

Aleš Šteger: A way out that is non-extant

The predictions from the political prophets of doom have proven sadly accurate. The EU was abolished several months ago. Or was it much longer ago? Unfortunately, I find it difficult to state the exact day and hour, the fading away lasted for a long time and the end was shrouded in an almost mysterious stillness, so you never knew precisely how, when and more especially – why? Of course, there was no actual reason, or it was too petty and banal as such to enter into the history books. It was less than a procedural error, less than a passing impulse of some unnamed middle- or even lower-ranking EU official in one of the basement labyrinths of the identical sterile Brussels EU offices, (or was it in Luxembourg? Or Strasbourg?), who consumed his afternoon snack and felt a slice of black pudding get stuck in his throat, and then a choking fit resulted in a misplaced comma and a chain of misunderstandings and later failed attempts at a cover-up and to make corrections. In the intrigue-ridden world of the EU Commission and EU parliament there was a long process of passing away – as long and drawn out, laboured and macabre as the EU institutions themselves – so that the end of the EU, which was no end, and the death of the EU was not experienced as any real event, nor as any transparent fact, but rather as a further ongoing process of dying and decay. I didn't begrudge the political prophets of doom their true predictions, and from the beginning I positioned myself on the other side, on the side of a living EU, and on the side of life per se. Each time I felt this to be true. Either EU or death. Now, I had neither of the two and I was confused. Most people didn't rejoice in the subliminal death of the EU, and some people didn't even notice it. You saw images of rather small and cheerless celebrations in a few villages in southern Bavaria, in a few pubs on the south-east coast of England near Dover, around Lille they waved the tricolour flag and in the suburbs of Athens they heckled to the camera and said they had already yearned for the death of the EU years ago. And that was that. Not that I would have hugely regretted the whole thing. In the 20th century my grandparents had to change their passports and currencies seven times without leaving their birthplace at the heart of Europe. And personally I had already even amassed a wonderful collection of three different passports from three different countries that were simultaneously one and the same territory. So I was hardened against the loss of nationality. Yet all the same with the EU the last big utopia of European society came to an end – the utopia of my life that I could freely decide on my destiny, that I would determine where and how I would like to live and then even have a go at failing better somewhere out of personal choice. As with every utopia with the death of the last one there was a bitter residue of a kind that if not instantly indigestible like black pudding, then at least – in the lofty terms of the philosophers – a kind that would be incommensurable. Not that I would ever have wished to emigrate from my small, boring country. On the contrary. The theoretical possibility of being able to make a free decision every day, indeed every minute, in the middle of a family celebration at a festively adorned table, or in the middle of a meeting shortly before you take a turn to speak, to stand up with dramatic gestures, to leave the room with head held high and to be able to emigrate, gave me the dogged determination to stay right where I came from, where I knew almost every nook and cranny, where I had my family and friends, and possibly with an exaggerated attitude and totally non-European to have immersed myself in my language, my culture, my city, my milieu and

tracking down local histories, having accepted the local conditions and playing with them time and again in a novel fashion. The prospect of an unfamiliar foreign domain made this less attractive for me, whilst it made home, which was totally unattractive for a stranger, a chosen place on earth. Yet the option of having the choice was now taken from me because of a crumb of black pudding, a procedural error, a lack of motivation on the part of bureaucrats, by a tragicomedy of intrigue in Brussels (or was it Luxembourg? Or even Strasbourg?), totally unheroic, cavalier, perfidious and in silence, without conflict, indeed without shedding a single drop of blood or a tear. How could I still have had the desire to carry on here with my EU idealism? I was as alive as the EU was dead, or apparently so. There was no EU corpse, no funeral procession and no burial ceremony. In 1914 when the body of Archduke Francis Ferdinand was transported by train from Trieste to Vienna, the guard of honour stretched into the distance for kilometres. In 1980 when Tito died there was world-class pomp and ceremony. The EU died, but not a cockerel crowed, not even the humble sparrows twittered about the event that was a non-event. After the end of the EU none of the EU officials was dismissed from their posts, they were only transferred and had to monitor the process of the collapse, where there was almost more work than for the previous process of living. There were only semi-official announcements along the lines of a plan to seek new solutions in the best European mutual accord, retaining the good things from the past, yet creating new rules, demarcations, national clear-sightedness and justice, reflecting on one's domestic situation and an incentive to set up a new platform. Et cetera, et cetera. I knew the rhetorical concoction well. Yet it didn't alleviate the phantom pain and from now on the phantom-like existence of the reputedly deceased EU. Or should I rather refer to a vampire-like existence? Where trains and trucks with their full loads of merchandise still crossed with no restrictions the now re-sealed national borders of the former EU states, and where as before bank transactions darted barrier-free to and fro between the countries and the few old and new tax havens on the old continent, the new post-mortem existence of the EU only forbade my physical person to hunt untroubled for mushrooms in Eastern Hungary and without having to climb over barbed wire, to cycle in Austria along the River Mur without being stopped and hassled by the border guards, or to be gawped at by Neapolitan *Carabinieri* while taking a shortcut through the vineyard in Collio. I could not avoid treating the death of the EU as a mean trick, even as a conspiracy against me personally. The black pudding, the sterile offices in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg, the political small talk, chanterelles in Eastern Hungary, European bank havens, over the years everything was arranged quietly in the most perfidious way and so well thought through that I, Aleš Šteger from Ljubljana, have been found out as a blue-eyed, if not even stupid, and anyway as a big loser and solitary mourner at a funeral ceremony for the EU that was never concluded. I grew more out of sorts, more depressed and living ever deeper in an increasingly idealized past, in contemplation of when, what and how I should have acted differently, to stop or at least to slow the pace of the dying process. Was I not also complicit with my political passivity in bearing some responsibility for the misery? Yet it was too late for such rhetorical and emotionally loaded questions. The utopia of a free Europe was over, once and for all. Everywhere was the fowl stench of small-minded nationalistic local politicians whose time had now arrived. I could no longer endure that. I needed a way out. A way out that is non-extant.