

CIVIC

Limits

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A desperate man does not seek a culprit in the system, an institution, atmosphere or ideology, but in another man with a name and surname whom he can face alone with all his (mis)deeds.

And this is why the limits are important, and the justification of crossing them is a call for continuing the spiral of crime where everybody is equally in danger, and all security measures fragile.

A young father of two elementary school age-children recently told me how everything in this country is upside down and nothing can be set right in the way the NGO sector tries to do it. Violence is the only way, he insists. A pacifist by conviction, I try to reason with him with the argument that violence does not solve anything, but that it takes much time and effort to see the fruit of one's work. He looks at me like he would look at a naïve and sympathetic creature and says that he has learned the life's school - with all due respect for my enthusiasm, will and faith that things can be different.

Namely, his kids are everyday crossing a busy street on the way to the school. As a rule, next to the street and the school, at least at the beginning and end of classes there should be a school policeman whose job is to make sure that the drivers slow down while children are crossing. But the policeman has more important things to do: he owns a bar nearby, himself or with a partner, and he has no time to watch over children and road. At the parents' meeting this young father brings up the question of responsibility of the policeman and of ways to solve the problem, whether by addressing the policeman directly or by filing a complaint with the relevant security centre, or perhaps something different. Out of 33 parents, 6 supported his motion. The rest stay quiet, fearing that they might bring on themselves the displeasure of the said policeman, the state or some other force. Disappointed, he decides to act alone, and goes up to the policeman in his bar to kindly ask him to be in front of the school for some half an hour - hour while children are coming in and out. Word by word, the atmosphere gets heated, mostly because of the insolence of the father, who himself had a turbulent adolescence and now has the cheek to call a law enforcement figure to his duty. It ends up with a charge against the young father for assault on an official. The former, however, gets a chance to find the policeman in private and talk to him "like a man". He shares with me the lesson learnt: nothing can be done properly and according to the procedures, until you take up the matter in your own hands. Or fists.

That's the image of the state we live in.

A state where everyone takes things into his/her own hands and gets things done, with more or less success, depending on the strength of their muscles or connections with those with greater real or symbolic muscles.

A state where public affairs are of marginal concern compared to the private.

A state, and this is the most terrible defeat, where some parents are paralysed by fear in their right and duty to protect their children.

Where are our limits? What sets them? Which ones must not be crossed? And what happens when they are crossed?

I must admit I was stunned before my interlocutor.

Not by the inadequacy of law enforcement officials or by their readiness to protect a colleague even when he violates the law. Since these are the same ones who do not dare to approach citizen MM even to fine him for irregular parking, while they would fine you any time, and if you ask why you have to pay and the citizen MM doesn't, they tell you truthfully: "You know, we are powerless in this matter". We have all learned already that the public institutions are not there to protect the public good, or us as citizens, but to serve powerful individuals and families. However terrifying, this fact is no news in Montenegro, even if some of us still hope that by relentlessly pointing out this deviation we might achieve some recovery of the system. But is this enough?

What petrified me was the realization of the extent to which authoritarianism dehumanizes, if for some parents the fear is stronger than the parental instinct. When it is more important to remain invisible, not to provoke the powerful, to skirt through somehow and to keep silent, because being visible, standing out or insisting on one's rights brings danger...

This is the limit that should not have been crossed and which opens up a dangerous space where anything at all can happen, including that, after the local power holders, ordinary citizens also resort to violence in solving their problems. Didn't the prime minister himself warn us that "violence breeds violence", justifying something that must not be justified?! Is this his message that everybody should take things in their own hands?

That should start worrying even those who believe that their lucky star will shine forever, that they are untouchable, whether they are stars, second fiddles or supernumeraries.

Because, in the final count, we all have limits. And those who do not know where to set them sensibly will sooner or later face the situation where somebody else sets the limits for them, which can be unpleasant, risky, and sometimes, unfortunately, tragic.

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