

Mait Talts

Martin Kala. Euroopa maailma teljel (Europe on the axis of the world). Tallinn: Eesti Päevaleht, 2009. 318 pp.

Sometimes it seems that the entire discussion on the significance of Estonia's European Union membership ended with the EU referendum in 2003. On the one hand, Estonia, which joined the EU as one of the most Euroskeptic countries, has become one of the most optimistic within those five years that Estonia has been an EU member. On September 14th 2003 only 67% of the people that went to the polls voted in favour of Estonia's accession to the EU, whereas 33% were against membership. Since the referendum and the actual accession, the popularity of the EU has grown significantly. According to the 2008 Eurobarometer survey, as many as 80% of the citizens of Estonia believe that the country will benefit from being a member of the EU, and 56% believed that things are developing basically in the right direction (Eurobarometer 68, 4). Moreover, in 2009, despite the current economic crisis, still 78% of Estonians were optimistic about the future prospects of the EU (Eurobarometer 71, 8). This is the second highest indicator among the EU countries (only the Irish are more optimistic about the EU's future prospects). In 2008 only 16% of the people in Estonia were convinced that things are going in the wrong direction in the EU, whereas the average number of EU citizens that share the same viewpoint is as high as 47%.

Along with this perpetual growth of EU popularity the one time heated discussion on the costs and benefits of Estonia's EU membership has apparently cooled off and almost died away. It even seems that the expected paradigm shift towards such principal underlying questions as what is the role of Estonia within the Union or how should Europe meet the challenges of globalization has not occurred yet. Such questions are raised only occasionally by intellectuals and usually without any tangible consequences. The bulk of the ordinary Estonians seem to be basically satisfied with developments after the country's accession despite the fact that quite often they acknowledge the EU's negative aspects (such as incapability of decision-making, and unfair and irrational decisions as in the infamous case of the sugar penalty fee) and love to complain about them. Nevertheless,

these things seem to be just a fair price to be paid for the advantages of membership that are taken for granted. Even the discussions on the European Constitution and the Lisbon Treaty have been quite inert in Estonia as if they had nothing to do with the country's future.

The book with its pretentious title "Europe on the axis of the world" by well-known columnist Martin Kala, which was published in May 2009 to celebrate the 5th Anniversary of Estonia's membership in the European Union, is a pleasant exception in this sense. There have been only a few other columnists (i.e. Erkki Bahovski or Ahto Lobjakas) who have mediated the news flow and the recent discussions from Brussels unveiling the background factors, but Martin Kala is the first who has managed to publish an entire book on the basis of his previously published press essays. As an advisor to former MEPs Toomas Hendrik Ilves and Katrin Saks, he gives ordinary Estonians a possibility to take a look 'inside'. In addition to that, Martin Kala is one of those very few Estonians able to follow Francophone discussion on European matters.

In his book the author, Martin Kala, presents his personal views as a strong proponent of the European Union and of European values, but he is, at the same time, a very concerned proponent. His personal beliefs and convictions are overshadowed by the problems and concerns about the future of the European project. And, of course, there are many reasons to be worried. Unlike some other strong proponents of the EU, he does not believe that the problems of the future will be simply wiped away by "Europe's invisible hand" as seems to believe, for instance, the well-known American analyst Mark Leonard (Leonard 2007, 15), but that they will require still both far-reaching visions and hard and persistent work for the goals set by the Europeans in order to maintain even their present status. He is also convinced that we cannot isolate ourselves from the influence of globalization unless we want to taste the 'bitter fruit' of the parallel process of globalization – 'new regionalism' in terms of isolation from world affairs, which can be already seen in some parts of Africa (see Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel 1999).

Europeans seem to have obsessions of their own. One of these is an attitude described by many social thinkers such as Isaiah Berlin (see Berlin 2003, 175-176) and which can be called the 'dark side' of Enlightenment. Europeans are so convinced of the rationality of their views that they tend to

believe that these views are so superior in comparison to other views that they do not need any explanations. Instead of that, these kinds of allegedly 'fully substantiated' ideas should simply be imposed on others. Martin Kala seems also to believe in the universalism of so-called European values, but finds still rather little proof of the self-assertive power of these values. Like many other advocates of Europe, he seems to have so deep a confidence in the self-evidence of European values that a discussion of the universal applicability does not even occur to him. In some cases he has to admit that in some countries the perception of the values we call European is often superficial or even purely extrinsic. Many countries simply copy them without a real willingness to implement those very European standards. The non-democratic regimes (i.e. Saudi Arabia or China) use their economic advantages on the world market without wasting efforts on the development of such values as human rights, individual liberties, democratic procedures, and a secure environment for everyone, etc. How these European values should be imposed in the case of the cultures that have a strong belief in their moral superiority in regard to the West (i.e. Islamic countries) remains without any reasonable explanation.

The existence of the European Union has been perceived here in Estonia as an inevitable part of people's everyday life, but at the same time a part that seems to be so remote a background factor that it has no direct impact on people's everyday life and therefore is not an object for discussion. The wider audience seems to believe strongly that ordinary citizens cannot influence EU affairs, and therefore it is better to stay as far removed as one can. This dual attitude is also inherent in the perception of the European Union in general. On the one hand, it has been a relatively successful project that has found partial imitation by others, if we bear in mind such associations of states as *Mercosur*, the African Union, the *Union de Naciones Suramericanas*, and the possible union of Turkish nations proposed by the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev. The EU is still an arena where formal sovereignty can be exchanged for real power (Beck and Giddens 2005). On the other hand, one can see a certain weariness, the lagging behind of institutional reform, the absence of a clear vision of the future, a lack of consensus in vitally important issues, growing unemployment and other economic problems, the unsubstantiated dominance of bigger countries (first of all France and Germany) in some important areas, the bureaucracy, and the dealing with false problems, all of which no one can deny.

Despite the problems, the EU has not yet experienced any serious setback. The EU is still a good example to its closest as well as to some remote neighbours, and the union's citizens are still quite unconcerned about their future. But one has to add that these things will definitely be changed and most likely quite significantly in the future, perhaps even in the near future. Martin Kala keeps reminding the reader that, as he puts it, "the map of the world will be different", and the later 21st century world will have many other important players, not just these 'famous three' big future powers: the EU, the US, and China (India's economy is also growing, but so far at an unknown pace), but also many new ascending countries called the 'Second World' by US analyst Parag Khanna (Khanna 2008). Countries as Japan, Switzerland, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Australia, the Republic of South-Africa, Mexico, Nigeria, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, and perhaps even Russia – the countries competing with the First World and with each other -- may strongly influence the economics of the future world as well as its international political climate. The EU's proportional share in the world can only decline. Martin Kala reminds us that 50 years ago there was 15% of the population of the world living in Europe; this figure has come down to 6% at the present, and 50 years from now there will be no more than 3% of the world's population living in the territory of the present-day European Union. Therefore, it seems inevitable for Europe to initiate something that could put a basis to the possibility of growing its influence in terms of qualitative change.

Europe has come to the point where the most significant feature of its citizens seems to be in a certain way "convenience" – people and, as the matter of fact, the overwhelming majority of politicians are so satisfied with recent developments that they do not desire any significant changes and therefore tend to leave the questions of the European future without adequate attention. The horrible events of the 20th century as well as Europe's colonial past have caused also quite a large number of Europeans to feel ashamed and to have turned their back to the Past in hope of a better Future. Unfortunately, the Future has been seen quite often as simply a continuation of the Present. Moreover, the majority of Europeans seems to be so pleased with the current situation despite widespread tendencies to criticize the current state of the bureaucratic and indecisive nature of the EU that they do not actually desire any substantive changes. In the case of Estonia, Martin Kala argues for a hypothesis that the relative "popularity" of the European Union here is at least partially explicable by the fact that the

Estonian media reflects the work of European institutions remarkably demurely. The very limited coverage has created an image of EU among local people as something very remote, which does not affect people's everyday life overly much.

It is clear that the French, Dutch, and Irish referendums are clear evidence of that thinking as well as of the weakness of the European identity, the commitment to the selfish interests despite the common values and considerations. But the question of European identity is also the question about European borders, something that has been actually disputable for centuries. As many other proponents of Europe, Martin Kala is also strongly against drawing new dividing lines and believes that there is no alternative to the enlargement of the European Union if the EU wants to maintain its present role in the future. Opposing the dividing lines and standing for enlargement, he has to refer repeatedly to the recent attitude of 'Old Europe' towards the new Eastern European members, an attitude which found its manifestation in the notorious expression *Polish plumber*. Martin Kala openly blames the political leaders of Estonia and some other Eastern European countries that they did not protest in due time against this obviously 'racist' slogan.

Using the terminology of physics, Europe is culturally not a discrete, but rather a continuous, phenomenon. We cannot indicate where the clearly defined limits of Europe's civilization lie and where the land of the *barbarians* begins. This concerns especially Eastern Europeans who have become members of the EU quite recently and should understand better than anyone the aspirations of the nations knocking on the EU's door. Martin Kala argues that the strength of the European Union lies paradoxically in its "weakness" – in the fact that Europe is not "present" in other parts of the world as it was during the colonial era, but is simply showing a good example worth following. Rephrasing the famous Chinese Taoist thought of the "decisive role of non-existence" (Lao zi 1995, 25) he states that "Europe acts because it does not exist", at least in the terms of coercive action. In this sense the 'soft power' possessed by the European Union really acts due to its non-coercive nature. However, this is in clear contradiction with the existence of non-democratic countries and the helplessness of Europeans to have any influence on them, a problem that was considered a few paragraphs back. The 'soft power' affects first of all, if not exclusively, the countries in the EU's closest neighbourhood, those countries that have a

clear intention of becoming EU members (such as Turkey, the Balkan countries, and Moldova. Other, more remote, countries can continue without significant problems on their current track whether it is democratic or authoritarian. But even those countries that have been developing their legal and value systems towards greater conformity with European standards during the last years in the hope of becoming EU members can suffer serious setbacks if the ‘door’ to the EU remains closed; this could be the case especially in regard of Turkey.

Nevertheless, Martin Kala believes that the actual weakness of Europe lies in the limitations of the conceptual and spiritual basis. The traditional religion has become marginal in almost every way, and the traditional Christian values have transformed into secular everyday moral principles without transcendental significance. It seems that most of the Europeans have created something that could be called ‘**civil religion**’ on the basis of generally accepted civil liberties, secular values, human rights, belief in democratic way of thinking, etc., which has replaced the role of traditional religion. At the same time, this *Weltanschauung* proves to be very weak when its values and their ability of self-assertion have been confronted by e.g. radical Islam. However, what could be the strengths of European values vis-à-vis Islam, which believes strongly in the moral superiority of its own values, seems to be rather unclear to Martin Kala as it is for most of present-day European popular thinkers.

Martin Kala reminds as about one often forgotten, but essentially important, principle: **unexpected has a tendency of becoming inevitable since we do not pay enough attention to unlikely development because of our strong faith in what we believe is inevitable**. Paradoxically, our faith in inevitable and the feeling of confidence caused by that gives to the unexpected phenomena a chance to occur. So, therefore, we cannot simply rule out any tendencies that seem to be unlikely for our superficial observation and deficient intellectual capacities to distinguish the inevitable from probable and probable from unlikely. Despite the ‘generally accepted’ European values, there is still only rather little that unites all Europeans. Why is it that the only effective solidarity seems to be the solidarity of fear created by facing a common threat or believe in the possibility of facing it (Beck 2005, 52)? Does it have to be this way always and by all means?

I do not believe that books like the one under observation here could change the attitudes of the general public directly. But it seems quite obvious that Martin Kala has managed to raise important questions and hopefully arouse at least some interest among representatives of the political and cultural elite. The future of Europe will be quite different from the Europe of the present day, and it will be by all evidence much more problematic. The alteration of the thinking of general public can be achieved only through the change of the attitudes of the elite and of respective communicative actions. Martin Kala's book is definitely a serious step in this direction.

References

- Beck, Ulrich** (2005). Riskiühiskond. Teel uue modernsuse poole (Risikogesellschaft: auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne). Tartu: Tartu University Press.
- Beck, Ulrich and Giddens, Anthony** (2005). Nationalism has now become the enemy of Europe's nations. – *The Guardian*, Oct 4.
- Berlin, Isaiah** (2003). European unity and its vicissitudes. In: Berlin, Isaiah. *The Crooked Timber of Humanity. Chapters in the History of Ideas*. London: Pimlico, pp. 175-206.
- Eurobarometer 68** (2008). Public opinion in the European Union. Autumn 2007. Estonia. National Report. Executive Summary. S.I. Directorate-General Communication.
- Eurobarometer 71** (2009). Public opinion in the European Union. Spring 2009. Estonia. National Report. Executive Summary. S.I. Directorate-General Communication.
- Hettne, Björn; Inotai, András; Sunkel, Osvaldo (eds)** (1999). *Globalism and the new regionalism*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Khanna, Parag** (2008). *The second world: empires and influence in the new global order*. New York: Random House.
- Lao zi** (1995). *The Book of Lao zi / English translation by He Guanghu, Gao Shining, Song Lidao*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- Leonard, Mark** (2007). *Uus Euroopa sajand (Why Europe will run the 21st century)*. Tallinn: Tänapäev.