



Slavenka Drakulic

Bathroom tales

How we mistook normality for paradise

The dearth of toilet paper may not have been the sole reason for the collapse of communism, but it's an apt metaphor for a regime unable to fulfil its subjects' basic needs. Although Slavenka Drakulic's bathroom is better stocked these days, she's still prone to doubt: was the normality she and her fellow eastern Europeans longed for just another false paradise?



The Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk, in his essay "Dziennik okretowy", describes how, while in his bathroom, he finally understands that he is in Europe:

Recently, while washing my clothes, I realized — as if suddenly enlightened — that I am a citizen of central Europe. Maybe it was *Omo* washing powder, maybe *Ariel* or something else packed in a colourful box. A distant, partly mythical civilization — was it *Procter&Gamble*, or *Henkel*, or *Lever*? — addressed me in my own language. Not only that, it also addressed the other inhabitants of central Europe in local languages: *Praci prostriedok pre farbeny bielizen. Fekezett habzadzu mosopor szines ruhakra. Detergent pentru rufe colorate. Prasak za pranje rublja u boji...* While putting my clothes into a washing machine and carefully measuring out *Ariel* (or maybe *Omo*), I felt that my existence was recognized in a deep and meaningful way. I took a look at other products in my bathroom: toothpastes, deodorants, cleaning liquids were all proclaiming my central European resurrection. It felt like this was a recognition of independence and the establishing of diplomatic relations at the same time. *Skladujte mimo dosah deti.*¹

I, too, can vouch for that feeling of belonging to Europe when I take a look at my own bathroom (which is also a toilet), even though Croatia is not yet a member of the EU. Still, we will become members in a short while, in exactly three years, as our politicians like to tell us. That is, we're almost there — as I can see on detergent boxes of both *Ariel* and *Omo*. It looks promising because I, too, am addressed in my local language. And just like Stasiuk, I marvel at the fact that my language is recognized, or at least, that the market recognizes Croatia. After all, does the market not come before politics? Some say that it decides politics. *Procter&Gamble* now have a factory in the Czech Republic and soon they will probably have one in Croatia. It will provide jobs to at least

some of our 17% unemployed (that's the unofficial number — officially we have 11%). I continue to marvel about the "brighter future" or about paradise *in spe*. But then, looking at the detergent box, I notice that there's a difference between those who are in the EU and those of us who aren't: though we have information printed on the box in our language, the instructions for use are printed on a sticker and glued to it! No, we aren't there yet; I see that Stasiuk is a step ahead of me.

Unlike Stasiuk, I'm a woman. Therefore, my bathroom contains more than a detergent, but all sorts of creams and shower gels, oils, and hair products. And I'm not ashamed to admit that at all. On the contrary, I waited a long time to see these *Lancôme* and *Helena Rubinstein*, those *Estée Lauder* and *Givenchy* and *Chanel* and *Dior* products right there, on my shelves. Or better said, I waited to be able to buy them in shops in Zagreb, instead of buying them in Graz or Trieste or some other western city I happened to visit. They are more expensive in Zagreb, but that's the price I'm prepared to pay to have them here, at hand. Because, of course, like most women, I believe that a skin-smoothing massage exfoliator, a "moist, luscious cream, enriched with hyper-oxygenated plant oil", will not only leave my skin as silky-soft as a baby's, "but will produce" — and this is even more important — "a feeling of bodily harmony and an immediate sense of wellbeing". In short, it promises to work a miracle. Like most women in the East or in the West, I believe in these kinds of miracles. So much so, that I throw away empty jars of fancy products with a heavy heart. From time to time a suspicion overcomes me, and I ask myself all sorts of normal, but superfluous questions, such as: Why do I need all these cosmetics? (I don't, nobody does.) Why does every part of my body need another cream? (It doesn't.) But that's only in certain moments of weakness, when my belief in cosmetics, the market, advertising, capitalism, the West, democracy, human rights, etc., undergoes a crisis — something every religious person will understand. When I don't question the idiocy of spending money on these useless trivia, I enjoy using them.

Actually, I enjoy the look of my bathroom today because I'm old enough to remember the bathroom of my parent's apartment in the early fifties, when *Plavi radion* washing powder was the only one that existed. Or an even earlier bathroom with no washing powder whatsoever, just a bar of *Jelen* soap. I also remember that we had two kinds of *eau de cologne* which my mother would buy in a pharmacy, going there with her own bottle. The pharmacist, an elderly, serious man who produced it himself, would pour it for her while I inhaled the magic smell. The one my mother preferred was called *Black Cat*. There were so few cosmetics or even hygiene products during my childhood that the brand name of the only toothpaste available, which came in two tastes, strawberry and mint, was referred to simply as "the toothpaste". That is, the product itself was the brand, something unimaginable today. What else was in that bathroom? A charcoal eyeliner, which, I guess, ancient Egyptians were already using, a *Dream Skin* facial cream, and my father's shaving soap. Once or twice we received a package from abroad; in it were a few soap bars named *Lux*, wrapped in a beautiful paper with small photos of movie stars. Oh, how soft it felt — leaving, indeed, my skin "baby-soft" and my "body in harmony, more than any other cream today". I could also ask myself what was not in that bathroom. I remember with distinct clarity, but also with embarrassment, that sanitary pads were not there. They couldn't be bought. They did not exist as a product.

Nowadays, what I'm especially glad to have — and Stasiuk doesn't mention this product at all — is my stack of fine toilet paper. Rolls and rolls of it, I still

hamster them as if they are going to disappear from the supermarket shelf at any moment, as they use to do. Old habits die hard! It's soft, very soft, and comes in various pastel colours such as light blue, pink, and orange; some come with a floral pattern, one has small people skiing (for use in winter, I suppose), and another has funny animals to encourage children to use it. In the supermarket across the street, I recently bought the latest hit, a lightly perfumed toilet paper from Italy. But I decided that it was too much, even for a collector. Besides, its scent clashes with the toilet-cleaning tablet, the air-freshener, the scent of the softener...

Does anybody in eastern Europe today remember that toilet paper was a luxury not so long ago? I guess my generation is the last to do so, and when we are gone it will be entirely forgotten. People born after 1985 will say in bewilderment: There was no toilet paper? But that's impossible! How could you live without it? Indeed, how could we?

The role of toilet paper in the downfall of communism is quite a particular one. I don't mean the fine toilet paper like the one I now have in my bathroom, what I mean is any toilet paper, any at all. For me, the lack of this product became a symbol of the changes that our communist society had gone through during the last two decades — a clear indication that communism, as a political and economic system, did not function. A system that could not recognize and provide for the basic needs of people, ranging from toilet paper all the way to human rights, was bound to collapse. Although, in retrospect, that was obvious, nobody dared to expect it would happen so soon.

My interest in bathrooms and toilets of eastern Europe dates way back. In the spring of 1990, I visited Bucharest and the villa in which the Ceausescu family used to live. Later, I described that visit in a story called, "In Zoe's Bathroom"²:

I peed in her pink toilet, I washed my hands in her pink washbasin and touched up my make-up in a mirror above it. For a moment, I even considered taking a bath in her bathtub — pink, of course. Perhaps that was what every Romanian woman wanted to do, to enjoy the privilege of the Ceausescu princess's bathroom on the first floor of the villa that used to be the family residence in Spring Street in Bucharest [...] Zoe's bathroom is not luxurious at all, but rather pathetic in its attempt to be luxurious. It is an ordinary, if spacious, bathroom of the sort you might see in middle-class family homes in the West. But when Zoe lived here, her bathroom was a statement of ultimate luxury, primarily because it functioned and was equipped with hot water, soap and toilet paper. It was the exception in Romania, which marked it as luxury.

If this was a dream of ordinary people, their reality was quite different:

I visited a friend living in a skyscraper in Bucharest. His little apartment does boast a bathtub, but often there is no water with which to fill it. Water, as well as electricity, often goes off. If you visited any state-owned or privately run restaurant — or any public toilet in the city — you would have the feeling that you had entered an underground world where civilized life had ceased to exist. This might well be one of the first things a newcomer notices upon arrival in this country: first the smell,

then the look of its toilets. The famous restaurant *Carul cu Bere* in the heart of Bucharest, housed in a beautiful nineteenth-century building they say was once a church, is no exception to this rule. Wooden carvings, ornaments on the walls and the whole atmosphere of a classical *Bierstube* is preserved and the food is good, but the impression of quality is immediately distorted if you take the risky decision to go to the toilet. Closing the door behind you, you begin to choke on the sharp stench of urine as you desperately try to find a dry patch on the flooded floor. Needless to say, there is no seat on the toilet, but by the time you visit that famous restaurant, you will already know that such thing is not to be expected. And then you have to pull a dirty piece of rope in order to splash the water. Soap is nowhere to be seen and toilet paper seems to be a completely unknown thing. There is not a single public toilet in Bucharest where you would find it [...] In Zoe's bathroom, I understood that a civilized democratic society has a very slim chance of immediately taking root in countries where a normal, clean bathroom with running hot water, toilet paper and soap was a luxury reserved for dictators.

Now, almost two decades have passed between my story about Zoe's bathroom and Stasiuk's story about his own. In the meantime, huge historical changes have taken place in that part of Europe, such as the collapse of communism, the introduction of democracy and a free-market economy, and the joining of the EU for many countries, to mention just a few. What is the price that we had to pay to have a normal bathroom — to live a normal life — and what, in this context, is "normal" anyway? What happened to us between Zoe and Stasiuk?

If I continue with the kind of metaphors that I have tried to introduce here, such as "bathroom" and "toilet paper", we can safely assume that it was our dream to have Zoe's bathroom. Perhaps not with her golden taps or pink tiles, just an ordinary one with an abundance of warm water and toilet paper. Because in former times, even a normal bathroom was a luxury, reserved only for the members of the *nomenklatura* (or, as my former countryman Milovan Djilas once put it, the new class).

I am sure you've noticed that I've been using the first person plural a lot. Indeed, this pronoun indicating the plural, a collective, is a key to understanding many things connected with former communist countries and people's behaviour there, as well as our dreams and expectations. But who is this "we", which — every time I use it — sounds like some mythical entity, some non-existent collective body, a ghost?

No, it's not a ghost. To me, who grew up in a so-called communist (or socialist) country myself — the one that wasn't as miserable as those in the Soviet bloc, but became much more miserable later on, as all the others were on their way out of it (Yugoslavia was falling to pieces in a bloody war) — to me, this "we" is neither a mere figure of speech nor an abstraction. It is a key word. It is the summary of my experience during my former life. I use it on purpose, just like comrade Tito, comrade Ceausescu, or any other important comrade did when addressing the people — although for a completely different purpose. To me, it reveals the collective spirit in we grew up, in times when citizens were treated like a single body. At school and at work, in public life and in politics, people did not exist in any other grammatical form. Every exposure of an "I" was punished because, it goes without saying, individualism

starts by opposing collectivism.

Therefore, I use this pronoun to indicate our common denominator, the very similar experience people had while living under communism. The consequences of the political use of this form of grammar were devastating, and still are. We still see ourselves as a group, as a nation, sometimes even as a tribe. Not yet as individuals. It's hard to start to act as an "I" because with our background, it's hard to believe that an individual opinion, initiative, or vote could make a difference. To hide behind "we" is still safer. Besides, to be an individual means to be individually responsible, and that also requires learning. That is, time.

It's not only our Communist past that still imprisons us in the collective pronoun, but also our dream to get out of that prison. We nurtured a collective dream of escaping from everyday life. We dreamt about a different normality. But what kind?

The short answer would be that we expected nothing less than paradise. Why paradise? And how could anybody's normality turn into paradise? Simply because, compared with what we had — or rather, *didn't* have — what the others (meaning western Europeans) *had* was in such abundance that it seemed to us exactly like paradise.

The Communist bloc was not as solid as it pretended to be. Thanks to glimpses of life on the other side, thanks to — often smuggled — films, magazines, and TV advertising, as well as small things such as fine chocolate and perfumes, underwear, cosmetics, toys and music — and a soft and fluffy toilet paper that I myself used to bring to a friend in Warsaw — our belief in a consumer's paradise easily replaced the official communist faith.

In such a situation, any "subtle" argument about differences between communism and capitalism, about the fact that under communism most people were equally poor while under capitalism they were not equally rich, played no role, at least not then.

That's how the big confusion occurred: the western European normality that seemed so beautiful, but so unattainable, was mistaken for paradise itself, even if we did not call it paradise, but simply Europe. Just like Zoe's bathroom — the bathroom equally desirable and equally unattainable for an ordinary Romanian.

But there was something else that made it easy for us to believe in paradise: the fact that life under communism was also based on a belief in a kind of paradise. That made it easy for one religion to be replaced with another.

In the communist ideology, if not in its practice, biblical paradise was replaced by the belief in a "brighter future", i.e. in the classless, egalitarian society in which, according to Marx, "everyone will work according to his abilities and receive according to his needs". True, the idea was that the realization of such a society would happen in this world rather than in the other, but that appeared to be just a nuance, especially in the view that the "brighter future" never really had a chance and thus remained as fictitious as the Christian paradise.

However, just like in any other religious system, we were trained to believe. That belief created a certain kind of mentality, one that is not so easy to get rid of, even if circumstances have changed dramatically in the meantime. It seems

to be difficult even for the generation now in their thirties. We were and still are used to thinking of, experiencing, and reacting to our reality in these religious and collective ways.

The question is, of course, what we got instead of the normality that we confused for paradise?

The normality that eastern European countries faced after the collapse of communism and, later, after entering the EU, was something rather different than what they had expected. The change from a totalitarian political system into a democratic one, from a planned economy into (wild) capitalism, did not automatically create a better life for all. The new experience of freedom was accompanied by a new kind of poverty and insecurity. As time went by, we started to realize that there's another side to normality (to paradise, to Europe): a growing gap between rich and poor, high unemployment, corruption at all levels, to name just a few.

Moreover, there's no relief, because there's no end to the suffering; the fact that what is paradise for one, is hell for many more, simply hurts — also because it is unjust. It is easy to forget that egalitarianism was perhaps the most appealing part of the communist religion.

In terms of my metaphor, I would even go so far as to claim that we not only dreamed about Zoe's bathroom, but were also made to believe that all of us had a right to it. If we were poisoned by the belief in the egalitarian paradise of communism, our post-communist politicians, in their promises, went almost as far in order to poison us again.

Soon, not only did our old dreams collapse, but most of the new promises failed us too. No efficient defence mechanisms were created, neither psychologically nor materially. The old social welfare net, feeble as it was, disappeared along with the old system. There were no worker's unions to protect our rights, no welfare state, no good and decent laws that were respected, no social network that would help — and no clear awareness about the need for it all, or not yet.

Many of us, confronted with such immense changes, deceived and disappointed in our new circumstances — the normality we longed for — started to feel like victims. Anxiety and insecurity were quickly identified by some political leaders as the "crisis of national identity". Insecurity breeds fear — and fear, in return, usually means closing up, defending what you have, or think that you have and haven't yet lost.

However, "nation" and "religion" were still there for us — in fact, more than ever. Frustrated and bitter, lonely and afraid, many took refuge in the lap of the Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim or any other religious haven. Many went for the populist rhetoric of nationalist leaders who had little to offer other than someone or something to blame: globalization, hedonism, decadence, capitalism, corruption, democracy, old communists, new oligarchs, the West, Jews, Gypsies... it didn't really matter who or what.

The fact that some did get Zoe's bathroom, but many more did not, became a problem. One could claim that it is one of the sources of all the Kaczynskis, Slotas, and Orbáns of today.

Was normality (I mean paradise, Europe) as we imagined and desired it, simply a mistake? Yes and no. We are learning the hard way that such normality — that is, a comfortable life — doesn't come automatically, and above all, doesn't come cheap.

Now we are experiencing that normality has another dimension, a tedious, small-scale struggle that each of us faces. Far from pink toilets, the colour of normality is grey. This is bad news. And there is no end to the struggle, be it for Zoe's bathroom, for justice, for more freedom — or against corruption, manipulation, or fear. The good news, however, is there is a new chance of winning the struggle. It's time to understand that it's up to each of us individually to take it up. We can't blame anybody any longer, for the simple reason that each person can make a change. Or, at least, can try to.



This article is based on the closing address at the 20th European Meeting of Cultural Journals in Sibiu from 21 to 24 September 2007.

¹ Andrzej Stasiuk, *Dziennik okretowy, Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej srodkowa*, Wolowiec 2000.

² Slavenka Drakulic, *Café Europa — Life After Communism*, 1996

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