

Liberalism Today Freedom First 2008

Central, Southeast and Eastern Europe

Contents

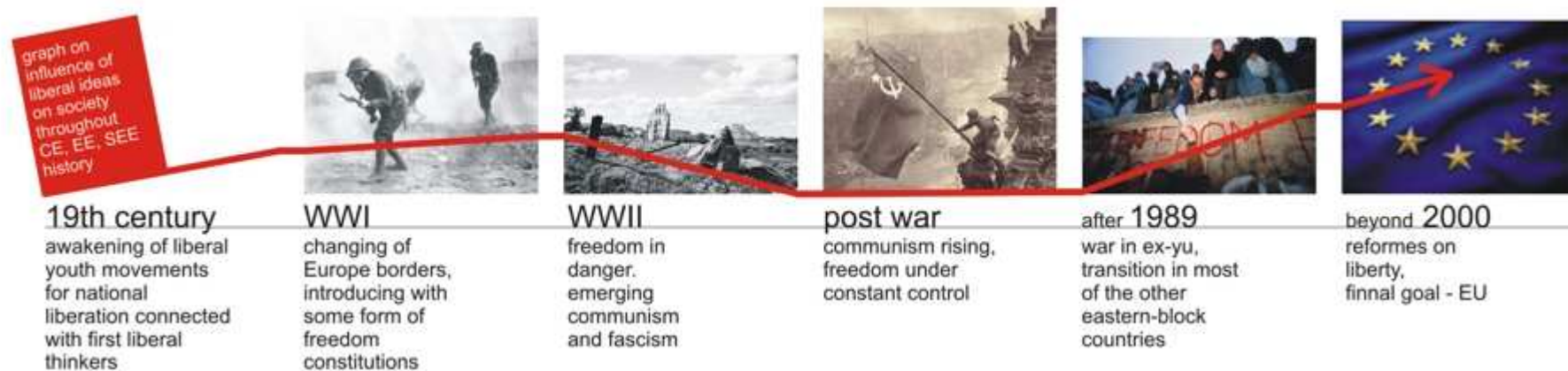
- 1 Liberalism in Central, Southeast and Eastern Europe
 - 1.1 the history of liberalism in our region
 - 1.2 the past and recent achievements of liberalism
 - 1.3 the problems that liberalism faces
 - 1.4 the reasons for the strength or absence/weak presence of organised liberal forces
 - 1.5 the future prospects of liberalism

Liberalism in Central, Southeast and Eastern Europe



Liberalism means modernity. It is the foundation of transformation, even though its representatives have never dominated the parliament in most of our countries. As the prominent Polish sociologist Paweł Śpiwak wrote: "The meaning of the liberal ideology can be assessed neither by the amount of votes liberal parties get in the elections, nor by the public influence of this theory. The importance of liberals lies in the fact that they presented and partly performed the most consistent socio-economic project." The main project was transition from Communism to democracy.

the history of liberalism in our region



The region of Central and Eastern Europe has often been in the middle of economic, political, cultural and other forms of crisis. It has been scarred by many wars, conflicts and turbulences and its citizens have survived many centuries of hard and unstable life, never losing hope and always striving for a better, more prosperous tomorrow.

Probably more than any other part of Europe, the region of Central and South-Eastern Europe has felt the impact of the WWI and the WWII, the Cold War and all the conflicts between the major powers, always being the collateral damage of their distrust, unwillingness to collaborate and above all, their interests. In this multi-cultural and multi-confessional region, peace has proven to be quite fragile.

So we can easily say that real history of liberalism in this region starts in 1989, after the fall of Iron Curtain when first liberal parties were organized.

Since the collapse of communism and the devolution of the "Eastern bloc", democracy was spread in the new countries. Most of these young democracies found it very hard to implement all the reforms and bring consensus between the political parties about whether they should move

towards liberal-democracy or not because of the unsettled ghosts of the past and the nostalgia that specific groups in the society felt towards the past system. It was once again the matter of ideology but also, personal as well as group interest(s).

After Communism was done with, liberals all over the post socialist countries ruled in coalitions, shaping their politics, setting goals to achieve - integration with western institutions, economic transformation to capitalism, creation of democratic political institutions.

In some countries liberal parties are on power till nowadays. Unfortunately in others, like most of the countries from Western Balkans, those parties are on the very edge of existence.

the past and recent achievements of liberalism



November 1989.
Velvet Revolution in Prague, Czechoslovakia
the overthrow of the Communist government



5th October 2000.
The Bulldozer Revolution in Belgrade, Serbia
the downfall of Slobodan Milošević's regime



22th November, 2004.
The Orange Revolution in Kiev, Ukraine
thousands demonstrating for free elections

Achievements of liberalism in our region are by far greater after 1989 than before, due to the historical reasons. Nevertheless, in many of our countries before World War II and in the XIX century it was a driving force, mostly through the influence of liberal-oriented intellectuals implementing ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution – the rights of individual, critical thinking, democracy and modernization. In the XIX century liberalism was often linked to the idea of national independence, not only personal freedom.

While in the Balkans people had to wait for the changes for another decade, liberal parties in CE introduced necessary, though at times painful reforms in virtually all areas of public life - politics, law, economy or media. Institutions of liberal democracy were established – democratic elections, division of powers, independent judiciary system, rule of law, free speech, free and independent media and so on. More controversies were raised by the introduction of capitalism and the free market economy, the transformation of heavy industry and agrarian structure, but according to most of the leading economists, this was the key to further economic growth.

Liberals defined that the main goal in their countries foreign policies is the integration with the western political and economical structures, such as the WTO, the OECD, the Council of Europe and especially the NATO and the EU. In most countries in the region all these goals became a national consensus accepted by main political forces.

the problems that liberalism faces

There were many problems and challenges that liberalism faced and still continues to face in these countries. The transition towards free market economy and capitalism was one of the hardest obstacles to breach. After many years of constitutional reforms and state-building, most countries in Central and Eastern Europe finally met the criteria that the Western European countries and the United States have set and joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization - the NATO and the European Union. However, there are still some countries that face continuing problems on the road to liberal democracy.

In these countries, the main liberal principles were considered and implemented with a lot of doubt. Unfortunately these are not the only problems. We should also mention:

- 1. Communist heritage** Nations weren't allowed to think for decades, and now that they are allowed to use their brains, they do not know how. Countries with tougher form of communism got rid of it more easily and embraced liberal democracy more eagerly and more successfully, although every young democracy faces serious challenges.
- 2. Deeply rooted dogmatic ideologies** Communism was not the only ideology rooted in this region. The idea of working class and the idea of nationalism were skillfully switched in numerous countries. Religion was incorporated later. How paradoxical the situation in the Balkans became shows the mixture of ideologies in the former Yugoslavia. Communism switches to nationalism, that didn't leave place for liberalism. Ideologically politics went from one extreme to another.
- 3. Lack of critical opinion** Education has been coming down to "milking" the people with empty facts, not letting them to think for themselves. Ideologies have been masterfully incorporated in every aspect of education, repression caused people become obedient masses, and when time for individualism and responsibility came, people were not able to make decisions properly.
- 4. Lack of viable institutions** It seems that the creation of sound institutions in Central and Eastern Europe would be a true achievement. New democracies have been making efforts to restore them, but not with a significant success. The only thing that was changing was their surface, while the corrupt system was staying basically the same. Institutions take centuries to build and they need tradition to be viable. Unfortunately, in this region, institutions lack tradition.

5. Long economic crisis The magical formula for all forms of dictators, autocrats, opportunists and their regimes to remain in power is the combination of poverty, bigotry and lies that people "want" to hear. Economic crisis can not be stopped abruptly with democratic authorities coming to power, as many people would hope. The period of transition is a difficult and painful part on the route towards development, and people get sick and tired of it quite quickly. When we add the significant rate of unemployment and the feeling of uncertainty people feel in the period of privatization to this, we can conclude that people easily give in to mourning for the old times and that liberal and democratic values become questioned, challenged and endangered.

the reasons for the strength or absence/weak presence of organised liberal forces

Liberal organizations (liberal parties, NGOs, etc.) are present for some time in the region of Central, Southeast and Eastern Europe. The fact that they exist and work shows an amount of strength that they possess. But on the other side lays the fact that liberal parties are either opposition in most countries or they are not even represented in the parliaments and that could be characterized as an important weakness. The situation is slightly better with NGOs, only because their work doesn't depend directly on the public opinion or the outcome of the elections.

So we come to the first reason for relatively weak presence of liberal organizations in this region - the public ignorance. The citizens do not find themselves close to the programs of these organizations. In the region which is still troubled, with a very bad historical heritage, and it is hard convince anyone about freedom and open economy if that person is still struggling to obtain basic human rights like the right to work, and to be protected from violence. But in the end, with the growth of standard in this region, this problem will solve itself.

As we mentioned, bad historical heritage is one of the main obstacles in organizing civil society, which is the base and the main goal of these liberal organizations. *The leader of Liberal Democratic Party in Serbia, Cedomir Jovanovic, once said: 'Maybe we don't know how to work, but we sure know how to fight!'. This is a problem not only with people in this region, but with the members of liberal organizations also.*

Many of the members of the non-government organizations are there only to be a part of the hard 'radical' opposition, to complain about society, to contemplate about everything that's wrong with this region. This situation can only be prevented by a strong and constant education of the members and supporters of liberalism about true liberalism and the right liberal values. Only then, we will have responsible politicians, capable for conducting the liberal reforms.

There are also strengths and advantages that liberal organizations have and they must be fully aware of them. They are fighting for a just cause! They have the truth on their side, and this is something that should not be neglected. Although at the moment it may not seem true, people always recognize the true values.

What liberal organizations really need right now, is hard work, dedicated people and some time to grow.

In the end, the liberal organizations have to be recognizable by the fact that they understand the achievement of governance as a responsibility, not as a privilege, to realize the role of decision making process as duty, not as mean of itself as well as to understand the practice of power as management for the general prosperity, but not as rule for personal benefit. This is the main mental matrix of the liberal staff potential capable to participate in all levels of power in the state.

the future prospects of liberalism

Liberalism in our region has a lack of politicians that can represent liberal ideology and bring necessary votes to liberal parties. In future we will have to make new generation of strong liberal politicians. We'll achieve that only through activation of youth in liberal parties and education of the membership.

As historical leaders of post-communist states and the opposition to liberalism are getting retired, and "the old division" is becoming less and less meaningful, there is a chance for a new one based on the attitude towards free market, modernization, the competence of the state, European Union, security etc. In that case, with the growing population that can be described as, mostly, city-dwelling, open-minded, well-educated, mobile, independent, young, and determined to achieve a success (understood in a broader sense than a good salary), there is a need for a proper representation, which can be a center-oriented liberal party. It will happen only if liberals convince these people, that the combination of personal freedom with the responsibility for public sphere are valuable, or even more – priceless. That liberal program, is the answer to the challenges of the global world and that its introduction will give a better chance to each and every person and the whole country itself.

The fate of liberalism lies in the hands of all of us.