

On Tolerance and Politics

Mario Soares

A TALK WITH THE FORMER FIRST CIVILIAN PRESIDENT OF FREE PORTUGAL

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For quite a long time now, there has been a great deal of discussion on whether our new European Constitution should refer to God anywhere in its text. We have finally decided – and I fully agree with this decision – that there should be no such reference even though our culture derives from the Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian culture. After long debate, the word ‘God’ was dropped from the new European Constitution.

Herald of Europe: Mr President, your name is a legend in Portugal, and even your opponents call you the Father of the Nation. You are held in high respect everywhere as one of the founding fathers of the New Europe. Could you please tell us something about the landmarks in your life? Perhaps we could begin with the principles you learned at a young age from your family.

Mario Soares: I had a Catholic mother, not the overzealous kind, though; at any rate she didn't drag me along to church. My father, also a Catholic, would have liked to send me to a religious school. But somehow, I didn't see eye to eye with the church and I resisted as best I could, so father left me alone. In the end, I didn't have a religious upbringing. Now I'm glad I didn't.

Nobody – at school or at home – forced religion on me. Really, no one did, and no one reproved me for it. That was after the First Republic, which followed the 1910 revolution. It was entirely in the spirit of the First Republic – to keep the state and religion separate. That was stated in the Constitution of the Republic. After centuries of domination and interference in every facet of public life, the clerics were left without power.

I wasn't even married in church – we exchanged our vows in a registry office. That was also an act of emancipation, if you can imagine how things were at that time.

My children didn't have a religious education either. At least, none of them is a Catholic.

This did not stop me or my children from finding a place in society and in politics. It seemed that the Portuguese people were mature enough to embrace freedom and make a free choice.

Between 1910 and 1926, though, the country had a succession of eight presidents and 45 governments. In March 1928, yet another military junta gave way to General Carmona, whose presidency was effectively a dictatorship.

In 1932, Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, a professor of economics and finance at Coimbra University, became Prime Minister. A new constitution of the Estado Novo [New State], or a 'unitary corporate republic', was promulgated in April 1933. Long years of Salazar's dictatorship followed. It was a different story then and one that I have written about.

H.E.: Would you say that society was tolerant enough at the time to put up with this kind of freethinking or atheism as a creed?

M.S.: It came with the First Republic, in 1910, which separated church from state, and Salazar, I must say, didn't have any problem with it. Probably, he didn't want to share power and influence with anybody, the church included.

Whatever it was, he was quite lukewarm on the issue. This certainly bears little comparison with what Portugal is today, with many different religions – Islam, Buddhism, Protestantism, and now the Orthodox Church as well – existing side by side with Catholicism. Salazar himself was a devout Catholic but he didn't have the stomach to turn back the clock.

H.E.: This did not bar you from going into politics in a Catholic country – socialist, communist and atheist that you were? How have you developed politically?

M.S.: As we can see, now that we can make comparisons, I would say Salazar's regime was relatively mild. Engaging in politics was difficult and dangerous. All parties in opposition to the regime were banned. We demanded civil liberties, fair elections, the lifting of censorship, a government accountable to parliament, the release of political detainees, decolonization. I had been arrested repeatedly, served time in prison, gone into exile.

I was not, in fact, banned from practising law in exile. During the Second World War, Portugal officially committed itself to neutrality. In 1944, however, when Salazar saw which way the wind was blowing, he entered into a treaty with the United States for the construction of US bases in the Azores. His move paid off handsomely. Portugal was included in the list of countries eligible for US aid under the Marshall Plan, and was accepted into NATO in 1949, despite being a dictatorship. It occupied a strategic position, after all, and leftist forces were too strong in the country.

Religion, which you were asking me about, was not at the centre of scenarios played out through the 20th century. For quite a long time now, there has been a great deal of discussion on whether our new European Constitution should refer to God anywhere in its text. We have finally decided – and I fully agree with this decision – that there should be no such reference even though our culture derives from the Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian culture. After long debate, the word 'God' was dropped from the new European Constitution. You must have noted that Communist parties were, at one time, very strong in Catholic countries – in Italy, France, Spain and Portugal.

That must be more than blind chance, I think. Socialism is not averse to the Christian (Catholic) sense of justice. Communist expectations, feelings, a keen sense of social justice are deeply rooted in Catholic society.

As a young man, I was an orthodox Communist myself. However, when, Ribbentrop and Molotov signed their pact and the USSR seized the Baltic countries, I stopped being a Communist. When, in 1941, Hitler attacked the USSR, I was with the Communists again, with the USSR, and I remained an anti-fascist and a Communist until the end of the Second World War...

I abandoned Communism again after Stalin had broken with Yugoslavia – when Tito was declared to be an imperialist agent. I couldn't accept that.

H.E.: You visited the USSR several times. What impressed you? Or surprised you?

M.S.: I was first invited to go to the USSR in 1970, and I went to Moscow, Leningrad, Samarkand, Tbilisi and Stalin's birthplace.

I returned from the USSR having been finally inoculated against Communism – by that time I had become a very enlightened socialist.

H.E.: Let's return to the present day. The story runs that first communism died in Russia and now socialism is expiring in Europe. That Europe needs to reform its generous social benefits system if it is to become more competitive. Furthermore, there is a conflict between France and Britain over the EU budget and many other issues. Some tend to call it a conflict between the liberal and social models of Europe. Where do you stand on this, Mr President?

M.S.: Yes, the European Parliament is now a battleground between liberals and the champions of social Europe – the Europe of social gains won by past generations.

As a European and a socialist, I am coming out in favour of the second option because I do not want to see everything that we have achieved over the past decade disappear. I do not want the American model of society and economics to be applied in Europe. I am totally against it. We have a free market economy here, but we do not want social tensions to build up. The state must have a social role – it must intervene and regulate, so as to narrow the gap between different sections of society and to reduce social tensions.

H.E.: Are you an optimist on this issue? Do you believe that social Europe has a future?

M.S.: It's not that simple. The European social model is a matter of European identity. You can't discard it easily. There would be an enormous social and political price to pay.

If we were to put an end to that social model, we would have demonstrations, strikes, marches and acts of protest all round Europe. Governments would fall. In any case we have EU laws that would prevent it. The EU is a system of social states.

H.E.: You won't deny, though, that the problems you have now will persist. Your pension system is outdated, your educational system is ineffective, health care is out of tune with our age in many countries, migration laws are at odds with one another. The Europeans have lost much, really too much time groping for reforms. Society will continue to grow more radical, and then remember immigration

M.S.: Europe is split over these issues, and the split is very deep. On the one hand we have those who want more liberalizing and competitive reforms; they call for most of the social gains to be abandoned. On the other hand there are those who want a free Europe, without rigid rules or federalist institutions. There is a third option, though, which is directly related to the subject and which is rarely discussed: *WILL EUROPE BECOME AMERICA'S APPENDAGE AND LOSE ITS IDENTITY AND ITS VALUES?*

The question is exactly that: how can Europe preserve its values and its traditions? Europe cannot be a country like the US, where no respect is shown for the rights of the individual, or for human rights. Europe takes a different stand on the environment. America makes a show of rejecting the Kyoto Protocol and environmental controls, and harms the whole world as a result.

All around Europe, marches were held against the war in Iraq – I supported them, too, because I am against the war in Iraq. And then we have the problem of China and European competitiveness. Yes, Europe has many problems.

H.E.: If a referendum on the European Constitution were held in your country tomorrow, how do you think the people of Portugal would vote?

M.S.: I will vote for it. I went to France specifically to lobby for the Constitution. Society, you know... it is difficult to speculate on what result a referendum might bring. People may actually be against things other than those they are asked to vote on.

We have to work, and work with society. It must understand its political leaders and trust them, too.

Before the referendums were held in France and Holland, I had been absolutely certain of the Portuguese vote. Now I am not so sure. Today, I am uncertain. I think the Portuguese will vote for it. They put very much stock in their part in Europe.

H.E.: A wave of nationalism is rising in many European countries – France, Austria, Germany. Do you, Mr President, believe this wave of nationalism can be stemmed?

M.S.: These problems have to be addressed over time, in the first place by the countries concerned – Spain, Britain, France and Holland, but strictly within the European Union's framework. Their problems can be resolved. If Spain were to become a federal state within the EU framework tomorrow, there wouldn't be a catastrophe. The right to self-determination has a long history in Europe, since the 19th century...

It is important to realize that the EU is not a paradise, but a compromise. A large union is a large compromise, with broad common rules. A country that does not want to follow these rules can opt out of the EU. The EU is only a compromise. But it comes in place of war and enmity. Compromise is better than enmity.

H.E.: Could you speak about the prospects for relations between Europe and Russia, now that we are coming around to the end [in 2007] of the Agreement on partnership and cooperation?

M.S.: These are matters that I spoke about at our conference this morning.

Extracts from Mr Soares's Conference address

Russia is very important to us, and your different positions are very interesting to Europe. We have to learn to understand one another. Russia is truly a big country, critically big and critically important for the welfare and stability of Europe, Asia and the world at large.

We wish Russia great success on its hard road of reform, and above all in building a stable democracy. Portugal is a key part of the European Atlantic seaboard, and we hope to make our contribution to the dialogue between Europe and Russia. This is a challenge for a long time, for many years ahead, and for many more governments, here and over there, to tackle with you.

In this sense, from the point of view of Europe's long-term strategic interests, we have followed developments in Russia closely over the past fifteen years. This is

why I believe, that the initiative we are launching today, a standing Russian-European workshop, is so important.

We need new relations and a new partnership between Russia and Portugal in the European context.

A crisis that the EU is facing is one of governance and decision-making. The accession of new members has led to huge changes in the EU and, to give it its true name, to a crisis in the EU. The Lisbon agenda of 2000 has been shelved indefinitely, if not completely forgotten, even though it called for Europe to have a leading place in the world. The EU's international relations and role in the world have suffered as well. Many of the new EU entrants have common borders with Russia and a long history of relations, at times very dramatic, which they now set in the European context. What's done cannot be undone. Now, in this new situation, the EU must be effective and future-oriented, and an example to others.

Russia must be viewed as a country of great potential for Europe, as its hope. Russia has an enormous historical European potential. It is a force not to be ignored, and standard, common rules that we use with small countries cannot be applied to it. Above all we have to build our relations with Russia on the basis of mutual respect, in order to lay the groundwork for confidence and stabilization in both the EU and in Russia. We have to forge a new, solid partnership resting on these relations.

People frequently forget (and unjustly at that) that Russia has made a substantial contribution to the building of modern Europe. Its role has been enormous in the last few decades as well – in developing a new configuration for Europe, even if this contribution appears passive to some. We have to see and appreciate this. And more than that – we have to consider the internal processes going on in Russia. Little attention is being paid to this at the moment.

The EU's task is to create good working relations with Russia and to consolidate all the existing practices.

We do not always clearly understand the scale and complexity of the internal processes unfolding in Russia: political, economic, ethnic, cultural, demographic, and it is extremely important to understand these processes. This is a high priority. It does not always go on smoothly; barriers exist to the consolidation of political institutions in Russia, and we do not understand them fully.

As I said, the European Union is undergoing a crisis, which is related to its enlargement. Today's crisis does not remove EU enlargement from the agenda altogether – its boundaries and potential in historical and political terms.

The European Union must always be aware how delicate its relations with Russia are and give them the utmost attention. Now that the EU has been joined by countries that, at one time, were part of the USSR and the Soviet bloc, we have to give

consideration to the legitimate interests of these countries and also to be attentive to their understandable political and psychological phobias.

We cannot see this issue in formal legal terms only; we have to see a strategy and a purpose. Rather than moving away from Russia, we have to make moves toward it, so that we might have stable partners in one another and build our relations on a fair and realistic foundation.

It is wrong, in principle, to view Russia as a threat to Europe's security. Europe should become a constant, friendly companion to Russia. This will give it the capacity to influence its partner, and to give weight to its words as well.

New prospects are currently opening up. Russia is no longer a country of which we have little understanding. No one argues any longer whether or not Russia is part of Europe. Russia is a European country, and we all regard it as such. These are facts that we have to realize deep in our hearts.

As a country very far from Russia, at the opposite end of Europe, Portugal is, I think, in a way very close to it, and must and can play a role of its own.

*Conversation was conducted by the editors
of Herald of Europe – Michael Borshchevsky
and Victor Yaroshenko.*

Lisbon, 6 July, 2005