ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, IDEOLOGY BEHIND THE CONCEPT AND THE LONG SHADOW OF THIS CONCEPT

Remarks by Head of Presence, Ambassador Bernd Borchardt, at the international scientific conference "The portrait of 'people's enemy' during the dictatorship of proletariat in Albania (1944-1990)
17 May 2019

When Genta invited me to speak here today, I thought about this concept of the enemy of the people and I tried to research a bit where does it come from, what is its history, what is the ideology behind it and, in particular during the last days again, I thought about its long shadows.

The first mentioning of "hostis publicus", the public enemy, refers to Emperor Nero and was used by the Roman Senate against him. Shakespeare recalls the term in the early 17th century in his drama about the fate of the Roman general Coriolanus who played a role in the early history of the Roman Republic.

To the best of my knowledge – the first time it became the term as used today, as a weapon of demagogues and dictators, part of the pseudo-justifications of totalitarian rule, was during the French revolution. In 1792 Robespierre stated that "the revolutionary government owes to the good citizens all the protection of the nation – it owes nothing to the Enemies of the People but death". We all know how many died on the scaffold during the further course of the revolution or during the Vendee massacres and at many other occasions related to the reign of terror as this period of the French revolution was later called.

At this time an ideology had been developed which was used to justify these cruelties: in particular Jean-Jacques Rousseau ideas formed the basis to develop the totalitarian idea of a "general will" that allows the legislator to claim embodying the will of the people, and the equally totalitarian idea that an absolute and perfect political truth exists that can and should be used to reshape society and that legitimates the uncontrolled exercise of power. It allowed Robespierre and his acolytes to form the first totalitarian dictatorship in modern times and to try to mould a whole society according to their vision. It implied the physical extermination of "counter-revolutionaries" and of all whom they did not consider as integrable into the future perfect society, of "the enemies of the people".

No surprise that Hitler, Lenin, Mao, Pol Pot admired Robespierre and used his concept of the fight against the declared enemies of the people: Hitler and the Jews, Lenin and the bourgeoisie and the Menschewiki and so on. I do not know whether Enver Hoxha referred to Robespierre, but he acted based on his legacy.

They all based their legitimation of power on a quasi-mythical identification of leader and people, of a leader/Fuehrer who embodied the "general will" of the people and did not need any other legitimation of power – certainly not a legitimation as mundane as through the ballot box.

In the early 20th century already the concept of the enemy of the people even found its way into arts: the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen wrote the very sombre drama with the same name describing how the term was used to intimidate, to isolate, to use repressive means against those who think differently.

In drama and in history – the concept of the enemy of the people is a central part of totalitarian thinking, where facts no longer make contact with the theory, which had risen far above the facts for the believers and for those who had given up to think. At that moment the point arrives when it is not the task to questions and verify or falsify the theory but to believe in it with quasi-religious zeal, where truth and debate disappear from the intellectual landscape and are replaced by slogans and power.

We are not beyond these totalitarian risks: a British tabloid called judges who decided to limit executive power of the government in the context of Brexit as "Enemies of the People"; or remember the so-called "fake news media" dubbed as "enemies of the people".

And Albania – how long are the shadows of the totalitarian past here? We hear – the more heated the debate the more often – wholesale condemnations of those thinking differently. And we do not hear arguments against their views. We hear and read attempts to deconstruct characters – and not facts or logical arguments against their stand. We hear the rejection of dialogue with the political adversary. We hear attacks on those who try to place facts against the myth.

Sadly, I hear this dictatorial discourse much too often by too many politicians in the Albanian political spectrum, ever since the collapse of the communist regime until present day. So the shadows are long. Far too many leading political actors sooner or later end up accusing each other using metaphors and rhetoric specific of the "enemy of the people" way of understanding politics and public life. This continues to harm society to the present day, long after the murderous dictatorial political regime has seen its last days, by keeping alive the false perception according to which one person embodies the nation, while holding the discretionary power of identifying and punishing the enemies in the name of a fabricated notion of morality, allegedly stemming from the masses.

But there are other thinkers who think differently. I mentioned Rousseau. Karl Popper identified a long trajectory of philosophers who underpinned totalitarian policies with their thinking against open societies. He formulated a powerful alternative against the idea of the "general will" as a legitimation of power: he taught us that the question "who should govern" was wrong. It led to the cruel dictatorship of majorities, it led to the "general will" embodied in a leader or to the "will of the proletariat" embodied in the communist party or to the will to exterminate the Jewish population in Europe embodied in a Fuehrer.

His alternative was the question: how to control the use of power, how to impede the abuse of power. Regular elections with broad participation of all, independent institutions, independent and not corrupt rule of law, open societies which give access to information to underpin decision making and allow the control of power are his central answers.

Albania still has a quite a way to go to arrive at this ideal state. Challenges are on the way – even in century old democracies – as we have seen.

We from the OSCE Presence are here to help Albania to continue on this way.

End