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“The Crisis of Liberalism and Its Implications on the Western Balkans”

Constitutionalism in Illiberal Democracies Series

Dr. Ognjen Pribicevic, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade, Serbia and former Serbian Ambassador to the United Kingdom and Germany, sees a crisis in liberalism occurring in Western democracies today through an erosion of the system of checks and balances. Since the end of World War II, Western societies have experienced cycles of ideologies, in which politics would swing to the left for a certain period of time, then swing back to the right for a period due to the system of checks and balances. Dr. Pribicevic argues that this system does not exist anymore, since neoliberal ideology is dominant for the period of almost half of the century.

Dr. Pribicevic points to the election of President Trump in the United States and to the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom as the most visible expressions of this crisis of liberalism and the collapse of existing political elites. However, he clarifies that these victories cannot simply be explained through the label of populism – they in fact go to the heart of American and British society. The 1970s and 1980s brought about Thatcherism in the UK and Reaganism in the U.S., which have had lasting effects on both U.S. and UK politics and have consequently changed the face of the world. The engagement of both of these countries in the Middle East – particularly in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya – has in part led to the wave of migration today that fueled support for Brexit in the UK and Trump in the U.S.

Among the most important causes for the crisis is income inequality. At the 2019 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of Oxfam International, stated that just 42 people in the world possess wealth equal to that of 3.8 billion people. Citing international economist Branko Milanovic, Dr. Pribicevic argues that globalism has failed on this issue of inequality, as the American and British middle class and working class have become victims of the rising wage gap.

A major implication of this crisis in the Western Balkans has been the diminishing attractiveness of the Western model of democracy. Dr. Pribicevic recalls that when the democratic movement in Serbia overthrew authoritarian leader Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, they strongly believed that accession to the EU was the key to solving their country’s problems of ethnic relations, economics and politics. However, 20 years later the problems remain largely unchanged. Dr. Pribicevic points to this lack of a solution to the issues in the Western Balkans as one of the greatest failures of the EU. As a result, support for the EU amongst the Serbian population has decreased from close to 80% at the turn of the century to less than 50% today. Low presence in the region by the EU means that other countries, such as China and Russia, have subsequently increased their presence in the area.

In many ways, the problems faced by the Western Balkans are similar to those in Western democracies today. First, decreased trust in the media has led to many turning to the internet and social media for the source of their news, decreasing the media's influence. Secondly, rise of inequality is present everywhere. Thirdly, traditional system of values is in crisis in Western Balkan as well as in whole Europe and the West.. Additionally institutions and civil society have weakened in many European countries. Finally, there is a rise in both the Western Balkans and some Western democracies such as the U.S. in a preference for strong, charismatic leaders that promise to solve all of their citizens' problems.

Dr. Pribicevic argues that despite this crisis of liberalism in Western democracies, the EU is still the key to solving problems in the Western Balkans, as their modernization is impossible without EU help. To achieve this goal, the EU must be more present in the region to prove itself as a serious and capable player and dissuade other powers from wielding influence. If the EU does not step up more seriously Dr. Pribicevic predicts that China, Russia, Turkey will continue entering the Western Balkans and the problems of the Balkan region will creep closer to the EU.