

EY2010 Journalist Award BULGARIA

Winner print/online

Georgi Gospodinov

Article title: “Невидимите кризи” (“The Invisible Crises”)

Published in: Kultura, 21/04/2010



Georgi Gospodinov (1968) is a poet, writer and playwright, one of the most translated Bulgarian authors after 1989. His “Natural Novel” has been published seven times in Bulgaria and in 16 languages abroad, including German, English, French, Spanish. The novel was praised by the New Yorker, Guardian, Times, FAZ, and NZZ.

Gospodinov is editor and co-author of “I’ve Lived Socialism. 171 Personal Stories” (2006) and “Inventory Book of Socialism”, (2006). He has Ph.D. from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; is editor of Literaturn Vestnik (a weekly publication for literature), and for the last 10 years he has been a Friday columnist of Dnevnik (a national daily).

<http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/16905>

Translation

The Invisible Crises

This text was read on March 18, 2010 on the opening day of the Leipzig Book Fair. Mr. Georgi Gospodinov was among the six European writers invited by the fair organizers to the "Autorenspecial" programme to give a speech on the ***Crisis! What Crisis?*** topic.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From the very start I plead innocent. I have been invited here to talk as a writer about a crisis that I did not bring about. Neither I, nor the entire writers' guild brought it and same for the people at this fair, the readers and publishers. In the classic case writers and money are two institutions doomed to a rather tepid relationship. We greet each other even though we never speak, to paraphrase Voltaire's response when he was asked about his relationship with another much more senior authority. I should not put off admitting my lack of experience in this so important financial field. I have never taken credit from a bank: firstly because I dread these institutions, and secondly, because no bank, as you know, will grant credit to a person with the freelance and somewhat lightweight profession of a writer. This is how because of something that is not good one remains innocent and virginal.

Let us imagine that at this moment at some other location there is an economic forum taking place in parallel to the Leipzig Book Fair. Its topic is "***Literature! What Literature?***". Six European finance experts have been invited to give a talk. Leading economists have crowded the room and are looking forward to hearing how the literature affects the stock market, the bad credits, the entire financial system, consumer demand etc. I know it is tough to imagine, it is even funny to do so. Because we have our reasons to suspect that the major financial players do not read lots of poetry and prose. We have not seen bankers, economists, private entrepreneurs, brokers spend hours over a novel or a poetry book and argue heatedly on Chekhov, Joyce or Thomas Mann. This never appears in any of the films we have watched. I am always under the impression that if the financiers read books, our crises would be different.

Let's face it. We, the people from the land of literature: writers, publishers and avid readers, to some extent have already accepted our defeat. With some humbleness we have accepted our place on the periphery. It is the politics and economics that make the world go round. The art in general and literature in particular are the extras we can easily do without. In any case, a book does not constitute a more vital, sought after or advertised object than a mobile phone or a play station. We did get used to the fact that the serious stuff about people and the world is announced on the evening news by serious people with serious professions, and also in the economical and political pages of the papers. The last several times that I saw great writers on the first page of big newspapers it was an announcement of their death. It is an irony of fate that the "author's death" is still an event, sometimes the only literary event!

Clearly, the utopian idea about an economic forum where the debate centres on literature is so far only a figment of my imagination. (Still, I go on holding on to it.) Most likely such a forum would end quickly and with an across-the-board consensus that literature makes no economic sense for the writers, nor does it for the publishers and readers. That is, for the entire chain, for us all gathered here. There are no significant investments, no overdemand and oversupply, banks are not so tightly linked to this business. Literature is rather illiquid and even small

investments pay back with effort. It is not related to the market of energy sources. And have you ever seen books traded on commodity exchanges? Having said all that, their conference may be closed and literature declared useless, especially during times of crisis.

Unfortunately we cannot, in response to that, close down the economy. We can, however, and to some degree we are obliged to, speak about the crisis, talk through it, describe it from our bell tower, try to understand it, pat it, tame it, snarl at it if need be... The objective is to make the crisis talk.

What are our reasons and rights to talk about a financial crisis? Will they not accuse us of trespassing?

Firstly I will tell you that sooner or later everything, every single territory, becomes a literary topic. Secondly, in a nutshell, literature has been around longer than money. Our reasons to talk are pretty much historical. The exchange of words dates back from before the exchange of money. That is obvious, but isn't it the obvious that we are often blind to? It is not even that literature is using a tool, such as the language, which is much more ancient than money. What is more important is that the very origin of money as a symbol follows the deep logic of the language. Long before the virtual essence of money there existed the virtuality of language. As a word contains in itself the object it represents without the real presence of this object, so the banknote contains in itself the goods it can be potentially exchanged for. Imagine what would happen if we talked through the very objects. In order to say "elephant", I would have to shove in the animal here. And what if I wanted to say "fire" or "crisis"?

In brief, the imaginary which underlies the economy and communications today, has historically descended from the utilisations of language and literature, from the conventions people got used to in those days long gone by. Literature and economy may happen to be linked much more closely that we have ever supposed. In my opinion, one of the issues lingering in the space of today's financial crisis is whether the virtual has not reached its critical mass. It is possible that the signs have exceeded their value and we may be exchanging signs without cover. Let semiotics intervene here. Today's financial crisis is to a large extent a crisis of virtuality, This virtuality has reached its possible limit without being sufficiently secured by reality. Similar to loans backed by insufficient collateral.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I come from a country that is well familiar with the flavour of crises. Not only has it tasted them well but also in the last decades it has not got out of them. These crises started raging after the fall of communism in 1989, yet they were conceived and brought up exactly by the decades of the preceding system. I was 21 in 1989 and clearly remember both states of the crisis – that of socialist times badly disguised by the ragged cover of ideology, and that of the transition period after the Wall fell that nobody tried to disguise anymore. My short personal list of crises starts from the 80's. I would like to specify that these are related to the Bulgarian version of socialism and my adolescence at that time. That is, we have already mentioned two initial crises. So, my list includes:

- **The energy crisis.** We called it the "power cut regime": three hours of power supply were followed by three hours of power cut. Some joked that viewed from space Bulgaria resembled a disco. Everyone had stocked on candles. Thus we sat in the cold rooms of our 20th-century concrete blocks of flats with the candles casting medieval shadows.

- **Shortage of staple goods.** At various time periods first necessity goods would vanish from the shops. During the 80's the hit was the absence of cooking oil, female hygiene pads, toilet paper, paprika, not to mention oranges and bananas that would appear only around New Year. If oranges were offered for sale, then New Year was near. We developed this conditional reflex, similar to Pavlov's dog: oranges - therefore New Year. In the end I did taste oranges. Yet during my entire childhood I never got the chance to have the chocolate eggs and real *Milka* chocolate I yearned for! One could buy them solely at the so called *Korekom* shops where only convertible currency was accepted. To get convertible currency, however, one needed special status... Therefore, the first thing I did after socialism came to an end was to buy a chocolate egg. That was in 1990 and chocolate eggs were now sold in normal shops. I collected money and clearly recall my embarrassment while paying for the egg at the register. Who knows why I blurted out to the cashier that the egg was for my nephew. I snatched it, got back to my student flat, locked the door and savoured it slowly and self-centredly, on my own, really slowly, to compensate for all those years during which I had dreamt about it. I was 22. There is no way I can forget that taste of chocolate and tears. Good that no one watched me. That was my chocolate Berlin wall. The end of socialism can sometimes be part of such small things.

I can describe many other local micro-crises from the 80's, including the entire informational blackout (let's call it the **information crisis**) after the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The secret kept by the government and the media for several days was literally a killer. It happened at the end of April and on May 1 we all had to march through the squares under the spring Chernobyl rain. I am telling you all this so that we have a basis for comparison between those crises and the one we are in the midst of today.

Most generally, those were crises of shortages whereas the current one, they say, is a crisis of overconsumption. As a matter of fact, at least for Bulgaria the crises of the 80's were transposed to the next decade. Communism is in some sense radioactive – it has a long period of half-decay. So at the beginning of the 90's while we were standing exhilarated at the squares, we again, like in a *déjà vu*, lived through a power cut regime as well as several alternating crises, shortage of goods, incredible inflation, bank failures, the meltdown of all our savings in 1996. It was possible to witness an absolutely empty shop with empty fridges, empty shelves and shop assistants awkwardly idling around. That would make a good museum of socialism, a museum of absolute void.

Recently I wrote a script for a short 4-minute film for this rich in crises year – 1996. The film tells the story of a mother that exchanges several dollars to buy eggs, cheese, mushrooms and make an omelette for her son. While she is queuing, the currency exchange rate changes several times and in the end she only has money for 3 eggs. Of those a single one survives the trip back to her place. With one egg the omelette is very bizarre. It is a twist of fate that the film was noticed at the Sundance Film Festival at the beginning of 2009, at the peak of today's crisis.

This is in short my Bulgarian experience with the crises of the past. The question is, if you have lived in a permanent crisis like that of the past 30 years, how are you to sense the next one which constitutes today's topic? In order to have a sense for a crisis, which is also a healthy feeling, you must have as well experienced another, crisis-free time. There is an entire generation that has never lived outside this situation. This generation has no other memory, other senses and other experience. How does it perceive the next crisis? How will it react to the situation when the crisis is over? Does it know how to live in normal times?

Let me give some numbers. Last year in Bulgaria there were 100,000 new unemployed of which 50,000 were really young people. According to Eurostat, the country ranks first in the European Union with respect to the social deprivation criterion (51% of the Bulgarians suffer material

deprivation). And the general feeling in the public is that the true crisis has not yet reached Bulgaria. At least not full-scale. It seems to me that what is scarier than feeling a crisis is the lack of feeling, the lack of senses to perceive a crisis. It is equal to the absence of thermal receptors. Then any stove or hot plate can kill you. What the literature can help with is the development of sensitivity to crises. Otherwise they become permanent while our insensitivity to them - chronic.

Again as per Eurostat data about 17%, or one out of six in the EU, lives at the poverty threshold. There is an invisible European country with 80 million citizens. We cannot find it on the map, and still it is larger than France, Italy, Spain, Poland. A country of poverty the same size as Germany. Do we know enough about it? Let us, though, go back to the much smaller Bulgaria. Officially, the current crisis got there in July 2009. Which translates into a 2.5-year journey from the US. The speed has not been particularly high, yet in that part of Europe the roads are not so good either. The truth is, the Bulgarian government at that time turned a blind eye to it. It claimed that the economic indicators were very good and Bulgaria was an “island of stability” in the ocean of the world crisis. What we now know for sure and the crisis has confirmed it again is that the island idea is no longer valid. Literature, of course, knew it before the economy. Those lovely lines about the impossibility to be an island and about the bells that always toll for you, by John Donne – we all know them (owing to Hemingway) – date back to 1624. They also form part of a book with prayers and mediations with the lovely and appropriate for today title, “Devotions upon Emergent Occasions”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is the place to admit that the crisis we are describing is by no means the only one nor the greatest in the world history. Yes, to some degree that is disappointing, I very well understand. Again we were not lucky to witness great times. The economists describe a score of similar major financial crises that occurred in just the last 150 years! The first is believed to be that of 1857 starting from the US and the mass failure of the railroad companies. It quickly swam across the “pond” which makes us think that the economy already stretched across the borders. Another famous crisis followed, that of 1873. It lasted whole 6 years and got the name Long Depression. Then came the most major one, the Great Depression, which has its exact starting date – October 24, 1929, i.e. Black Thursday. Then the first petrol crisis of 1973, then the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange in 1987, plus those consecutive crises that were so frequent during the 80’s and 90’s, the Mexican crisis, the Asian one and so on and so forth.

Have we got a name for the crisis of today? Alas, no matter how much it expands, it will never be called the “Great Depression”. Which, to a certain extent, exacerbates our own depression. There is certain greatness missing from today’s crisis. Our crises and depressions have not become smaller but the fashion in which we experience them seems to have shrunk. We have too many promises of salvation, too many virtual ways out. In a fast and diced up world there is no way for us to live through the grief and the tragedy around us in that integral, compete and elated manner that they deserve. Which does not bring us any relief. On the contrary. Another reason is that what the ancient Greeks called catharsis becomes ever more unreachable. The impossibility to experience a tragedy, a crisis, a depression to its lowest point makes you its permanent hostage. The crisis becomes chronic. My covert radical hypothesis is that for the last decades we have been experiencing the same chronic crisis with separate remission periods. Let us not forget that “crisis” is a medical concept used even by Hippocrates and Galen, that is, long before it became an economic concept.

The question, however, was whether we had a name for today’s crisis. Yes, it turns out that more and more writers utilise the name “Great Recession”. Here we did, after all, arrive at some grandeur, at the coveted qualifier “great”. (By the way, according to an article by Catherine

Rampell in the New York Times from March 11, 2009, this name has embellished at least 4 economic crises from 1970 onward.) On the other hand, “recession” is a concept with a much lower degree of tragedy, the “heroic dimension” is lost here. According to the economic definition a recession constitutes two consecutive quarters with negative values for the Gross Domestic Product. Somehow this is too unambiguous and computable. Beyond the economy the word “recession” is associated with the erosion of sand shores and gums and so on. Against this background “depression” shines with its full fan of meanings. There is really a myth, a legend here. Literature and psychoanalysis have done a good job. There is real depth in each sense of this word. In geology a depression is a deep valley, a trench, the ocean bed. In fact the deepest depression in the world is the Mariana Trench. That is another Great Depression for you. We can juxtapose it to that of 1929 as well as to our own melancholies and depressions. A depression as deep as the Mariana Trench. This sounds like a poem.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me, since we already paid our dues to the historical, etymological, geographical and even geological dimensions of the crisis (and the depression), to have a peek in its private personal depths. Here, in contrast to the field of economics, I am a true expert, like we all are, I believe, who are on the side of books.

Actually, one of the good aspects of this crisis is that it lets us discuss issues that stretch beyond it. We call it financial because it is easiest to see that part of the iceberg. Everybody is sensitive when money is concerned. Yet here the singular of “crisis” is deceptive. The crises, especially the visible ones, are more than one. In the short catalogue we enlist the environmental one – I specially insist on underscoring the bees’ mysterious disappearance in the last years; also the crisis with the depletion of the energy sources and so on and so forth. All stuff we have talked so much about that we have stopped noticing it. Besides them, however, I am also referring to another, less visible personal and global crisis which is not exhausted with the bank failures. Which is this crisis? Here is one possible answer.

It is known that the financial crisis started from the so called easy credits granted quickly and light-handedly, without sufficient collateral and guarantees. We know that “credit” derives from the Latin “credo” – to lend but also to believe, to trust. So the etymology is giving us a hint that before the credit crisis the crisis is in the credo. Today we have freezing of credits – just translate it as freezing of the trust, of the belief. Analogously we are facing a system of quick, easy and superficial explanations and values. The market and media to a large extent stimulate these processes. The market wants you to buy instantaneously, without too much thinking. The authentic person is the consuming person, the shopping person, the person greedy for the world. (“Greed is good”, states Gekko’s famous slogan).

Don’t hesitate, the market says, that is your nature. Make a wish, get the money and get it now. Live today. On the other side is the culture with all its hesitations. Also with its absolutely nonmarket idea of how to live tomorrow. Two different worlds with a high level of tension between them. It is clear which one has predominance. I claim that the meaning of literature is to take the loser’s side. The value of being a winner and to be invulnerable is natural for the system of capitalism. Yet for the people who are on our side, the losing one, it pays off to stand behind the vulnerability as a value, to stand behind the hesitation and insecurity. I believe in the hesitant human being.

What is the link to the media? At some point Milan Kundera calls them “reductionists of the meaning”. Intentionally or not, they transmit and often also participate in the manufacturing of easy explanations about the world. Of course, the media have also been badly hit by the crisis.

The shrinking of the media market, the fall in the circulation volume, the loss of advertisers: all that is a fact. But the strategy for their salvation, at least in Bulgaria, entails an even stronger reduction of the sense. The first that is dropped from a newspaper are the pages for analysis, investigative journalism, social and political journalism, and the pages on books and culture. I find this rather myopic in the long term. Should right during a crisis there not be more supply of alternative versions about what is happening beyond the immediate visibility of the facts?

To the easy explanations about the world (the easy credits) I will also add the expert economic explanation. This crisis is a defeat for the overly arrogant Homo economicus, as some analysts wrote. It is a defeat for the idea that the world can be explained solely through economical relationships, cash flows, markets, interest rates, credits. Even the economic depressions cannot be explained solely with the use of economic parameters.

We are not made of economics and politics. We are also made of grief and hesitation, of such delicate and unexplainable stuff.

Each crisis has a visible and an invisible aspect. We can measure the former, the latter – no. How do we measure grief? The question is to have senses for both sides. And not to try to treat one with medicine designed for the other. Because there is no way to treat grief with antibiotics. Nor can we treat one's personal depression with a financial shot.

We are at the threshold. This is just a private intuition of a new crisis, analogous to the one related to the depletion of the oil deposits and the energy sources. I once called it the *depletion of the deposits of meaning*. Yes, to a great degree it will be a global, a world crisis. Perhaps in separate countries it will have a more specific or a more severe expression. There, where the own deposits of meaning have never been particularly deep. And where they have been used up much faster. A crisis of the short horizon, a crisis of motivation, the unclear tomorrow, oscillation between depression and aggression, blowing up of the rather delicate truces in society.

Therefore I predict a terrific future for the literature as the producer of meaning. Something like an alternative energy source. What does literature do, to state in a nutshell. It tells stories and thus postpones the end (Scheherazade) and expands the world and our own restricted time and body. Our life would be insultingly short without literature. What else? It gives us tools for interpretation. It teaches us how to think about ourselves and the world, how to tell the world, how to read it. Literature is a slow medium in contrast to the classic and new media, but the meaning it gives has the important quality of duration. What is slow lasts long. I like the story about the Bedouins who during their long journeys often stopped to let their souls catch up with them. The rate of the soul is different. I claim that literature knows more about this rate.

There is yet another advantage to literature. Everything, at the end of the day, turns into a literary topic. So does the crisis. As Mallarme wrote in Borges' favourite quote, "Everything in the world exists to end up as a book."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

All this time I tried to talk about the meaning, the importance and the resistance of literature regarding a crisis from behind which there are other, invisible, crises peeking.

To be honest, let me at the very end say something that seems to refute me. Recall that the Great Depression of 1929 occurred at the end of one of the greatest literary decades that saw the publication of books by Joyce, Proust, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Eliot... It sounds rather discouraging. Still, it leaves us with the hope that exactly this great literature has brought sense

and consolation to the personal grieves and depressions of those who lived through 1929. Which is by no means little.

At the finishing line I would give my trust and personal credit to the abovementioned Thomas Stearns Eliot who said: "For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

By the way, Eliot himself, as we know, worked for seven years for a famous London bank.

Winner AV

Ekaterina Kostova

Report title: "Една история за малкия човек" ("The story of a...small man")

Published in: f2f TV, 31/08/2010

Ekaterina Kostova began her professional journalism career in 1992 at the Regional Centre of the Bulgarian National Television in Plovdiv. She worked there for six years as a host of various shows and programmes. Afterwards she had her own show in the private television Eurocom, and since 1999 she became part of the F2F Studio. For the last ten years in the F2F Studio she has created hundreds of news productions and reports for several private televisions.

As part of the F2F Studio team she has two prizes: from UNICEF – for a TV report promoting breastfeeding, and from the Ministry of Defense - the annual award for presenting the Ministry's work - "Officer".

Summary: "Една история за малкия човек" ("The story of a...small man")

This is the story of a man and his family, stricken by poverty only because of his Lilliputian size.

When Stoyan was born 4 decades ago, he was just like all other babies in the maternity hospital. But his mother dropped him on the ground when he was 6 months old and shortly after that she left him and his father. He was left with the pain of abandonment and a physical defect; he would not grow beyond 135cm.

Today he has a family. In the beginning of their marriage he and his wife Sylvia were making plans for their home; to repair the small house he inherited on one of the hills in his hometown Plovdiv and to live happily in it. And so they did in the beginning. He was in the construction business and had 18 employees. They got a child. But after that the crisis swallowed his business and they spent one year without electricity and he has now been without a job for two years.

The powerlessness, which he feels in front of the employers and the emotional scars of his being abandoned by his mother, are the feelings which rule their family life. Their son didn't know until recently what the word "television" means, because their electricity was cut. And he still gets a bath today in an external, terrible looking bath or in a tray placed in the center of the only room that the family lives in. They warm the bathing water with the immersion heater ... There are no sweets or confectionery and toys are a luxury.

We chose to make this story come to life for the audience as this regards a different kind of poverty than the one we normally see on our streets, begging, digging from garbage cans. In our case poverty is a result of ill fate, not one of choice. It is caused by the economic crisis, but also by the discriminating attitudes of the society towards small people. So the story of this real small man ... turns him into small and meaningless in his own eyes.

Our team saw in this family the will to fight their situation "I did not have a childhood, but my son will have it. I will fight hard, and give him a good upbringing..."- Says Stoyan at the end of the reportage: shaking balance of a rejected man who finds it hard to change his own fate.

The national winners were selected by a national jury which consisted of:

- Ivanka Shalapatova, Head of Foundation “For our children” (NGO) working to prevent abandonment of babies and children in institutions; for equal access to education for children with disabilities
- Kiril Valchev, Darik Radio
- Boris Hamalski, Bulgarian Telegraph Agency
- Nikova Radiona, State Agency for Child Protection
- Milen Valkov, Union of Bulgarian Journalists
- Zlateva Elitsa, EC Representation