

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE “Deepening the Democratization of the region as criteria for peace and stability in the Western Balkans”

Organised by the Albanian Council on International Relations, The Community of Democracies, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Tirana, 10 November 2011).

***Speaking Notes used by Ambassador (retired) Alexandros Mallias,
Special Advisor to ELIAMEP, Athens***

I had no intention to address the existing unresolved problems of the region. I will address more the issue of deepening the democratisation at large .

However, I cannot resist the temptation to comment briefly the content of the intervention by Deputy Foreign Minister Zoran Petrov. The aggressive, unhelpful, unfriendly and provocative manner he opted to present his Government's views on Greece, makes clear to everybody how hard indeed is for Greece to deal with Prime Minister Gruevski's politics and diplomacy.

Even harder to have a deal with him. Unfortunately.

1. ON POLITICS, PARTIES AND PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

The essence of our topic should be POLITICS. At their center the POLITIS (the citizen). Developments in European Union and through our region compels me to point out some observations which may not necessarily relate just to a particular country.

Nevertheless, I argue that they may have a cross-border scope of application.

Do we truly live in a democratic system called parliamentary democracy, foundation of the parliamentary republic or rather in a party republic?

Do our political masters serve the national interests, the country's interests or their personal political agendas and the party's interests when such interests converge?

Notwithstanding rhetoric and public statements, the gap between Politics, Polities and Policies from one hand and the POLITIS, the citizen, from the other is deepening.

Governments with a comfortable parliamentary majority lose swiftly the popular support

and public acceptance.

Governments based on the Party rule or posture render null and void the concept of "participatory democracy".

Even when used to lead or rather to mislead the public opinion, the concept of "participatory democracy" is merely empty of any essence or characteristic of what I like to call the "democratic legitimization process".

Participation in politics instead of becoming the cornerstone of a value/ideological based political affiliation and a partisan democratic process, is systemically transformed into an obedient party interest phenomenon.

So far, the concept of Participatory Democracy is to my deep disappointment synonymous with the practices of "demagogic politics".

Parliamentary democracy is losing its essence and foundations, its real meaning and substance.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union generated the collapse of the communist regimes and the drastic reduction of the influence of the Communist parties in the European countries-Greece and Cyprus are the exception to the rule- and politics.

Nevertheless, we experience that both in what we generally call centre-left or centre-right parties the Leader, the Central Committee or the Presidium of the Party cannot afford or tolerate dissenting views or votes.

The PARTY orthodoxy is the rule.

The PARTY rule is the orthodoxy of the system.

The PARTY system is the orthodoxy of the parliamentary democracy.

Indeed, what we observe in some countries is that speaking in and out of the Parliament in a way that is or in fact is perceived to be out of the party line, the Leader's line, tantamounts with deviation from the party's dogmatic posture.

If you are an M.P. then for sure either you are asked or forced to leave the party or, in most of recent cases in Greece, you are expelled from the party.

So, what kind of political system is the parliamentary system that favors the strict obedience to the Leader and the party and ignores the conscience motivated position or vote differentiations?

The freedoms of conscience and expression are universally guaranteed. The right to exercise freely the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of political choice -when you cast your vote-is valid and valuable for all citizens.

Yet, I am angry to see that they are considered to be an anathema for the political parties and the President (the party's leader) when it comes to the voting pattern of their M.P.'s.

The antidote to the party's iron fist discipline is a stronger, and a more powerful in real terms and not in procedural semantics, Parliament.

The freedom, the liberty for the Parliamentarians to speak out and vote on the basis on their conscience ,their ideology and their beliefs, should be protected and guaranteed both by the Constitution and the Parliament's own rules and procedures.

No elected representative may be expelled from the party simply because he freely chose to vote in a way that is not aligned to the party's orthodoxy.

The present political deficit of the traditional parties should be more democracy. Not, more discipline and powers to the party's leader .

Paradoxically, political leaders contemplate with the concept and model of "direct democracy" as a means of exercise and expression of the democratic rights. Yet, the same leaders do not allow and in fact forbid the freedom of vote -choice to their M.P.'s.

In the Greek Parliament, the so called independent deputies -in fact expelled from the two main parties-constitute following the PASOK, NEA DIMOKRATIA and the KKE (Communist Party), the fourth larger group.

2. MY EUROPE

Observing today the developments in the European Union, I cannot but remain melancholic. Sad and disappointed. But not silent.

At present, the European Union appears to appeal more to the economic and political elites. The citizens, the Europeans, are confused if not afraid by the messages from Brussels, Berlin, Paris and Frankfurt.

The principle of public participation and adherence to the E.U.'s values is undermined if not completely sidelined, on a daily basis, by the importance of stock or the euro values.

I consider myself still part of the most pro-European generation. For us, in Greece, during the dark years of the military dictatorship (1967-1974), Europe was synonymous to freedom and liberty.

This was my EUROPE. I still remember how moved I was when, for the first time in 1973, I visited the Strasbourg based Council of Europe and the premises of the European Commission of Human Rights.

Being or identified as pro-European during the underground student movement meant for some torture, prison, exile or self-exile.

Then European Communities and the Council of Europe were our heroes.

Today, to my deep sorrow, the European Union appears to be at a lesser degree a value-based organisation; and increasingly so a financial value club.

I am not naive.

However, I do believe that notwithstanding its transformation to a global economic and financial player, Europe should not lose its own values and characteristics.

Those values that kept alive over half a century the journey to Ithaca of so many different nations and peoples.

The European Union is based on common interests.

Yet, the strongest foundations and cornerstone of our Europe is and will remain our identity. The common European identity, with full respect of the ethnic, cultural or religious diversities.

During the present greek crisis, followed by the Eurozone crisis, I much missed this unifying factor of our common identity.

Anyway, the European Union, we knew, is under deep and profound transformation. According to the Berlin based contemporary Delphic Oracle ,by 2014, the European Union will be a different one. Most probably, there will be two homocentric circles with just few residuals of economic and political sovereignty left for those institutionally or virtually belonging to the outer circle.

3. ON MERITOCRACY

Meritocracy as the axiomatic foundations of the Athenian democracy was described and defined in a fine way in the most famous political speech since 431 B.C., The Pericles' Funeral Oration (Thucydide's, Peloponesian War) . In Pericles' words:

"...It is true that our government is called a democracy, because its administration is in the hands ,not of the few, but of the many; yet while as regards the law , all men are on a equality for the settlement of their private disputes, as regards the value set on them it is as each man is in any way distinguished that he is preferred to public honours ,not because he belongs to a particular class, but because of personal merits; nor again ,on the ground of poverty is a man barred from a public career by obscurity of rank if he but has it in him to do the state a service..."

On the issue of meritocracy (ΑΞΙΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ in greek), allow me to point out two issues.

First, the ongoing interdependence of politics with the media tycoons.

Second, the existing in many countries, Greece included, almost unqualified immunity for the deputies.

On mediocracy versus meritocracy, just one word. There is an interest based partnership between some media owners and politics.

Though this is a global phenomenon, let me simply emphasize that politics and polities, through the banking sector, may control the financing or not financing of media. The media also may influence politics and policies .

Recent greek experience shows that there is not a single government or major political party that have not directly or indirectly accused the media for "orchestrating a negative campaign" against them or even provoking their " fall". But, there is the other side of the coin. Media also accuse governments for discriminatory financial-banking- favours.

One note on the parliamentary immunity. Originally established to protect the members of parliament from unjustifiable as well as unfair penal consequences of their action to freely exercise their duties in accordance to their democratic beliefs ,the parliamentary immunity has been transformed in an omnipresent shield to protect our elected representatives from the implementation of the law.

Establishing, thus, two categories of citizens. Those under and those above the law. This fact has not contributed in preserving and protecting the dignity and accountability of the deputies.

On the contrary, it has generated an unjustified holistic criticism with reference to the double standards or lack of moral accountability of our elected representatives.

This is as dangerous for our democracy as the maintance of the generalised application of their immunity even for their responsibility while causing ...car accidents .-