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Is a new “Iron Curtain” reemerging in Europe?

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Summary

The author is of the opinion that with the fall of the Berlin wall not all obstacles to the free circulation of goods and people were eliminated — either in Europe or in other regions of the world, since there are numerous other walls standing in the way of establishing a global world or European order.

In that context, the agreement among the members of the European Union on the all-out control of “its borders” towards the non-member European countries, is considered by the author as a specific form of a new “curtain”, not “iron” any longer, but electronic. Its function, the author claims, is to divide Europe into the Union and the Non-union, which is in many ways harmful for the promotion of the European idea — in the spiritual and the material sense.

In the post-war political history, the schism between the totalitarian eastern world and the democratic world of the West is exemplified with the term “iron curtain”. Though this term at first glance carries an unequivocal symbolism, it was a screen which hid a plethora of undertakings, whose consequences the population living in that “iron” belt still feels (and will probably go on feeling for a long time).

In the world there have been some examples of self-imposed autarchic development, but never on such a systematic and broad scale. More numerous are the examples of imposed autarchy, as a specific form of pressure on certain states in order to bring them to heel or induce them to a desirable behavior.

In Europe, another symbol similar to that of the “iron curtain” is the “Berlin wall”, whose fall — or demolition — and the recently signed agreement on cooperation and partnership between NATO and Russia, leads us to the conclusion that the days of the divided Europe are over; at least that is what numerous international factors (who, by the way, very facily determine the fate of small nations) have been trying to convince us of.

However, facts do not corroborate this conclusion since there are many small walls scattered around Europe and the world. Some of them are disappearing, but others are being erected, along different lines. For example, along its Mexican border, Americans have installed a "sensor wall", in combination with meshed wire; in Europe, on the other hand, there was first the "treaty wall" and now the "Schengen wall", with which some countries are electronically and administratively fencing themselves off from other parts of Europe.

Not all walls are the same. Some serve economic interests, others migratory, still others security, so it is extremely difficult to compare them. Thus, only the "walls" with the identical function and purpose may be juxtaposed.

If this criterion is applied, certain similarities may be discerned; thus, there are analogies between the "Berlin wall" and the "Schengen wall". The first was protecting the "idyllic world of socialism" from the contagion of the "rotten capitalism", while the other is protecting the European West from the "viral European East", burdened with numerous post-communist traumas, which should consequently be systematically decontaminated and — over a longer or a shorter period of time — made fit for a standard communication.

There are also differences between the "Berlin" and the "Schengen" walls. The first was put up at the boundary between two different political and economic systems and its goal was to disrupt any communication. The other has no such purpose. It is unilateral in its function. It obstructs with all possible administrative and electronic means the imission of undesirable social-viral phenomena and insists on the emission of Western values, regardless of the cost and the repercussions.

Thus one can argue that the implementation of the Schengen Agreement has put up a new curtain, which is not iron but electronic, at the periphery of the Union.

The need for such an "electronic curtain" has two sources. It was set up because of the elimination of customs barriers and control between the Union member states on the one hand and the third countries on the other, and because of the shift of the control to the peripheral regions of the Union. Later, security reasons were added to its rationale, as well as the provisions from the agreement on the European Union (Maastricht 1992) and the part which refers to the joint defense and security. That is why the "Schengen wall" is formally based on the Schengen Agreement of 1985, but practically on numerous additional agreements, which is the reason it was put into effect only ten years later (in 1995) and that even nowadays some member countries resist its implementation or seek a special treatment for themselves.

The central part of the Schengen Agreement (named after a small place in Luxembourg where it was signed) is the transfer of the customs control for all Union members to its peripheral states, thus abolishing interior controls (apart from entry points like airports) and immensely advancing the traffic; however, at the same time, the control at the periphery is stepped up (by means of the networked police control) and subjects from the third countries are discriminated against because they are treated in a different way.

This Agreement has been put into practice by most member countries. Some members claim that they do not have the appropriate computer equipment, while Great Britain and Ireland, and to some extent Denmark, seek for themselves a special status. Austria began implementing certain provisions of the Agreement in early 1996. Italy is planning to do the same in the near future, while in the Greek parliament this Agreement is undergoing the ratification procedure. Slovenia is also thinking about introducing some elements of the Agreement, though it is only an associate member, which brings the Schengen issue to the Croatian borders.

Nevertheless, with or without the Agreement, the European Union has an elaborate system of regulated cooperation with many states, in their vicinity or further afield. These include agreements on cooperation and economic relations which have in the last few years included the provisions referring to the security and the universally desirable developments (particularly so in the case of the so called "European agreements"); thus, they may also be considered a sort of a wall which cannot be climbed over. Significantly, these agreements are called European, which proves that they are something more than a usual cooperation: an acceptance of certain European values, as defined by the Union; their violation is sanctioned by many expedients, including (ultimately) suspension.

In the case of Croatia, this wall can be identified in the form of the Union's regional approach by means of which the Union has been giving support to a new integration of the Balkan regions, envisaging for Croatia a different role from the one it has had.

Only this could explain the Union's regional approach which is trying to link something unlinkable. If such links had been possible, they would not have broken apart; if there was no desire to push Croatia into such "partnerships", it would not be held in the stand-by, "checkmate", qualified position of a forced cooperation with some states of the former Yugoslavia as a prerequisite for Croatia's cooperation with the Union.

Although the Union has been trying to convince Croatian diplomacy that, in case of Croatia's acceptable behavior (meaning toeing the Union's line to the letter) it will sign a special agreement based on the same basket of policies, a bitter taste of coercion remains nevertheless. President Tudjman is right when he resists such politics and thus once again proves that his vision of the Croatian state interests is broader than the

opposition's, who do not perceive any stratagem in the Union's policy towards Croatia.

And the stratagem is cunning. First, the Union has placed Croatia on the other side of the wall being erected in southeast Europe. Second, they want to force Croatia to adapt its economic development to its southeastern surroundings and thus serve as a shock-absorber for the pressures of the undeveloped Europe on its developed regions (i.e. the territory of the Union). And third, this is an attempt to thwart Croatia's desire to (in time) form an economic association and close political ties with its northern neighbors. Herein the Union's special Balkan policy and its support for (even imposition of) "the Balkan cooperation" of the new states, in the guise of the so called "regional approach".

The Union exercises special policies towards other European regions, though with different motivation. Thus we can distinguish among the central European policy (for the CEFTA states), the Mediterranean policy (as implemented via the Euro-Mediterranean forum), the Asian policy (also implemented via a special forum), the Latin-American policy, the ACP policy (the associated member states of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific) and, lastly, a special policy for Russia which is, regardless of its transitional hardships, a major economic and political factor for the Union.

All these policies have "shock absorbers" built into them, in case certain undesirable behavior occurs; they may also be considered small walls. One could well imagine what would happen in the Union if these absorbers did not exist and the enormity of the flow of workers from eastern Europe that would swamp the economic centers of Europe.

That is why the celebrations which accompanied the fall of the Berlin wall as an end to the divided Europe were rather premature. It is also premature to interpret the latest NATO-Russian friendship in this light, because the wall's structure has remained intact, only the plaster has peeled off.

It is true that the wall got moved farther to the northeast and south-east of Europe and that the "construction work" is now being done more subtly; those left beyond it are even assured that the wall is in their interest and to their advantage.

These developments may be noticed through an analysis of the Union's policy towards the non-Union regions. In the field of economic cooperation and trade relations they are noticeable in the types of agreements that the Union concludes with the third countries since they serve as a gauge of the Union's interest for individual states or regions.

In its relations with the third countries, the Union uses the following types of agreements: the customs union agreements (Turkey, Malta, Cyprus); free trade agreements (exclusive agreements with the EFTA countries which were later rearranged into a separate agreement on the EEA

region); the European agreements (basically the agreements on associated membership) — the change of the name is due to the fact that some new elements have been added, especially from the sphere of human and minority rights; the preferential agreements for the ACP and the Mediterranean states; the agreements on trade and economic cooperation with Latin American states and the ASEAN countries; and the special sector agreements for the Third World countries.

In the palette of the mentioned contracts, the biggest barriers are faced by the countries with which the Union concludes agreements on trade and economic cooperation. A somewhat more benign regime is for the signatories of the European contracts (the associated membership agreements). The economically most favourable agreements are those of the customs union.

For Croatia the priority is a European agreement (on associated membership), much coveted by Croatia, but rather unlikely, since the Union has been pushing Croatia towards the agreement on trade and cooperation.

A state aspiring to a European agreement must prove that its legal infrastructure has been adapted to the needs of market economy. Next, it has to set a timetable for the adoption of the fundamental provisions of the Maastricht Agreement — in other words, the plan for accommodating social institutions to the solutions which are valid in the Union. Next, it must pledge to accept the adjudications of the European Court. It must bolster its cooperation with the neighboring countries and the third states. It must support the development of private business in various fields. It must participate in the project of trans-European networks, provide trade concessions to the Union members and the third states and adopt appropriate measures for the free movement of labour.

The associated status has two "pillar" agreements. One refers to the trade cooperation between a country and the Union — to economic relations in general. The other regulates numerous extra-economic issues (particularly the political cooperation and the political dialogue), which are instrumental in the pan-European integrations and in line with the Helsinki Declaration and the Paris Charter.

The associated status implies that, as a rule, the implementation of the agreed upon provisions in the area of economy is limited to a ten-year period. After the first five years, the effects of the provisions are analyzed and, if deemed positive, the second phase commences.

The associated membership agreement gradually eliminates customs duties and other restrictions — with an uneven dynamics. Usually, an associated member state is given a longer grace period for lowering tariffs for the goods imported from the Union. For example, Poland was given a unilateral two-year grace period, so that it began to lower its tariffs for

the import of "European goods" in 1994, and the eventual elimination of the tariffs is to happen in 1999. The same dynamics is valid for other restrictions.

This means that the associated status has its wall, too. In order to climb over it, many requirements ought to be met, and when they are, the political will of the Union members — the key to the door — is needed.

And finally, the road to the Schengen wall is paved with numerous misunderstandings. First, in June of 1994, the European Union Council adopted the principles of abolishing customs and police formalities on the borders between the member countries. After that, France and Germany made an agreement on the abolition of border control, which is usually considered the first step in the implementation of the mentioned principles (the Saarbrücken Agreement). Then came the Schengen Agreement, among Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, and Holland. These states signed an additional agreement in 1990 about the conditions and the guarantees for the implementation of the Schengen Agreement (it contains 142 articles and must be ratified by the national parliaments). Other Union members tuned in. Italy did that in November of 1990 (but has not implemented it yet), Spain and Portugal in 1991, Austria in 1995 (partly implemented as of 1996). Greece also joined in 1991, but the process of ratification is only now under way. Great Britain was allowed to control its own borders (due to its status of an island country). Ireland aspires to this status as well, while the Scandinavian countries, members of the Union, do not conceal their intention to retain their special status.

It is worth noting that the "Schengen wall" does not stop short at border controls. It involves the police data network of national security services, which each member state will be able to access by means of special on-line terminals and store in them the information, in compliance with the signed agreements. Practically it means that a system of control with millions of data is to be set up, which can easily turn into a system of abuse unprecedented in the world history.

Thus, the answer to the question is a new "iron curtain" reemerging is negative; however, the process of creating "the electronic curtain", running counter to the parallel process of utmost liberalization within the Union, has undoubtedly begun. A rift has opened in Europe between the Union and the Non-Union; the Non-Union countries are shooed away and into special associations, allegedly according to a certain regional geographical criterion, though the truth is somewhat different as can be clearly seen in the case of Croatia.