



**Slavenka Drakulic**

## Who's afraid of Europe?

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Slavenka Drakulic, a committed European, expresses doubts in the continuing momentum of European integration amidst rising anxieties about a loss of national identity. Mirrored in the success of right-wing and populist parties across Europe and concerns being voiced in the post-communist countries queuing for "entry" as well, this anxiety, however, focuses on a cultural construct, the author argues. To make the project Europe work, a new kind of imagined community will need to be created – is Europe ready for that?

I live in Sweden, Croatia and Austria. Europe is my home. I remember when, a couple of years ago, the checkpoint at the border crossing between Austria and Italy was abandoned and we were passing the border near Klagenfurt, barely believing that we were not going to be stopped by the police. But there was no police, only empty booths. What a great feeling of relief it was! Especially because I remembered the strange sensation when I crossed the newly erected border post between Slovenia and Croatia in 1991 for the first time. Being an Eastern European, I also know how it feels standing in line at the airport checkpoint that says "non-EU citizens", or sometimes just bluntly "Others".

Living on both sides of real and imagined European borders and crossing them back and forth all the time, I have to say that only a year ago I believed in the project of constructing a united Europe much more than I do today. But of course, that was before the elections in Austria, in Norway and Switzerland or in the city of Antwerp, before the referendum on the Euro in Denmark – or incidents such as the one in Malaga where a mob, mobilized by a neo-Nazi web site, chased Moroccan workers for three whole days. The list of disturbing events all over Europe is much longer. It is as if there is suddenly a pattern of a different Europe emerging in front of my eyes, and when I look at it, it gives me goosebumps. It is not a *deja vu* because I belong to a generation that did not experience fascism, but I can see growing xenophobia, nationalism and racism everywhere. Moreover, because of where I come from, I can tell when the fear of the Other becomes something one must start to take into account. And I just wonder if these are isolated incidents or are perhaps already signs that the project of European integration is in danger of losing its momentum?

I was born after WW II and grew up on a sleepy continent divided by the "iron curtain", dwelling in the shadow of a possible nuclear war. As school kids, we would practice what we had to do in the case of such an attack. We learned to recognize its characteristics by heart: first a mushroom cloud would appear on the horizon, followed by a blast of heat and ashes. You should hide behind any barrier, pull the gas mask over your face and under no circumstances drink water (the bit with the water was particularly strongly impressed upon us and I always wondered why). Although only children, we understood that these preparations would give us little protection if such a horror as described in our

textbooks would happen. Still, we practiced dutifully. It did not help us. When the next war, the war in the Balkans erupted much later, we were taken by surprise. Little did we know in the late fifties that the war we would witness would be a local one, limited and of small intensity – the war that would catch us totally unprepared.

My generation grew up with the idea that such a war, with genocide, concentration camps and forced resettlement of entire populations is simply impossible after WWII. Europe had learned its lesson, the history teachers told us, and such horrors could not take place any longer. Today, after the war in my country and in Bosnia and Kosovo, I no longer believe that Europe has learned that lesson. But perhaps I am wrong. After all the last war happened not quite in Europe, but in the Balkans. Are the Balkans Europe? Today it seems so, although tomorrow it could be decided differently. But if this is so, what then is Europe and where does it end?

Back then, in my school days, even that was somehow clearer. Europe was where the Soviet Union was not. The big political changes during the last ten years blurred that childish certainty. The Europe of today is no longer a question of geopolitics and defined borders to the East, not even of economic unity – but more of attitudes, definitions, institutions, of a certain mental *landscape*. There is no longer any "iron curtain" to make definitions easier. During the last ten years the peoples of Europe witnessed the collapse of communism and the disappearance of the common enemy, the speeding up of the integration process within the EU, its planned enlargement into the East as well as the war in the Balkans. At the same time the globalization process seems to engulf the entire world. But these changes happened too fast for people to comprehend them, to grasp them fully. They reacted as people always react to the unknown, with a feeling of uncertainty and fear. While the known world is dissolving in front of their eyes, the new one that is taking shape is not yet comprehensive. What is Europe really and how far can it spread eastwards whilst still remaining Europe? Is Turkey Europe? In that case, what about Russia?

These are not abstract questions. The bottom line here is how these changes will influence the life of Europeans, their work, income, education, language and so on. More and more people have the feeling of losing the possibility to control their own lives. A feeling of anxiety undermines their confidence in the world around them and their sense of certainty. This anxiety is vague, to be sure. But although it is not entirely identified or specified, often not even recognized as such, it is out there, palpable, measurable in opinion polls, referendums, election results, articulated as doubts about the necessity of a common currency, of integration and enlargement, or about free circulation of a working force. That is to say, as vague as it is, this anxiety is already having effects on the political life of some countries and might perhaps soon bring substantial changes to the political landscape of Europe.

The mechanism of exploiting fear is simple and well known. As an individual, you may feel lost and confused, swept away by the speed and magnitude of historical events. Suddenly, there is somebody offering you shelter, a feeling of belonging, a guarantee of security. We are of the same blood, we belong to the same territory, our people first, so goes the rhetoric. To scared ears it is soothing to hear old-fashion words like *blood, soil, territory, us, them*. Hearing that, you feel stronger, you are no longer alone, confronted with the Others – with too many immigrants, Muslims, Turks, refugees, Africans, asylum seekers, Gypsies or too much big bureaucracy that wants to rule your

life from Brussels. Once you have found the pleasure of belonging, Others don't frighten you any longer. From the fear of the unknown to the creation of the "known" enemy, it sometimes takes only a small step. It doesn't need much more than that vague sense of anxiety, plus a political leader who will know how to exploit it. The media will do the rest.

It looks as if the new, darker picture of Europe started to surface with the victory of the Freedom Party and Jörg Haider in Austria a year ago. The truth, however, is that his electoral success only made the anxiety more visible. Haider has been the most successful, but others such as Umberto Bossi, Christoph Blocher, Karl Hagen, Edmund Stoiber, Filip Dewinter, Pia Kjersgaard or Jean-Marie LePenn are catching up as well. Recently, the ultra-nationalist Flemish Block party in Belgium celebrated the biggest victory for the extreme right in Europe ever since the Freedom Party entered the Austrian coalition government. It got 10% of the votes in general elections. In Antwerp it has increased its votes from 18% to 33% over the past twelve years by exploiting xenophobic sentiments. Their excited young leader, Filip Dewinter, confessed that "Even I did not dare to dream this." The Northern League in Italy got 10% in the 1996 general elections, another success based on xenophobic immigrant politics. The Danish People's Party got 18% in the last polls thanks to very aggressive xenophobic propaganda. Pia Kjersgaard openly says that immigrants, especially Muslims, are threatening the safety of families and the Christian values of genuine Danes, "their very Danishness", as she expressed it. She went as far as comparing cultural pluralism to the Holocaust. Therefore, the recent referendum rejecting the Euro in Denmark did not come as a big surprise. The Front National in France is not as strong as it was, but is still there with its 15% of voters. On the other hand, the German Prime Minister Gerhard Schröder suffered a defeat in opinion polls last spring after having suggested to "import" 10.000 computer experts, mostly from India. Although it has been estimated that Germany needs some 70.000 computer experts to catch up with the international developments in the field of information technology, 56% of the population opposed this plan. In another poll only 4% of the Germans expressed enthusiasm for the free circulation of the working force within the EU. The rise in popularity of Norway's Progress Party is part of the same tendency of closing borders and building new walls. So is Blocher with the Swiss People's Party, which jumped to 22,6% in the federal elections last October (from 14,95% in 1995). Another Swiss case is also very telling: voters in Emmen, an industrial suburb of Luzern, used the ballot box to reject citizenship applications from foreigners. Only four Italian families were accepted. Blocher is now proposing a popular vote on citizenship as a model for the entire country. "People are feeling insecure in a very new globalized world and have feeling that being isolated makes them more secure", explained an official from the Swiss foreigners commission.

Even this very superficial overview indicates the growing success of ultra right wing parties all over Europe. What emerges is not necessarily a pattern of brown and black shirts again – but a new pattern of the rising anxiety of people. The right wing parties, whipping up people's fear with populist rhetoric then use this anxiety. However, the truth of the matter is that the right wing parties are the only ones to have their fingers on the people's pulses, to recognize that feeling of anxiety. Of course they use it for their own purpose – to come to power. But it would not be right to say that the anxiety is produced or invented by these parties. To say that would mean to dismiss the anxiety in the easiest way. These parties, with the generous help of the media, only give that vague feeling of dissatisfaction shape. Directing it towards xenophobia is easy, there are Others in every society. As long as this xenophobia expresses

itself on the level of polemics about this or that law proposal regarding citizenship for immigrants (like in Germany in 1998) one can say that it is not alarming. But it is alarming that an opinion poll published in Der Spiegel this summer shows that the majority of Germans agrees with some opinions of the extreme right, especially regarding immigrants. And it is alarming that this kind of rhetoric has produced concrete political results in elections – especially during the last year. After that, it is hard to dismiss it, and arrogant to consider it just a marginal phenomenon.

Anxiety is sweeping over post–communist Europe as well. The enthusiasm of the first years after the fall of communism has been replaced with disappointment. Once more a united Europe looks distant, there are now walls different from the Berlin wall, conditions for joining the EU are hard to meet and the date is pushed further into the future. This opens up room for nationalists and anti–Europeans who argue that the newly won sovereignty should not be given up so easily. They spread fear of multinational companies that will buy their country, of the Americanization of their culture, of globalization. It is not surprising when somebody like Slobodan Milosevic uses this kind of language. Yet, democrats like Vaclav Klaus, the former Czech Prime Minister, are speaking out against the EU as well: "Europe is now fundamentally challenging the nation state, particularly its sovereignty:" he said, speaking in Austria this June. He is right – but this is the very idea of an integrated Europe. Klaus, too, speaks of assimilation and the loss of national identity: "We don't want to become Euroczechs!" The Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is also skeptical about the EU, not to mention the Slovak populist Vladimir Meciar or the Hungarian nationalist and anti–semitic Istvan Csurka. Post–communist Eastern Europe is far away from a united Europe in another sense as well: 67% of the Poles, for example, believe that when their country joins the EU they will become second class citizens.

Success of right–wing nationalist, xenophobic and anti–European parties and populist leaders seems to be a danger in both Western and Eastern Europe. By spreading their influence even further through the exploitation of anxiety and fears that no one else wants to address, they can really undermine the integration process. Their leaders tell people that they will lose their national sovereignty, their culture, their language, etc. Their national, cultural and social identity is in jeopardy. Not only will foreigners take all their jobs, but also – and this seems more important – the society itself will be transformed beyond recognition. In the language of the right wing, a multicultural society means cultural disintegration. This does sound threatening to people. It is not important if we prefer to call this political egocentrism, regional nationalism or new regionalism, the result is the same everywhere: homogenization, mobilization of defensive mechanisms and isolationist politics.

In research done in March (at the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach) about the fear of losing their identity in a united Europe, over 50% of Germans said that yes, they thought a German identity will be lost – compared to 35% in 1994. But what is the identity they would like to protect so much? Usually one is not often in a position to ask this question because there is no need to do so until this identity is in some way challenged or threatened. From the point of view of an individual, national identity looks like something given and definite, something as "natural" as the color of the eyes. Culture, history, language, myth, memory, mentality, values, habits, food... All this is part of a national identity, and a national identity strongly dominates our sense of personal identity. Recently, in the small French town of Millau a man was imprisoned for destroying a local McDonald's restaurant. But the process

turned into a manifestation of support for Jose Bove. He became a national hero because he had managed to articulate the French fear of American domination. This time people protested against the globalization of taste and the French are against McDonalds fast food just as they are defending their right to make cheese out of non-pasteurized milk. Anything else would threaten their national identity. You cannot ask the Germans to stop drinking their beer or the Dutch not to grow tulips. When they were negotiating their joining the EU, the Swedes were particularly keen to make sure that chewing tobacco would not be forbidden for them – it is a matter of their national identity.

On the other hand, in newly established states like Croatia for example, one could actually observe how a national identity is being constructed and symbols of national identity are being invented – mostly out of myths and the re-interpretation of history. It only proves what modern anthropology argues, that national identities do not represent a set of eternal, ready-made cultural, historical or social characteristics. In other words, what we believe to be a fundamental support for an individual is no more than a cultural construct – that is, invented, not "natural". But the archaic populist rhetoric of Franjo Tudjman didn't want to know that identity is always constructed in relation to the Others, it only wanted to exclude these Others, that is Serbs. Yet, on the examples of emigrants, mixed marriages and people who live close to borders, anthropologists are proving that it is possible to identify with more than one nation and one culture.

When I met a Turkish *Gastarbeiter* on a train in Germany, he complained that "When I am in Germany, they consider me a Turk, but when I visit Turkey, they don't take me as one of them, they consider me a foreigner, a German. I always feel that I have to choose between the two, and I don't like that." "Well, how do you feel, what do you think you are?" I asked him. He answered, "I am both." He himself did not have a problem with his identity – others did. Indeed, in a culture of nationalism, identity is made up of borders, territory and blood and one is forced to choose one nation. But forcing people to choose sometimes brings unexpected results. Some years ago, two small villages in Istria were caught in a dispute between two newly founded states, Croatia and Slovenia. When Slovene journalists asked people there if they were they Slovenes, they answered positively. But when Croatian journalists asked them if they were Croats, they also answered positively. This, of course, was confusing and journalists sought an explanation. Finally somebody told them that "either/or" simply is the wrong question to put to them. They feel strongly about their identity, but they don't define it in national, but in regional terms, they are Istrians. Indeed, in a 1991 census about 20% of people in that region declared themselves Istrians; according to the regulations, they should have declared themselves as "others". This was a kind of an anti-nationalist demonstration against Franjo Tudjman's government and the message was clear: for Istrians, their nationality and their identity do not necessarily overlap. Nation, as a political category, is only one aspect of their identity. For them the transnational regional identity was stronger than the national one. Istrians were not willing to choose one nationality over the other, but rather experience their identity as a sum of the cultural, national, political etc. identities represented in their region. "The EU will only achieve a solid basis of legitimacy when Europeans perceive a European political identity. This does not imply that they would no longer feel themselves to be Swedes, Finns, Frenchmen, Portuguese, Czechs, Poles or Hungarians, but that the sense of a common European destiny had been added to these identities." writes Ingmar Karlsson.

I recall the earlier census of 1981 in Yugoslavia when almost 10% of the population declared themselves Yugoslavs. Further analysis demonstrated that this was the voice of the post-war generation, the young urban population. Was this the beginning of the Yugoslav nation? I don't think so. I think people were still very much aware of their ethnic identities. In my experience, this was rather the case of simply adding one identity to another, a common Yugoslav identity had been added to a Serbian, a Croatian, or a Bosnian one.

If nations are not eternal and national and personal identities are constructed, then they can be re-constructed as well. Another kind of imagined community can be created. Perhaps this is the right time to think about a new paradigm of understanding identity in order to balance the growing anxiety in Europe. Instead of using cultural exclusion mechanisms, is it possible to create identities by summing up ethnic, regional, national, transnational elements of identity? If identity can be reconstructed in terms of a multiple identity, is this a way to establish a European identity? Not as a standardized and globalized community, but as a non-hierarchical community of diverse cultures. People would feel that they belong to a specific culture but not to a state – just like the Istrians. Can transregionalism help to overcome the anxiety people feel towards integration?

Because of the way I live, a united but diverse Europe is a possibility that enriches me and gives me more freedom. But in order to create such a Europe, people need to be convinced that they, too, are gaining, not losing something. We are at the point when losing seems more obvious, when fear overtakes hope facing our future. Who is afraid of Europe? Bronislaw Geremek, the former Polish foreign minister already answered that question beautifully when he said, "Europe is afraid of itself!"

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