DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

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Throughout the history of Europe, the progress of communication and exchange between human groups depended on the universalisation of the instruments of social communication and the gradual adoption of common standards that made it possible to overcome political, language and ethnic barriers. This was the case with the system of weights and measures, which for a long time remained local in character; the arbitrary definition of their values gave rise to constant conflict. Only in modern times were measures standardised, with most European countries adopting the metric system. The standard metre was created and deposited in 1889 at Sèvres in France, the very country which through persuasion, pressure or by force fostered the spread of the metric system

Perhaps it would be possible —at least metaphorically— to apply the example of the universalisation of the system of weights and measures to democracy. Certainly, modernisation processes have fostered the spread of the belief that a democratic organisation of public life is a universal value: this is what the concept of «the end of history» signified, even though it concerned the history of ideas rather than social reality. Of course, not all civilisations have understood and practised democracy in the same way, nor can any of democracy's historical forms be defined as the model against which all others must be judged. It has been a long way from Thucydides, who in the *Funeral Oration of Pericles* opposed despotism and tyranny to government by the majority —the hallmark of democracy, to the Warsaw declaration of 2000—. The democratic system has become a more and more universally accepted model, and ever more countries have given their citizens the power to decide who should govern them and how those governments are to be controlled. Although this process was not cumulative and did encounter some setbacks, the record of the 20th century in this area is on balance a positive one. Fareed Zakaria begins his book *The Future of Freedom* with this striking statement:

> We live in a democratic age. In 1900 not a single country had what we would today consider a democracy: a government created by elections in which every adult citizen could vote. Today 119 do…

All civilisations and all continents have taken part in this march of democracy across the globe, albeit with varying intensity. In the successive waves of democratisation —as outlined by Samuel Huntington in his «The Third Wave»— the special position of a group of countries in the North Atlantic area became blurred, because democracy had become universally accepted as the only source of legitimate power. Even in the totalitarian system in force in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, it seemed necessary to organise elections every few years— only for show, of course, since these elections were neither free nor fair, but it is significant that they were seen as an instrument indispensable for legitimising the government.

In the second half of the 20th century, despite this obvious triumph of democracy around the world, debates on democracy's weaknesses continued unabated. *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to Trilateral Commission*, published in 1975, diagnosed a crisis of democracy connected with the delegitimisation of power, ineffectiveness of governments and disaggregation of group interests. One of the authors of that report, French sociologist Michel Crozier, said that a

> vague and persistent feeling that democracies have become ungovernable has been growing steadily in Western Europe

and foresaw the growing success of state socialism, the spread of the communist system, and considered the tendency towards «Finlandisation» a lesser evil. Today, after the fall of

communism, this pessimistic tone may seem absurd and base-less. It does, however, correctly point out that democracy is by its very nature weak and fragile, and that it should never be considered as granted and attained for good.

Democracy is, above all, a constant challenge. This holds for the degree to which the principle of representative-ness is applied in political life, the extent to which executive power is perceived as legitimate, the degree of citizens' parti-cipation in public life, and the extent to which collective inte-rests are articulated in the functioning of the state. Treating democracy as a challenge also requires that close attention be paid to the relation between the principle of majority govern-ment and respecting the rights of the minority, which in fact corresponds to the question first raised by Thucydides —the issue of relations between the strong and the weak in the practice of government. Finally, the category of challenge is also appropriate to consider tensions between the centrali-sing tendency in the functioning of the state and the tenden-cies to increase autonomy of the lower rungs of territorial power. Regardless of how these challenges were met in various civilisations and in different eras —and this was by no means a continuous or cumulative process—it can be sta-ted that the beginning of the 21st century is marked by gene-ral agreement to define democracy as a political system in which free and fair elections lead to the formation of govern-ments, public life is conducted according to the rule of law, the rights of minorities are respected, the constitutional sys-tem provides for a system of checks and balances between state institutions, and local autonomy is considerable. And, last but not least, we must also mention a democratic politi-cal culture, i.e. a civic virtue expressed through participation in public debate and the decision-making process itself.

Everyday political events around the world clearly show that democracy is a challenge, both in those countries where it does not exist, and in those where it does. This also holds true for Europe, where the principles of modern demo-cracy were born and where they were put into practice on the widest scale. Thanks to the reviews of the state of democracy around the world issued by major international institutes and institutions —for example the Freedom House, the Open Society Institute or the United Nations Development Pro-ject—I do not have to provide a detailed presentation of democracy on the European continent. Moreover, Europe possesses its own structures for the promotion and control of democracy.

The foremost of these is the Council of Europe, which was established in 1949 as the first pan-European ins-titution, and today numbers 45 member states. The set of its treaties (especially the European Human Rights Conven-tion), its «charters» and recommendations, define the rules and regulations that member-states should follow. The Council's institutions include the European Court of Human Rights, which considers individual complaints, as well as the European Commission for Democracy Through Law (known as the Venice Commission), which has gained considerable power and influence over the practice of crea-ting democratic law. The Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe, established in 1975 as a result of the Helsinki process, is also involved in the area of human rights protection. The OSCE, which today has 55 member states, including all the states that arose after the collapse of the Soviet Union, covers, besides European countries, also the nations of Central Asia. It is in the post-Soviet area that the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, one of its agencies, is functioning, effectively supporting and monitoring democratic procedures and institutions. And finally, the European Union, which after over half a century of existence now has 25 members, is an ever more closely integrated federation of nation-states and has set a democra-tic system of government as the foundation of the commu-nity and a pre-requisite of membership. These institutions' activities support democracy becoming the universal princi-ple on the European continent and an element of Europe's civilisational cohesion.

However, this could only happen after the historic breakthrough of 1989 led to the collapse of the communist system, the end of the cold war, and the unification of Euro-pe. Europe's collective memory should retain the remem-brance both of the totalitarian systems that were born on this continent and of the successes of the defence and deve-lopment of democracy in Western Europe, as well as of the peaceful transition to democracy in Central Europe. If the process of the unification of Europe on the basis of demo-cratic principles was peaceful, unmarked by revolutionary violence, it was also because it was rooted in universally accepted standards. Ukraine's Orange Revolution of Decem-ber 2004 showed that the transformation model followed in Central Europe in 1989 still retains its creative potential. It is significant that a society courageously rises up to fight for having democratic procedures —procedures which are con-sidered the norm— finally put into practice: to be able to change a government, or even a political system, through a vote; to be sure that elections are not falsified; for the parlia-ment to be a real representation of the people; to be sure that citizens no longer have to fear physical violence from their government. The striving for free and fair elections expressed a belief in the ethical aspect of democracy, which creates an opportunity for freedom, ensures respect for human dignity and demands respect for the truth. A similar perspective is now appearing before the people of Belarus, the only Euro-pean country that is not a member of the Council of Europe —because it does not fulfil the basic criteria of democracy.

European debates about democracy and its future —several months ago, the Council of Europe commissioned the *Future of Democracy in Europe Green Paper*— should not be perceived as catastrophic or pessimistic, but as a realistic endeavour to ensure that democratic institutions function effectively and enjoy the public's support. I would like to focus on several of the main issues of these debates. The first of these is the danger of populism. It arises from the very nature of democratic procedures. After all, Europe has lived through the painful experience of seeing democratic elections bring to power the enemies of democracy. In the spring of 1897 in fin-de-siècle Vienna, the extremist nationalist Karl Lüger was elected mayor in a democratic election; Emperor Franz Jozef prevented him from taking office for two years. In 1933 Hitler's victory in fully democratic elections brought about the end of the Weimar Republic. When social frustration creates a climate favourable to radical slogans and a desire for an all-knowing, all-powerful leader, democratic procedures may become a tool used to destroy freedom and overturn democracy. Opposition to this should include a critical analysis of the situation, the removal of the sources of frustration, and the augmentation of democratic procedures with a culture of democracy. It is amazing that even a country with as strong a democratic tradition as the Netherlands can witness both the success of a populist leader and the wave of violence of recent months. However, both of these demonstrate the potential influence on society at large of the shock caused by a mass inflow of immigrants. Europe needs immigrants in order to maintain its demographic and economic balance, but it has not yet managed to create mechanisms for their acculturation, which would remove tensions between the community receiving the immigrants and the newcomers, who usually come from other cultures or belong to different religions. Conflicts also arise in countries with large immigrant populations, especially of Muslim immigrants, as is the case in France. Exploiting ethnocentric sentiment does not in itself endanger the foundations of democracy, but it does open the door to dangerous radicalism. The experience of Austria, where the coming to power of such a radical party did not destroy democracy, but instead rather wore out that party, can serve as a demonstration of the self-defensive capabilities inherent in democracy. Generally speaking, it also shows how important it is to form a democratic culture that promotes the idea of an open society and opposes exclusion, ethnocentrism and the construction of cultural barriers.

The second issue in European debates on the future of democracy is the question of the civil society. It arises as a reaction to —or an instrument of resistance against— authoritarian governments. This was the case with dissident or opposition movements in the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe; civil society programs in all European countries are formulated in opposition to excessive power of the central government. The French historian Pierre Rosanvallon pointed out that in the modern history of France we can see a constant conflict of two models: that of political democracy, which assigns the chief role to the central political power and to promoting the general interest; and that of civil democracy, which ensures the realisation of particular interests and supports all intermediary bodies, such as associations, trade unions and local communities. In all of today's Europe civic society has achieved an important position, fulfilling not just a consultative or representative function but also certain executive functions, in many countries taking on the responsibility for distribution of certain funds from the central budget. Europe is making up for its delays with respect to the USA in the area of general development of non-government organisations, which bring citizens together in communities. In this way, Europe has achieved a combination of the two models: political democracy and civil democracy. This is of great importance for counter-acting the decreased participation in the political process in its conventional formula, i.e. carried out through political parties. Instead of political parties, the citizen participates in organisations focused on a specific task or a pragmatically defined goal. The falling trust in political parties results in a reduced interest in politics, and the citizens' indifference is a significant threat to democracy. It is therefore necessary to look for ways of counteracting the move of citizens away from politics, which they see a fight for power, in favour of increasing real participation in the functioning of democratic mechanisms and procedures —this is the formula for defending democracy. We are witnessing a redefinition of democracy whereby most European countries are following a trend to expand direct democracy processes by using the institution of the referendum to decide on issues which bear on the political system. Finally, the process of globalisation and the spread of new technologies has significant influence on the relationship between the state and the civil society, presenting the latter with new opportunities, both in the context of the post-authoritarian governments in the countries of Eastern Europe and in the democracies of Western Europe.

Thirdly, currently underway is the important debate on the European Union's constitutional treaty, which by 2006 should be ratified by all 25 member states, at least 10 of which will hold a referendum on the issue. The constitution brings together all the European Union treaties signed until now and gives European integration a political dimension. In this context, a debate has begun on the so-called democratic deficit in the European Union. The EU's democratic character is due primarily to the fact that all its member states are parliamentary democracies, but the functioning of the European Union itself was based on a hybrid formula combining an association of nation-states and a political community. In that formula, the decision-making and legislative process was

divided between the governments of member-states and community institutions. This in turn led to a situation which Larry Siedentop in his *Democracy in Europe* described with the words: «Democratic legitimacy in Europe is at risk».

The European Union has a half-century's experience of carrying out integration focused on economic objectives: the idea was to ensure peace in Europe, peace which would be guaranteed precisely by economic growth and gradual building of material prosperity. The issue of the political form of the community was put aside. However, when these problems had to be tackled to ensure continued development, the difficulties appeared. The first of these was the bureaucratisation of government, and already Montesquieu pointed out that a bureaucratic state becomes a modern form of despotism. The second was the necessity of separating democracy from the concept of the nation-state to which it was historically and organically tied. In order to overcome these difficulties, it was necessary to call upon the idea of «civic virtue», i. e. a culture of citizens' participation in public life and fostering a feeling of European citizenship that would bring together diverse ethnic groups and varied historic traditions —without denying their uniqueness and without destroying European diversity.

The European constitution provides the necessary institutional environment. It puts the European Union on the road toward federalism, without transforming it into a centralised super-state. It expands European citizens' rights, allowing for bottom-up legislative initiative, on condition of collecting a million signatures of citizens of at least several member states. It increases the powers of the European Parliament, which for a long time —even though it has been directly elected since 1979— had only a limited representative and legislative role. The governments of EU member-states could quote the words ascribed to Frederick the Great: «My people and I have to come to an agreement which satisfies us both. They are to say what they please, and I am to do what I please». The Parliament has attained influence over the formation and dismissal of the executive institution, i.e. the European Commission. The principle of subsidiarity is intended to safeguard the European Union's political architecture against tendencies toward centralisation and excesses of bureaucracy. Thus the debate on the European Union's «democratic deficit» leads to the creation of mechanisms that safeguard democracy.

The fourth noteworthy issue in European debates on democracy is connected to the tensions that in recent years have appeared in relations between Europe and the United States. In American political discourse, the belief in the universal character of democracy is used to legitimise the use of force abroad in order to spread democracy. Democracy is seen as a «political religion» to be promoted - even through military force. This is one explanation for the resurgence in neo-conservative rhetoric of the idea of «crusade», which had, many years ago, been used by another US president, Dwight Eisenhower. This outlook results from connecting the idea of democracy with moral values, which seems to be in line with the way democracy is understood today, both by Americans and by Europeans. However, the European view seems to be that democracy cannot be imposed by force, because then the means used may undo the intended outcome. Democracy is based on persuasion and on discussion, which means it must be an organic process, whose success depends on creating a social will toward freedom and a democratic political culture. International relations are served well by spreading democracy based on dialogue, in which international organisations exert pressure for democracy in a partner-like way, free from any patronising attitudes. A good example is the functioning of the Council of Europe and its procedures for accepting new members, or of the European Union and its rules for accession (the «Copenhagen criteria»).

Europe's experience of democracy can be seen as a historical success in learning and following the principle that Abraham Lincoln described as «government of the people, by the people, for the people». True, we must be aware of the weaknesses and deficiencies of this process. The processes of transition from communism to freedom remain uncompleted: we need only mention Belarus or Moldova. In some countries, authoritarian governments still treat their parliaments as mere window-dressing. The situation of the Roma in some European still gives cause for concern. Equal political rights for women are still not a reality - in the practice of public life, if not in constitutional provisions. The independence of the media, the financing of political parties, the relations between business and politics, all require improved legal regulation. Strengthening the civil society and improving civic education remain a challenge. However, regardless of existing weaknesses, the practice of its public life makes Europe a continent of democracy.

Certainly, democracy is not a cure for all that is wrong with the modern world. Nevertheless, the European experience permits the conclusion that a lack of democracy would make it more difficult to resist the temptation of excessive government, to rise to the challenges of poverty and human security, to avoid violations of human rights or intolerance. A democratic Europe can and should serve the strengthening of a cohesive community of the world's democracies; it can and should propound the position that every dictatorship, every authoritarian system, and every anti-democratic coup constitutes a threat to the world order.