

CIVIC

Sky over Berlin and sky above us

By: Daliborka Uljarević

The only question is what we will do with this so that one day we could also say that we are citizens-kings, and not mere subjects in our own state.

That morning, my trip to the airport was the last ride of the shift for a talkative taxi driver. That afternoon he was going with his wife for a holiday to Thailand. That's one long adventure ahead, and he was already looking forward to the Asian sun. Yes, I said with understanding, the sky over Berlin is cloudy, although I find it beautiful.

He's telling me how comfortable it is to be in Berlin and that he can live well from his work. He adds that one can feel the openness of the institutions also on the symbolic level: any citizen can enter the Government or the Parliament buildings every day. He explains the parliament is making important and strategic decisions, that it's the most important authority elected by the citizens, which makes citizens kings. "I'm a king!", he says, to explain how much he values it personally. In the Bundestag there are people who in his name and for his benefit set the guidelines for development of the country, worry about what he will win or lose because of their decisions, because they know that his vote will decide whether they can sit in the same chair four years later. He is also politically active: in a small town near Berlin, where he owns a weekend house, he won the elections once but lost for the second term. It is democracy, he says, he learned the lesson and will do better next time. There's no bitterness in his voice. He believes the system is working for him, not against him, even if it doesn't mean he always wins. That's what gives him the sense of security, dignity in defeat, and knowledge that it's only another step, not the end and humiliation.

I never heard a story like that from a taxi driver in Podgorica or any other citizen here, nor have I recognised the sense of satisfaction with the state and the system. Why?

Perhaps because few people here are really enjoying their lives using their full potential, irrelevant of the individual context. Here we rather just bear with life, like with a ride from A to B point, looking for the fastest, most convenient way without surprises, because we view surprises as threats or traps, and we suffer every present difficulty with a silent hope that "if we sit this last one out, things will start getting better". Many have passed their entire lives waiting for it to happen, reconciled well in advance with the failure of their most intimate dreams, hope, desires, ambitions. But the change doesn't come on its own, it needs to be pushed, our collective Balkan karmas are no excuse.

In this spiritual climate the MPs of the two biggest parties, one in the government, the other in the opposition have approved unanimously the report of the Regulatory Agency for Energy (RAE) at the last session of the Committee for Economy, Finance and Budget. Politically, this is a terrible decision, unthinkable in any country where ordinary citizens, like my Berlin cabby, know the power and the value of their votes. Let's remember that all this time RAE has been using certain legal provisions that enable it to regulate some activities to the detriment of the citizens and to the benefit of the energy lobbies, i.e. EPCG. Two of its decisions have been declared void by the Administrative court after three citizens have filed the case against it, and RAE itself admitted that it allowed EPCG to charge 39 million euros more than it should have. That means that the citizens of Montenegro have been cheated out of at least 39

million euros, and those who should defend their interests see nothing wrong with this fact!? I expressed my astonishment to one MP who participated in this very un-European event, and he explained to me that there will be more on the report in the plenary session, that the report is objective, because it criticises EPCG and the coal mines and the monopolies, the squanderers etc, and that RAE itself will be discussed separately!? What is that supposed to mean? That RAE told off a bit these scoundrels that profit from its favours which are financed out of our own pockets, and that this is enough to relieve it of all responsibility!? What is the point of the plenary debate? A few novel side comments by the MPs who entertain the public with their feigned rhetorical competitions on who cares more about the public good? Or the big turn, withdrawal of support for the agency which proved to be independent only from professionalism, respect of law and interests of the citizens who finance it?

This is one of the questions against which to measure the extent of Europeanisation of national policies and distancing from party, family and other interest groups for the sake of approaching the concept of the public good. Many phrases and incomprehensible technical terms will be used to cover up the essence. And it is rather simple. We have a Parliament with 81 MPs. They are there because on one Sunday we went to the polling station (or decided to sleep that day) and with our vote or abstinence put them into their offices. Their duty to work in our own best interests is the key precondition for a functioning democratic state. Everything else is a farce which weighs on our development like the heavy clouds after this Indian summer. This could not be any clearer to those who spend their Sunday evening without electricity or to the rest of us who have been paying sky high bills for incompetence of our political leaders and their alienation from the people in whose name they are ruling. The only question is what we will do with this so that one day we could also say that we are citizens-kings, and not mere subjects in our own state.

The author is executive director of the Centre for Civic Education (CCE).