

## **“Who Do You Love The Most?”**

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*Translated from the Romanian by Adrian Sangeorzan.*

I imagine that most people, in their early childhood, had to face a question which gives the full measure of adult imbecility: “Who do you love the most? Your mother or your father?” The question would come from guests, boring aunts, or unctuous uncles. It might even come from the parents themselves, eager to prove the affective judgment of their offsprings. The question always had the same answer: “I love both of them.” This answer did not mean that you did not consider measuring things with precision, or even that you did not have some preference. You just wanted to pass this embarrassing dilemma honorably and be absolved to return to your games or to your plate with candies in it.

“Whose side are you on? On the European Union side, or on the side of the United States?” So we have started all over again. In order not to offend anybody, the countries of Eastern Europe have to rediscover the innocent hypocrisy of childhood. Our aunts and uncles from Brussels and Washington D.C., nicely perfumed and bending over us, tenderly pinch our cheeks and ask, “Whose side are you on? Who do you love the most?” If you say Brussels, the Atlantic candy is gone. If you say Washington D.C., the Union candy flies away. Of course, you make up your mind for equidistance. (At this moment you don’t have any candy in your hand at all; you only lure pieces from both sides.) How could you know, when you have just escaped your fourth communist ménage, that you must learn how to navigate a complicated capitalist polygamy?

During the communist dictatorship, it was very clear that you were living in Hell: and beyond the Iron Curtain - from Vienna to Dublin, Oslo to Lisbon, New York to Paris - was Paradise. “Beyond” was the territory of the blessed homogeneity, while “here” was the place where we lived suffocated and deprived of a language in which to express ourselves by the compact homogeneity of the party’s dogma. We dreamt, without too much hope, that we would one day get the chance to enjoy western values. But when we said West, it never crossed our minds that France is one thing and Germany is another, that Western Europe and Northern America are divergent entities. It did not cross our minds that one day, after the Soviet “protectorate” dissolved, our western brothers would endlessly debate whether or not we were Europeans, and would, at best, invite us “inside,” as though after World War II we were floating adrift through the exotic waters of the Pacific. Europe had been broken in half. In that sinister configuration, we had the bad luck to be on the doomed side. How could we have foreseen that after the border between the two “camps” dissolved, we would find ourselves not in a naturally reunified Europe, but in a havoc of concurrent regions: Central Europe, Southeast Europe (with its Balkanic “ballast”), Baltic Europe, Southern Europe (poorer, more frustrated, more haughty), Northern Europe (distant, aseptic, skeptical), the segregationist Swiss Island, and the elitist “Visegrad group,” - not to speak about the Franco-German moodiness, the pro-American dissidence of the Brits, the ambiguities of the Ukrainians and Russians or the unconfessed Europhilia of the Turks. Europe is a so-called “legion” and, like America, is not universally beloved.

We can empathize with that. First we were not loved at Yalta, when we were cast in the role of the happy victim, given awards for the Soviet victory and chosen as a testing grounds for the golden solution of communism. Then we were not loved in the fifties, when we were waiting in jail for the promised American invasion; then under Ceausescu, when he was both an interesting stab in the Soviets’ back and the bulldozer of our conscience. Then at Madrid in 1997 and in Washington D.C. in 1999. Overall, the European Union loved us more before 1989, when we were their doomed relatives from East, sacrificed to totalitarianism, which amplified with its contrasts the virtues of the western democracies. But once we

became “candidates,” their love for us cooled. Their affection became “exigency,” “help-yourself-if-you-want-to-be-helped,” an endless negotiation for a possible alliance.

For some time now, the ghosts of this former love have haunted Europe and the whole world. The U.S. now tells us that we are more important than the Western countries. We, the Romanians, the Bulgarians, the Polish, the Magyars, the Czechs, we are the salt of the earth. Coup de foudre. Don’t call it love at first sight: rather call it late love, at the last moment, after a careful assessment of the situation. Who could have expected this faint ecstasy, slightly perverse, which now comes to us? We thought we had economic, social, or political problems, but we have just now found out that what we have are sentimental problems. We don’t know who to love first and most. But with God’s help, we will manage, somehow. We have enough expertise in matters of the heart. We kissed and licked enough boots during our troubled history, and we’ll know how to do it again. Don’t even mention that from time to time we might be allowed to grab something, a bowl of warm soup, a political wedding, or a funeral feast.

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