

Council of Europe Democracy Debate  
Strasbourg, 24 November 2011

Ivan Krastev

Europe in crisis: is liberal democracy at risk?

This presentation will focus on the problems that the European Union is facing and consider to what extent the crises of the EU are linked to issues facing democracies at national level. I will address how our framing of the problems is based on personal experiences. People from Eastern Europe, who went through 1989, have one major existential privilege these days: we know how fragile the world is, not on the level of knowledge but on the level of experience. In 1987 and 1988 communism in Bulgaria seemed as solid as nature itself - it was forever, until it was no longer. This experience of the fragility of the world will be reflected in what I wish to say today.

There is a general feeling that something is going on with our democratic systems. Different people are complaining about different things but there is a shared sense of uneasiness. People do not know exactly how to speak about it, but the surveys show that the trust in politicians and in political parties is very low. It varies from country to country but in some cases trust is critically low.

Looking to the countries of the EU periphery, there is a problem with the electoral process itself with more and more signs of contested elections. There is a growing uneasiness about how elections are organised, who wins and why.

There is much debate on the rise of voting for extremist parties, but in fact whilst these parties are rising less than people fear, their influence in public life is stronger than the votes they receive. To estimate the influence of the extreme parties, it is not so important to know what their leaders say, it is much more important to note what mainstream political leaders no longer say. Indeed the extreme parties have been doing as well as might be expected given the extent of the economic crisis. The closer they get to power the faster their appeal is going down. Nevertheless, some of their agendas are on the rise.

There are major concerns about the state of the media, the printed media is a major victim of the economic crisis, but in different countries and in different contexts the pressure and misuse of the media goes in two directions. On one side there is much talk about government control over the media, but for example in the case of the Murdoch scandal, the problem is of freedom from media which invades the privacy and private life of people.

Most of these issues can be summarised as a crisis of legitimacy, but there is also a crisis of governability. Many democratically elected governments have difficulty implementing any policies, look at the example of Prime Minister Papandreu in Greece.

In our part of the world there are people, often young, on the street and governments do not know exactly what these people want and how to talk to them. All of this, plus the fear of populism, the

fashion for technocratic governments that makes some people scared and others happy, created this strange feeling that probably we are witnessing a crisis of liberal democracy as we know it.

The question which many political commentators are asking is, with what should we compare this crisis of liberal democracy? Are we back in the 1930s when Europe basically witnessed the breakdown of democratic regimes? Are we back in the 1970s when there was a major crisis but it did not touch the democratic institutions, or are we back to 1530 when, with Gutenberg and others, a new idea of public space was emerging? All the people making these comparisons may have their arguments, but I would like to suggest that it is interesting to see what is happening, and it is equally interesting to see what is not happening.

There is much talk about the crisis of democracy, but there is no rise of any popular non-democratic alternative. Regardless of how mistrustful the population could be towards the democratic system, there is no open challenge to this system. From this point of view it is very different from the 1930s. For many, democracy is no longer the best society imaginable, but it is the default option. People are not suggesting changing it for any special reason and even if extreme parties can be accused of being anti-liberal, it is very difficult to accuse them of being anti-democratic. I do not know of a single extreme party which is contesting the democratic part of the liberal-democratic consensus; rather they have a problem with the liberal part of it.

Furthermore, there is no violence. Although there are quite a number of people on the street, and in some countries there are very high levels of unemployment, especially for youth, we will witness much less violence than could be expected. In comparison with the 1970s, the public is much more cheerful than one would expect under the current conditions. Furthermore, even if there are people on the street, they are not attacking the democratic process, they are voting. People in Spain said that they did not have a voice or much choice on candidate selection, but they voted and election turnout was not dramatically reduced.

The question is whether we are facing a transitory state or a transitory crisis as a result of the economic problems or whether we are experiencing a serious threat to liberal democracy. We do not know exactly what we should fear. My argument is that we are talking about something slightly more serious than a crisis. I suggest that we are talking about a major transformation of liberal democracies in Europe and in the United States.

What makes this crisis very different from the transformations of the 1960s or the 1970s, is that what I refer to as the five revolutions that deepened our democratic experience for the last forty years; they are the same factors that are now making our societies and our democracies much more prone to crisis and to loss of self-confidence.

The first is the cultural revolution of the 1960s. In a certain way it was the impact of 1968 which contributed to the cultural opening up of our societies and the dismantling of some of the authoritarian structures in our social life, starting with the family and continuing with gender relations. This was a very important factor that deepened our democratic experiences.

At the same time, it was exactly because of the impact of 1968 and the subsequent placing of the individual at the center of political life and agenda that the idea of a common purpose and shared public space started to decline in Europe. The idea of a society as a shared project and the concept of political parties has been replaced by different claims coming from different groups and thereby reducing politics to the politics of rights.

The second major factor which contributed to the spread of democracy globally and deepened our democratic experience was the market revolution of the 1980s. The success of the market revolution of the 1980s made democracy so attractive to many people around the world, because democracy started to be equated with prosperity. At the same time, it was the same revolution that totally de-legitimised the state and the government as an economic actor.

We are now seeing some of the consequences of this, because if we compare the current crisis with the economic crisis of the 1930s and 1970s there is one major troubling difference. In the 1930s the population lost faith in the market, but this was accompanied by a hyper-belief in the capacity of government to make miracles, shared by all sides from Roosevelt's New Deal to Stalinist Russia and Hitler's Nazis. In the 1970s this belief in government was crushed, but in parallel there was a regained hope that the market can deliver.

Looking at public opinion surveys today shows that sadly both the market and government are mistrusted. The people who are occupying Wall Street are not the people who will organise a parade in government square; they mistrust both sides. This makes the current situation much more complicated than previous ones.

The third revolution which has shaped Europe is the revolution of 1989 which managed to reconcile the cultural revolution of the 1960s with the market revolution of the 1980s. In an important way 1989 managed to reconcile the democratic and the liberal tradition, which in Europe, especially in the twentieth century, did not sit together as easily as today's textbooks suggest.

After 1989 democracy was perceived and taught as the normal state of affairs so democratisation was reduced to simply imitating institutions and practices. The contradictory but at the same time much more creative nature of democracy has been abolished and what came after was an idea of normality which makes it more difficult for East-Europeans to understand what is going on. Because when you try to explain people's experiences as being due to the transition from an abnormal world to a normal one, you do not know how to speak when there is a problem with normality.

The fourth revolution that is critically important for democracy today, is the communication revolution and the creation of the Internet. For the first time, the utopia of direct democracy started to look more realistic. Seeing the power of social networks in the Arab world confirms the critical importance of the Internet in empowering citizens in the face of repressive government.

However, there is also a dark side to the Internet exemplified in the way in which people are now living in information ghettos. Research confirms that the easiest way to become an extremist is by simply

talking only to your friends and having your prejudices confirmed. This is easy to do on the Internet where people are less and less exposed to the ideas of others. As a result of this, there is a radicalisation in politics. As well as the growth of virtual ghettos, people today are less exposed to other political options in their daily lives. If people have no contact with 'others' on a daily basis, it is much easier to believe that s/he is either stupid, criminal or somebody you cannot negotiate with.

The fifth factor relevant to the transformation of democracy is the changes and advancements in the neurosciences. According to neuroscience tests, only 3% of voters' political decisions are based on rational calculations. Political consultants are following this very carefully and from here it is a short step to decide that what matters in democratic politics is to manipulate emotions rather than come up with political ideas. Democracy studies today will study Karl Popper and such like, but if they want to know how electoral politics really work, they should rather study Karl Rove.

These five revolutions have managed over forty years to deepen our democratic experience, to awe us and give us a better understanding of power. But, on the other hand, they have increased our frustration of what can change in society. People in the European Union have more rights than ever but at the same time they feel more powerless than ever. The political process is much more transparent than ever, but at the same time the politicians are ever more mistrusted. This is the paradox of our societies; we might call it the 'frustration of the empowered'.

We are entering a very strange period where people tend to view everything that politicians do as corruption and politicians tend to view everything that people ask for as populism. This clash between anti-corruption discourse and anti-populist discourse is shaping the way in which our societies function, but it is not a productive discourse.

The more democratic our societies become, the more ineffective our democratic institutions become. This paradox is central; the current crisis of democracy does not result from a lack of democracy, to a certain extent it is the result of a different level of democratisation of society.

In Europe, especially Western Europe, there is also the demographic revolution as major shifts have led to an ageing population. Europe is seeing a new political actor which I shall call the 'latent majority'. These are voters who are not the losers of today but who perceive themselves as the losers of tomorrow. They are fearful not only of real immigration, but also 'imagined immigration'. The same phenomenon has been seen in the Balkans on the level of ethnic groups. Democratic imagination includes the fear of how others are going to transform you. It creates a tension between cultural insecurity and economic insecurity.

Populist messages today include a rejection of the elites who they see as offering a stark choice to voters. Either to allow immigrants in as a means to saving the welfare system and maintain standards of living or ending migration to keep cultural identity but having a decline in living standards. This is a choice people do not want to make and they feel manipulated by the elite.

The new populism in Europe is not the same as the populism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or even of the 1920s;

it is not the populism of the Romantic notions of nation and nationalism. It is a populism of those who read newspapers and opinion polls and see that the majority of the population thinks like them but politics still goes in a different direction.

In a certain way this is more pragmatic, but these people have a better idea of what they do not want rather than what they do want. This is one of the interesting differences between people on the streets of Athens, Madrid or Paris today and the young people in 1968. In 1968 people were on the streets because they did not want to live in the world of their parents, now people are taking to the streets because they believe they have the right to live in the world of their parents.

The issue of pensions and retirement is also a central topic. I will not be surprised if health and what we are doing with the health system is going to replace labour as the main reference point in discussing what is just in our societies.

I do not think that democracy will be overthrown by some unknown authoritarian regime. I believe that the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism is less useful than it used to be because of the transformations which have taken place within both concepts.

What we should fear is something different: can the European Union survive the transformation of democratic politics? We know very well that European democracy is a democracy without European demos. European democracy has depended on the existence of a liberal democracy guided by an elite. What we are witnessing is the crisis of the elite-guided part of democracy because the elite are failing to influence decision-making.

We can see two trends in the new paradigms of how the EU can be saved. The first is to give power to the voters to vote and all the problems of the EU will be solved by referendums. But people are never going to vote on the question they are asked to vote on and in Europe a referendum will never be about Europe, it will be about local political elites and the local situation. Opening European politics to the voters, thus saving the EU and regaining a new legitimacy, is good rhetoric but I do not believe it can work.

The second option is also problematic because it is not a secret that the model which works in the EU today is policy without politics on the Brussels level and politics without policy on the European level. As a result of the crisis this model has been destabilised because the crisis has an asymmetrical impact on different countries. This means that in countries like Germany, public opinion has become more important than it was ten years ago whilst in countries like Greece and Italy, because of the nature of the crisis, the public does not have a say on economic issues. As a result of this asymmetry the EU has two types of democracy: a democracy of the creditors and a democracy of the debtors.

The question is how good are the chances of the debt driven countries getting through this process without destroying their institutions and their appetite for democracy? One argument is that it can work, because it worked in central and eastern Europe. To put it bluntly, if in 1991 the question was how to transform central and eastern Europe in the way southern Europe was transformed - through

democratisation - now the question is how to transform southern Europe on the economic level, in the way central and eastern Europe were transformed.

My final point is that I believe eastern Europeans have a special role to play, by being honest. Honest about the success of transformations on a certain level and the factors which made it possible. I will suggest several factors which in my view are very different in southern Europe now from eastern Europe in 1990s.

Firstly, in the 1990s eastern Europeans had a very negative consensus on their past. There were different views in Belgrade, Sofia and Warsaw on what the change should look like, but nobody was really defending what already existed since the idea was to change a society which does not work into one which does. People had very strong positive expectations and even if they were unrealistic, they were important. This is not the case in southern Europe today.

Secondly, in central and eastern Europe people had some immediate gains such as travel, media freedom, ability to vote. In southern Europe, the major gain of the people, if everything goes well, is that the situation will not get worse. This is not a strong mobilisational factor. If people are going to make sacrifices they need a more positive view on the future.

Thirdly, the communist legacy was extremely important in having “shock therapy” reforms. Poland was the only country which had an organised mass movement as communism managed to weaken the capacity of society for collective action. Organising a strike was highly problematic in countries such as Bulgaria because trade union officials could not be trusted. Also, in 1990 there was no legitimate language with which to attack the reforms; any country with the ability to do that was a case of ‘closet communism’, which is not the case now.

Last but not least, the accession period in the transformation of central and eastern Europe succeeded because people in these countries perceived the EU as a means of controlling their own corrupt elites. Even if the EU is an elite project, it has been perceived, strangely enough, as an anti-elite power.

Part of the problem the EU is facing today is rooted in the fact that liberal elite controlled democracies as they have existed in the European Union for the past 50 or 60 years, are going through some serious changes. The EU is not going to be what it used to be and when trying to reinvent it, it is important to keep in mind the political dimension, which goes beyond saving the Euro. One should be critical of democracy and remember Churchill’s famous quote: “ Democracy is the worst form of government with the exception of all others”. But Churchill is the author of another important aphorism about the weak side of democracy: “The best argument against democracy is a five minute talk with the average voter”.