

‘Democracy in the Western Balkans came to be understood as freedom of the collective, not as freedom and equality of individuals’

with functioning of democracy and only 32% were convinced that democracy represents the only and best governing system. In addition to this general dissatisfaction with political options, one observes an exceptionally high mistrust towards political elites in comparison to other societal actors. Only 22% of respondents in Serbia approved of their political leaders. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, the frustration and dissatisfaction with political elites is increasing too.

While the certain crisis of democracy or – to put it differently – democracy fatigue in the Balkans parallel to post-democratic tendencies in the West has emerged, certain percentage of citizens in the Balkans societies started to be rather skeptical towards the ‘role model’ and values of the West and the EU. If we take an example of Serbia, we see that citizens who consider themselves as victims and losers of the wars and developments in the past 20 years, have started creating very negative and critical images of the West and its values. The West is accused of having ‘wrong perceptions’ of Serbia, of focusing on its own interests while claiming that it acts for the sake of higher democratic values, they accuse the West of decadency and aggressive and hegemonial behavior. Citizens selectively choose examples from Western countries (such as the situation in Italy during the Berlusconi era, or the emergence of corruption cases in countries like Italy, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Greece, etc.) to argue that Western societies do not represent ‘real values’ that are different to Serbia and other Balkan societies, where – as goes the argument – humanistic and traditional values are still preserved.

This growing disenchantment with Europe and the West is supported by various survey data (for example the annual survey conducted by Balkan Monitor) showing a significant increase

of EU-skepticism. The support for the EU integration has been decreasing in the last few years in almost all countries of the Western Balkans. Despite the fact that Croatia is the country closest to the EU (Croatia will join the EU in 2013), the skepticism towards the EU and certain values the EU represents is growing. For example, support for the EU in Macedonia fell from 62% in 2009 to 60% in 2010. In Serbia, the support for the EU dropped in 2010 to 44%; while the support in Croatia reached very low 28%. (Gallup Monitor 2010) The conclusion could be drawn: the EU accession is still supported – but certainly not so fervently. In the time of the Euro debt crisis and the fears of new recession in Europe, it is highly unlikely that the EU will be able to strengthen its function as a role model for the Balkans and to accelerate the EU integration efforts. It may even further endanger the already established democratic values in the region.

Let me conclude by quoting Ivan Krastev: ‘After two decades of wars and painful economic transition, Balkan societies appear mistrustful and pessimistic’, and ‘The Balkans still represent a collection of frustrated protectorates and weak states’ (Gallup Monitor 2010). Krastev and many other scholars detect the new crisis of democracy and democratic values in the Balkans even before democracy has become ‘the only game in town’. The global crisis of democracy and of traditional values and norms attached to democracy has become the part of the Balkans present.

Vedran Dzihic is senior fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University.

Mous Knowing better

Long ago, when I was in primary school, every year the same missionary honoured us with a visit. His remarkable appearance – bare feet in sandals, long beard, wearing a white habit with a coarse rope around his waist – never failed to impress his young audience. And so did his stories. He told us about black people in foreign countries who suffered from terrible diseases, were hungry and naked and above all deeply grateful for his merciful work. We children diligently saved up bottle caps that contained aluminium and could be sold to buy food and clothing for the poor. In my childish imagination it was a good cause to feed the hungry, so they wouldn’t have to eat each other anymore. Apparently I had heard about cannibals. To clothe the naked was a different story; I felt deeply sorry for the poor bastards who, due to my bottle caps, had to wear pants and skirts. My school was Roman-Catholic and the dress code was strict. Girls were not allowed to wear just pants. Over it, you had to wear a skirt too. I hated the two waistbands and envied primitive peoples for their nakedness.

In my adolescent years I no longer believed in faith. My rebellion against church rules was caused by their fussy interference with my way of life and in particular to their smug pedantry. I embraced the assumptions of humanism, as I still do. Self-determination, personal freedom, empowerment of people to live their lives the way they like. When I reached adulthood, D66 was founded just in time to fulfil my desire for community involvement. We demolished the compartmentalization of our Dutch society, reinforced the control of power and refused to take the morals of our time for granted. But above all we wanted to live in a country where both human rights and concern for the environment were self-evident. Nothing could jeopardize our

individuality; the key-word was democracy. We believed in our ability to change the world. Today, sadder and wiser, I realise that real change has to take a thorny path. I vividly remember my struggle to free myself from the religion of my upbringing. I had nightmares about having become a leper. The nuns had effectively planted the conviction in my subconscious that misbelievers were not only hungry and naked, but so terribly ill as well that only God could save them. Even during pregnancy I hesitated, for a brief moment, about baptizing our child-to-be.

The European Prime Ministers hesitate too. Unfortunately not only for a brief moment. Forty-five years of concurrency are not enough to internalize the awareness of mutual dependency. When things get tough, the Pavlovian response in all national parliaments is the same: let’s do it without them or get rid of them. But we all agree that candidate states have to change and they have to do it at the earliest. My own liberal democrats are adding the extra mile for them with their demands for the quality of their democracy. I hesitate. Why not rely on the strengths of people?

Marijke Mous