

Is representative democracy in crisis?

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SP Senator Tiny Kox, in his capacity as Chair of the United European Left Group in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, addressed the World Forum on Democracy, held in the Palais de l'Europe, Strasbourg on October 10, 2012.

Half a century ago, Chinese President Zhou Enlai was asked to give his opinion on the French Revolution of 1789. 'Too soon to say' he said.

So when we now ask ourselves whether representative democracy is in crisis, we could answer in the same way: too soon to say. Only a century ago you had to travel to New Zealand to observe the then only democratic state of the world, with general suffrage. When my father and mother were born, general suffrage still had to be introduced in the Netherlands. When they could cast their ballot for the first time it was on the eve of the Second World War, when democracy was suspended throughout Europe. Now we have plenty of democratic states – and so called democratic states. Only few states officially fail to claim that they are democratic. The Vatican is perhaps an example. But states which are seen by many as authoritarian or even dictatorial, also often surround themselves with democratic symbols and institutions. We have just had parliamentary elections in Belarus, a state that is often called Europe's last dictatorship and that is not allowed to be a member of the Council of Europe because it does not meet essential democratic criteria, such as that the power should be limited by the rule of law and that elections should be free and fair and freedom of expression and organisation should be respected. Nevertheless Belarus organises parliamentary elections and has an elected Parliament and President.

It shows that the idea of being considered as a democratic state is seen as positive and profitable: profitable especially in relation to other states which meet criticism at home when developing relations with states which are considered as non-democratic.

The idea of representative democracy is far more popular than its execution. I think we all agree that perfect democracies do not exist in practice. It is therefore better to divide states into emerging, developing and more mature democracies. But even that is a matter of interpretation. Recent elections in Venezuela met a lot of criticism in the Western world, but were evaluated in a totally different way in Latin America. Last Monday, at the start of this World Forum on Democracy, we

heard in this hemicycle a difference of opinions on democracy between speakers from Europe and those from other continents. Many Europeans seem to commit themselves to so called 'liberal democracy', which concentrates on free and fair elections and the rule of law. Many speakers from other continents do support the idea that elections should be free and fair and the rule of law should limit the power. But they put far more emphasis on the need for democracy to lead also to more equality. Otherwise, democracy can become a system in which you are allowed to elect your next oppressor, but not allowed to demand more equality and a decent life for everybody.

I led the two last election observation missions of the Council of Europe to the State Duma and presidential elections in the geographically largest state on earth. These elections were held on December 4, 2011 and March 4, 2012. I can assure you that I did not cast a blind eye to the many undemocratic manipulations I witnessed. On the other hand I also admitted that in certain aspects, Russian democracy was developing in a positive way. For example: there was less manipulation during the presidential elections than three months earlier during the parliamentary elections. People were allowed to demonstrate and exercise their right of expression. And laws that limited the freedom to elect and to be elected were changed quite radically, as I had asked for in my first report. Is Russian democracy in crisis? Maybe – at least we cannot take it for granted that the next elections will be more free and fair and that the rule of law will better limit the powers of president and government and strengthen the powers of Parliament and the people. 'Wait and see' would be far too easy. In this hemicycle we therefore adopted a week ago a resolution with regard to these needed democratic developments in the Russian Federation. We called for support for those forces in the Russian Federation which strive for more democracy in their country. More democracy – as the best medicine for Russian problems with democracy.

More democracy – that is always the best medicine when democracy is in a crisis. Unfortunately, we often see the opposite development.

When powers are criticised that their democracy is not functioning well and does not meet international standards, they often react with limiting the right of freedom of expression and demonstration. But less democracy only leads to more crisis in democracy.

This is also applicable to the development of democracy in the so called 'old democracies'. At the beginning of the 1990s Francis Fukuyama called 'liberal democracy' the winner of the game between ideologies, but since then we have witnessed an enormous transfer of democratic powers to undemocratic markets, especially financial markets. These completely undemocratic markets lack a

telephone number, an email address, a face. They are not governed by the principle of 'one person, one vote', but 'one euro, one vote'. Nevertheless, these undemocratic market forces now demand of governments of the old democracies that they do as the markets want them to do. If not, they might seriously damage your economy and even overthrow your government.

In order to strengthen themselves against these ever growing powers of the undemocratic financial markets, governments try to convince their democratically elected parliaments to hand over ever more powers to far less democratic institutions, such as the European Commission. So, after liberal democracy had won the battle, it started to lose relevance in an unprecedented way. Today, the member states in the eurozone allow the European institutions to demand 'regime change', as happened in Italy and Greece, and to take over parts of the government, as is happening in Greece. The country where the word 'democracy' was invented is now ordered to limit its democracy, amongst others by German Chancellor Merkel, who for this reason is not the most popular politician these days in Athens. Greece is condemned to less democracy, whereas more democracy should be the recipe to recover.

Six years ago I observed the Palestinian parliamentary elections. According to the standards of the Council of Europe they were excellent, free and fair. But the day after the elections, Western capitals informed Ramallah that although the elections had been free and fair, the Palestinians had made the wrong choice, in making Hamas the biggest party in the Palestinian territories. We all know the result: a government not recognized by Western states, then a split between the parties elected and a total blockade of the Palestinian Parliament by the government of the country which is illegally occupying Palestine. Instead of hindering democracy, we should have allowed the Palestinians to deal with their democracy and we should have supported them in improving it. More democracy, that should have been the recipe for Palestine - as it is always the best medicine whenever democracy is in crisis.

And for the rest? It is indeed perhaps 'too soon to say' whether democracy will prevail. But nevertheless it is worthwhile to fight for its success because without democracy human rights cannot be protected and civilisation cannot develop in a humane way.