic exchange – i.e., privileged access to gas, oil, to the Russian labor and wine market in exchange for political loyalty – the European Union offers help in democratic institution building but according to Formuzal has little to offer in economic terms:

„Last year, Moldova has delivered 178 tons of apples to the European Union, but Russia has absorbed 150.000 tons. All our production notwithstanding, Poland exports apples to Moldova. We cannot compete with the Polish farmers who have access to EU subsidies. The EU supports the production of apples with 500 Euros per hectare – Moldova is unable to do so. (...) If I have to chose, as a politician, between making our households pay a gas bill of 470 Euros a month [at world market prices] or just 180 Euros through the Customs Union with Russia, I will prefer the second option. Any politician who cares for his state and its population would act like this. (...) The EU has abolished visa requirements for citizens of Moldova, but at the same time it denies them access to the labor market. The idea behind this is: ‚Visit us and spend your money here.‘ But do not have money. In contrast to that, Russia say: ‚Come here to work, earn something and send it back home.‘ (...) We are pragmatics: We want to work here, we want to have a market for our production, we seek for a certain standard of life, we want to survive as a people with its habits and values. (...) We are not looking for foes but for friends. Isn't this a truly European model?“

Thus, leaving aside the sensitive question of family values, Formuzal does not appear as a fundamental anti-Westerner criticizing the EU for its proclaimed principles. Rather he accuses Europe for not really sticking to its promise of fair exchange relations, at least not to outsiders knocking at its door.

Thinking in terms of alternatives is clearly frightening to a large part of the European elite, used to the triumphalist prospect of an ever-growing Western sphere of influence. Listening to Formuzal, one might find consolation in the idea that his type of thinking is typical only for those countries which have not yet entered the European Union but got stuck in the uncomfortable waiting room between Russia and the EU. But for all those happy ones who already have become members of the Union – shouldn't they be expected to stop asking questions like this once and forever? Or are they likely to follow Formuzal's pattern, enjoying growing anti-European support both from without the EU, and from 'partners' within such as Fidesz, Front National, PEGIDA and the like?

On our trip to Romania and Moldova, we indeed found some evidence that the EU framework can have a tempering influence – the Romanian Orthodox Church, for example, though by tradition clearly critical of the West, does not pose the value question in the same way as Formuzal does. Archbishop Casian, who heads the Lower Danube Diocese and resides in Galați on the Western side of the Romanian-Moldovan border, is an ardent advocate of the traditional family as Formuzal is. But Casian decouples this question from geopolitical aspects. Instead, he stresses that



A frontier or just a boundary? Border post Oancea between Galați (Romania) and Cahul (Moldova)

the Romanian Orthodox Church supports EU membership since this is the choice of the Romanian people, which the Church would never dare to ignore. And he counterbalances his conservative critique by positive aspects: „If the European Union stands up for human rights and economic progress, it is a good union.“ Compared to the well-known human rights statements by the Moscow Patriarchy who is also the mother church to most of Moldova's Orthodox citizens, the difference is obvious: While criticism of human rights *as such* has become a trade mark of the Russian Orthodox Church, Casian applies the Orthodox heritage

in a much more flexible way. As an (accidental?) result, both churches, the Romanian and the Russian, help creating different value platforms which support their respective governments' geopolitical orientations.

But still, the framework isn't all that matters, and any frame can be criticized from within. Vasile Dolghin, a school teacher in the Dobruja village of Sarichioi and a spokesman of Romania's East Slavonic Lipovan minority, puts it like this: „The European Union is good for the wallet but bad for the soul.“ Impressed by such a statement, our students asked Nuredin Amdi, the imam of the Mosque in nearby Tulcea, a Tatar by nationality, what he thought about this – and he consented without hesitation. Since by general human standards the soul is considered far more important than the wallet, the conclusion seems clear: At least these two elderly minority spokespersons feel uncomfortable with a European Union which stresses markets, prices, laws and procedures far more than moral values in the narrow sense. Their scepticism might increase further once the wallet goes empty. Sure, neither Dolghin nor Amdi are in a position to make the big choices which Formuzal is talking about – but some alternative is still around. In 2006, Russia officially recognized the Lipovans as a part of the Russian diaspora. The Lipovans, who came to then-Ottoman Dobruja in the 17th-18th century as Old Believers and Don Cossacks unhappy with oppression in czarist Russia, consider themselves a part of the Russian people. As a diaspora community, they are entitled to official Russian aid such as textbooks or school trips to Russia. The most visible trace of Russian support is probably a huge flat screen TV for Sarichioi's Lipovan cultural center. During our visit, it broadcasted Moscow's state TV version on fights in Doneck, eastern Ukraine. The Dobruja Muslims can turn to support for Turkey which maintains a consulate in Constanța and recognizes the importance of Dobruja for the Ottoman historical heritage – as underlined symbolically by Erdoğan's visit to the region in 2007.

For sure, the impact and importance of external support should not be overestimated – as a pre-stage of irredentism or anything close to that. Both Dolghin and Amdi were keen to stress Romanian tolerance towards minorities, a fact that wondered some of our students who had deeply internalized that minorities in Southeastern Europe are to be seen as unhappy and suppressed. One has to keep in mind that Romanian nation builders never treated all minorities equally but singled out some among them as key threats to national unity. That role was traditionally ascribed to Jews and Magyars, while Muslims or Lipovans were left aside as less problematic. The latter, though proud of their Russian decent and to some degree

influenced by Russian state media, have a developed sense of distinctiveness not only towards the Romanian majority but also towards the „normal“ Russians – or as Vasile Dolghin put it:

„After 1945 we were invited to re-settle in the Soviet Union, but thankfully renounced that offer – since in the USSR we would have assimilated within two generations, whereas in the Danube Delta we have been able to uphold our traditions for more than 300 years!“

Anyway, alternatives are back in. A deterritorialized one, global islamism, has been on the scene for quite a while. Another, territorial-statebound alternative, has emerged with the Eurasian Union. Some of the alternatives are homegrown European, fueled by a deep popular mistrust in the existing political order. They reflect the notion of a different ‘true’ Europe, i.e. the ‘return’ to an *Abendland* of nations, embracing conservative and Christian values. By the way: All established views depicting Orthodoxy as being outside this ‘traditional West’ notwithstanding, contemporary Orthodox intellectuals and hierarchs express clear sympathies with this ‘catholic’ construction of European identity, at least when the alternative is a Europe of markets and sexual minorities’ rights.

Thus, alternatives are popping up all over the continent – be they leftist as Syriza in Greece or rightist as the Front National in France. This all but an accidental process: Viktor Orbán’s anti-liberal course would have been impossible without the impoverishment caused by the financial crisis, without the scandals of the Gyurcsány government. Silvio Berlusconi could hardly have succeeded in deeply undermining Italy’s rule of law if the Democrazia Cristiana had not drowned in its own corruption in the early 1990s. In many EU states, the established system is still working, since here alternatives emerge within the existing political order, basically as political parties of the opposition. But who guarantees that it will always remain within this framework?

Hopefully, the European Union will not perish as quickly as Formuzal predicts it. But in order to grow successfully, it will have to consider value differences within the Union more carefully and to take regional concerns for serious. This is especially true for Southeastern Europe, where the European framework is quite shaky, and where alternatives are not so unlikely to appear.

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