

On democracy and its opponents. Notes from Southeastern Europe

Nationalism, with its dichotomy of 'good vs the other' is upon us again. If liberal democracy is not protected we are on a dangerous path to inhumanity...again.

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Here are some of the book titles trending in the past few years: 'How democracies die', 'Democracy in crisis', 'democratic rollback', 'Competitive authoritarianism', 'The new totalitarian temptation.' All of them suggest that something has gone wrong with liberal democracy, that a certain fatigue and a state of crisis have replaced the era of vitality and functionality of democracy. Admittedly, there are few scholars and thinkers trying to make a counterpoint and arguing against the cultural pessimist view of decline. Steven Pinker's book 'Enlightenment now' is probably the most powerful recent account of optimism based on facts, spreading the message that 'life is getting better' and liberal humanism is prevailing. The debate is controversial and the situation across the globe varies. Therefore, a closer look at specific regions may tell us more.

How can we describe times that we live in? It seems that the era in which liberal democracy was a predominant socio-political system rapidly spreading across the globe, has come to an end.

So, where to begin the story about democracy and the crisis of democracy? It is difficult to say, especially in the case of Southeastern Europe (or particularly in the Western Balkans) – where we are witnessing a regression of democratic standards and values before democracy has ever managed to become the "only game in town."

I believe that there is no space for relativism – freedom is under attack again. And yet, contexts, circumstances and reasons why such attacks are not only possible, but seem plausible and justified to so many people, have to be found in "thick descriptions" (Clifford Geertz) of stories. Scholars and experts discuss the decline of democracy under various terms including authoritarianism, despotism, illiberalism, nationalist and far right populism. What unites such regimes

are open attacks on fundamental rights, freedoms and liberal values, obstruction and dominance of formal state institutions and clientelism combined with a strong nationalist rhetoric. In Europe specifically, particularly since the beginning of the so called 'refugee crisis' of 2015, a new populist and nationalist, mostly right wing discourse has become more prominent. The proponents of

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this new right wing nationalism claim that protecting the purity of "our" cultural nations against (mostly Muslim) immigrants, and by doing so protecting the national sovereignty, is the ultimate task. What has followed is a continuous rise of populist and nationalist parties all over Europe.

New nationalist 'Othering' and authoritarian governance

Populist nationalism is on the rise in the Western Balkans too. Whatever definition we take, populism always includes an attempt to turn the symbolic and emotional project of an exclusively defined ethnic/cultural group into a political, nationalist project. Such a process ultimately results in divisions, in putting borders and demarcation lines to the forefront. The process of drawing new boundaries (in Europe for example since the refugee movements of 2015) and reiterating old ones (like in the Balkans following the wars of the 1990s) is an integral part of the nationalist mobilization that we see today.

This mobilization goes hand in hand with the moralization of the community. "Our" community is portrayed as authentic, brave, pure and morally on a higher ground than the community of "others", which is endangering our moral consensus. Such a mor-

alization is dangerous as it operates on the basis of the politics of fear – the motto being 'demonizing the other to protect ourselves'. The most dangerous aspect of nationalist demonizing or 'othering' is not only the rhetorical but also real exclusion of those that do not belong to us. In the Western Balkans the 'others' could be Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs. In Europe the 'others' are immigrants, 'foreigners', Roma, etc.

The idea of excluding the 'other' has become normal. Once that happens, an even greater danger looms – a constant evolution of who constitutes the 'other.' It could be political opponents or someone that looks different. Where does it stop? This, indeed, is a very dangerous path.

A new type of (semi-)authoritarian governance has emerged, not only in Europe and the European neighborhood but also globally. This trend is partly building up on new populist and nationalist moment and is partly a consequence of weaknesses of formal institutions and democratic political culture. As Charley Tilly put it in the early 2000s, "de-democratization" seems to be immanent to any kind of democratization. It has also become increasingly clear that liberal democracy is only one possible final outcome of democratization processes. Forms of rule and regimes beyond democracy with strong man and ruling parties "running the show" have proven to be perceived as attractive, flexible, and partly functional alternatives to democracy. Such regimes are seemingly able to reconcile competitive elections, multi-party systems, parliaments, constitutions and other elements usually associated with liberal democracies with the functional logic of authoritarianism and the mechanisms and techniques often applied by authoritarian regimes.

Curiously enough, these new regimes use democracy as a façade for establishing a

powerful but clientelist and corrupt system based on alleged reforms, on deregulation and on restructuring. Such a system is accompanied by a whole set of neoliberal discourses on pragmatism, efficiency, economic reforms, etc. At the same time it completely neglects the social dimension of deepening inequalities, low wages, a new precariat, and unbearable life conditions for parts of the population.

Hope as practice – Quest for new democratic engagement of citizens

Ágnes Heller, the great philosopher who died recently, had one major message she kept repeating in the last years of the life: 'Liberal democracy is imperfect, in some places more imperfect than in others. But we do not have anything else to protect. This is the only thing we can protect.'¹ I am convinced that protecting liberal democracy can only be achieved by renewed democratic engagement of citizens based on renewed hope that better and more just societies are possible.

One particular form of engagement is the one that we see in social movements or protest movements, particularly in Southeastern Europe. Not all protest movements are 'progressive' by nature; they may very well be conservative or nationalist. In the region we have seen strong reformist, democratic forms of social engagement with huge potential to rejuvenate the notion of democracy. The "Colourful Revolution" in North Macedonia stands as an important milestone and role model for democratic change. Protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina ('Justice for David'), Serbia ('One of five million') and recent protests in Romania, do represent a fundamental critique against the "untouchable" political elites, against injustice, corruption, malfunctioning of state and economy, and generally against non-democratic political practices.

A new enlightenment is needed, argues the young Spanish philosopher Marina Garcés,² a radical enlightenment based on the education, on a re-thought relationship between the knowledge and emancipation, fighting against the authoritarian will and retrotopian visions of the society (Zygmunt Bauman). I am deeply inspired by citizens of the Balkans that are resisting and fighting authoritarian power. I am convinced that the fight for new enlightenment has to be entrenched in the principle of hope, including political hope based on the universal principles of human dignity, freedom, justice and equality.

Martha C. Nussbaum – In her recent account on "hope"³ introduced the term "practical hope", one 'that is firmly linked to, and energizes a commitment to action.' If all types of hope-based actions – be it in form of protest movement, through civil society engagement, through investigative journalism (to name only a few) – continue engaging and fighting for just, democratic, equal, and livable societies, freedom will ultimately prevail. ●

Endnotes

- 1 Ágnes Heller: Orbán is a tyrant, PoliticalCritique.org, 13.8.2018, <http://politicalcritique.org/cee/hungary/2018/agnes-heller-orban-is-a-tyrant/>
- 2 Marina Garcés, Neue radikale Aufklärung, Turia+Kant, Wien-Berlin 2019
- 3 Martha C. Nussbaum, The Monarchy of Fear. A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis, New York 2018, p.204

