



Report on the Regional Table V: Europe

The Regional Roundtable on Europe has convened as scheduled at the ICC, Balla Moussa Hall, on Friday, 16th November 2007 from 15:00 to 17:00 hours, under the Bulgarian chairmanship of H.E. Ambassador Todor Churov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The composition of the panel was as follows:

- Co-Chair: H.E.Mr. Witold Waszczkowski, Undersecretary of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland;
- Facilitator: Ambassador Istvan Gyarmaty, Director of the International Centre for Democratic Transition;
- NGO Resource Person: Mr. Roel von Meijenfeldt, Executive Director of the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy

The discussion that ensued has covered a number of issues and topics on the status and the prospects of the European democracy.

At the start of the deliberations, the participants have noted that all member countries of the European Union can be identified, more or less, as established and functioning democracies. There still remain a few countries in Europe that are yet to claim undisputed democratic identity. Thus the focal issue on the regional roundtable was that of how much democratic Europe really was, rather than whether there could be existing regions within the common EU space that still would not subscribe to virtually democratic system of governance.

A question should be raised of whether Europe could be regarded as the best democratic achievement in the world that is to serve the others as guiding example.

Democracy in Europe should not be regarded as a completed process, regardless of its numerous historical achievements. Also, there is no single established type, no blueprint for democracy in Europe; rather in EU these are 27 different such systems of governance. Nevertheless, the continent has already distinguished itself and possesses a strong record on the democracy-social justice combination which could be of good use elsewhere, in particular when adopting new socioeconomic policies.

There was general consensus that democracy should be regarded both as an objective and practice and Europe should engage its partners worldwide towards open dialogue on democracy issues. According to one of the participants, the developed democracies of Europe are spending too much energy and resources on two dimensions: development assistance and defence and security; the third component of an efficient foreign policy, i.e. diplomacy is often missing or lagging behind. A lot of financial resource has already been spent on election support in third countries but it is rather naïve to accept that such expenditure could foster democracy in the respective countries. According to the prevailing opinion, nowadays it is quite clear that democracy must be of indigenous nature that cannot be exported. A separate issue is the one on the correlation of religion and national culture with democracy; past historical experience has clearly shown that the first two pass through different stages of transformation and development.

The enlargement of EU is also a process of democratic expansion; however, it is yet to discover the actual limits of this development. There are some neighbouring countries which do not wish to become EU members. The number of potential newcomers is very limited, too. Recent observations show that even some members may witness non-democratic acts, even once in. It was recalled, however, that Europe had established numerous efficient institutions to promote democracy, such as the Council of Europe, the Venice Commission or the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe /OSCE/. The latter has stretched over to include five Central Asian countries. On the other hand, one participant pointed that OSCE might be chaired by one of its members with insufficient democratic record. OSCE also suffered serious divergence of opinion on various matters. Once OSCE has been experiencing such difficulties what should be expected then from other regions of the world to produce? Thus there might be a need to revert to the old Helsinki Accord model which used to be very efficient in the mid 1970-s.

According to one participant, some countries of Eastern Europe have been initially accepted as a guiding example by the civil society in his country but more recently have brought about a dire disillusionment by dragging themselves into populist and nationalist policies.

On the other hand, a positive national experience was quoted as example: a transition that has often been assessed as the bloodiest and the worst in the whole of Eastern Europe and a necessity to build democracy from scratch, and yet 17 years later that country is cherishing full membership of EU and NATO. The explanation was considered to lie in the strong involvement of the civil society and the state institutions able of addressing the real concerns of the people.

As for the African perspective of the EU policy, an opinion was voiced that the criteria should be the cautious assessment of the challenges for democracy in a particular African country, rather than hastily imposing sanctions on her; the outcome is always disastrous. It has become virtually impossible to explain to the common people that the democratic institutions and organisations existing there have nothing to do with their plight given the imposed sanctions.

Some participants have questioned the integrity and effectiveness of the EU policy towards certain European countries with democratic inefficiency and the European reaction to the recent curb of the freedom of the press and expression in a European country. Also, according to one participant, Article 2 of the EU agreements of association signed with countries of the larger economic space of the continent is of dubious nature. There is no guarantee that lack of its implementation would lead to breaking of agreements. It is disturbing, too, that some European countries have dissociated themselves from the common EU approach towards autocratic governments. There is still a discrepancy between the official EU policy of promotion of democracy, while actually practising 'realpolitik', under certain political circumstances.

Yet Europe is regarded as the best example for democratic development. Although desired, there wasn't much to be done to react on some of its critical cases on the continent and yet there are countries which have worked consistently and with some success there.

In Europe itself, there are voices heard now and then preaching extremist values but this does not mean that the respective countries are not democratic.

At the end of the deliberations recommendation was made by one of the participants to make best use of the double chairmanship of Portugal of the EU and the Community of democracies.

A discussion of certain issues non-related directly with the European region also took place.

Despite the critical remarks and points raised, as a whole, the discussion confirmed the leading role of Europe in the democracy practicing and promotion worldwide.

Bamako, 16th November 2007