

Youth and Democracy

“What is Democracy to Me?”

Collection of Essays

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the OSCE Presence in Albania.

Dear readers,

Democracy is the voice of the people in action; the voice of the people being heard. It's not a tradition or a gift, to be taken out for admiration every few years like an old heirloom. As an action, it must be practised – exercised. And as any sophisticated action, it is best developed young and never forgotten.

The essays published here are the first flexing of muscles that will grow strong. They were among those submitted for an essay competition titled 'Youth and Democracy', organized in the framework of a project we ran to strengthen participation by citizens – especially young people – in the decision-making process at local and central level. In an attempt to stimulate critical thinking about the role of young people in democracy and to stimulate young people to explore the issue and to find their own voice, 16 to 18 year olds from around the country were invited to say: "What does Democracy mean to me?"

The answers are striking: diverse, strong, intelligent, articulate and often very personal. Young people free from influence or interests, pushing the process of change and building society, have made their voices heard. They are not afraid of taking a more proactive role. To them, participation means taking part in decision-making to build the future and taking responsibility for the outcomes. These essays are what democracy means, and their publication is itself what democracy means. The voice of this generation – the first born after the collapse of Communism, the first to reach adulthood in the 21st Century, the first that can add something truly fresh to the many difficult transitions of their country – will only grow stronger.

I hope you will enjoy reading these essays - and listening, and reacting.

Robert Wilton

*Acting Head of Presence
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In Albania, the term ‘democracy’ could probably be more accurately defined as ‘post-dictatorship’. The Albanian democracy resembles a teenager, who from time to time is impetuous, unpredictable, stubborn, selfish, inexperienced, but always so zealous to be a ‘somebody’. And it always comes to pass, that the day when even the staunchest teenager suddenly feels of age. Such a day is also coming for the Albanian democracy.

Fatos Baxhaku, publicist

August 2013

The democratic system has triumphed all over the world as it has convinced most of the people that it stands for more justice and fairness than the other political systems. Over these years the Albanian political establishment has failed in a spectacular way in delivering justice; as a result, it has caused sizeable deformations in the country’s social structure. These deformations are now consolidated. They stand in the way of the endeavours to bring the country towards functional democracy.

Gjergj Bojaxhi, public figure

August 2013

Democracy, the system we found ourselves in after the fall of the Communism, imparted upon us, in addition to our rights, the most important freedom: the freedom to express oneself freely. Yet it happened to pass that the freedom of expression was the one to be abused with the most by a host of people who did everything they could to sling mud on everyone and everything on its very behalf. The Albanian democracy still remains a bonsai, a fragile tree planted in a pot, in need of special fertilisers, in need of the right amount of water and of plenty of light, so that it does not wither. The tutors of our democracy were only recently introduced to this ‘pot plant tree’, and this is a fact that our young people seem to have realized by now. The young generation has already started to analyse the nuts and bolts of democracy. Once they are fully aware of its shortcomings, they can tap into valuable lessons, of much use when it comes to build a better system of governance.

Rezarta Delisula, journalist

August 2013

Ledion Onuzi
Kukës

What is democracy to me?

A riot I watched in the evening news thrilled me. It was Athens. I saw angry people violently protesting against the crisis that hit Greece. I stopped and I said to myself: “Why should people hurl things at the police, why should shops be destroyed, why should cars be set ablaze?” This comes to pass in the very country that invented democracy.

How did it ever come to pass, that two thousand years ago, instead of throwing pieces of tiles at the police, five thousand Athenians decided upon their city’s fate by casting them as ballots in a democratic voting process? So I asked myself - what did change in the meantime? Was it the place?

No. It’s the very same place – Athens. Did the people change then? No. It’s the new Athenians in flesh and bone, the genetic heirs of the ones who once build the temple of democracy. What did then change? Maybe democracy was looking for more space, for a place where the voters and the elected could meet up, where they would respect each-other, where the elected officials could be held accountable every day.

Maybe in modern Athens the difference between people on the streets and the government officials in their offices had grown far too big. Maybe the government did not ask the people about the important things, and maybe their failure to ask fell flatly on everyone’s shoulders.

At the end of the day, I am sorry for what hit upon Greece, but I have to think about Albania too. We had to endure half of century of dictatorship. Democracy could not even be mentioned. My parents once told me that in Albania democracy was compared to dictatorship. Our mountain tops were adorned with huge slogans that read: “The dictatorship of the proletariat is the true democracy”. That sounds a bit ridiculous, yet our parents know it wasn’t. They had to endure the lack of free speech, of free choice on education, they had to endure fear of political persecution and the threat of immediate imprisonment should they dare to speak out.

Uncle Esat is a living proof of this. He suffered 18 years of political imprisonment only because he dared to give voice to his revolt. He died one year ago. He could not claim full compensation for his imprisonment. He left behind a poor family.

I was born few years after democracy was installed. We cannot fully comprehend what happened to our parents. We were born free, we enjoy rights. The right to life, the right to education. These are tangible rights. We witness the right to vote, maybe because strangely enough, these elections have disproportionately affected our age group. I see the political rallies, the nice and shining pictures of the candidates placed upon the dirty facades of the buildings. Kukës town is full of people, cars moving around, full of posters, party banners bursting with numbers. That's democracy. Everybody's free. Even our mayor moved on to another party!

This time they make more promises, they stage more smiles, yet what I see is more fear. I see the very same persons promising their vote to very different candidates. From time to time I hear some gossip about money being offered in exchange of votes. I hope this is not true. What would become of democracy, that very democracy that created the world's greatest nations, should this ever come to pass?

I live next to the police district, in the sixth borough. People in pre-detention sit just next to my place. There're plenty of them, yet to my knowledge, none has been detained for speaking ill of the government. I don't hear any cries, no-one is beating them; they can't be touched, my father tells me, if they're beaten, the police have to account for it. Sure, I say, thieves and burglars have a nice time in a democracy!

The court building is just next to the police district. My people never refer to it with its official title: "The Palace of Justice". They will refer to it as the former Central Committee meeting. My parents told me that the building used to host the chief Labor Party officials. The arrest and execution orders would be signed in that building. I don't want to believe this building will be never called "The Palace of Justice"; I don't want to believe that when it comes to justice in the present days, people waste a lot of time and money to get some. What has become of justice? Isn't it democracy's twin?

The TV news usher me to the bedroom. The newspapers fire on the government and on the Prime Minister. Once I used to think this was not normal, as

a government ought to be respected. Later I thought this was in order, governments should be held accountable each and every time. So that they keep their promises. Isn't this democracy?

My home town has moved closer to the capital over the last year. A new motorway has been built. My elder brother visits us every weekend. He is angry with the lack of water in our town. In fact, Kukës is full of water springs wherever one lays his eyes on. Yet we get water only for one hour three times a day. My brother keeps saying there's no civil society in Kukës, if there were any, people would rise up and protest so as to get the water.

I asked uncle Jonuz: why don't people protest? He told me "maybe they are afraid they will be fired". I was too sorry to hear people are afraid to protest in a democracy.

My other uncle, Gëzim, will pay us a visit from the Unites States later this month. He lives there since 15 years with his family, working as a teacher. He always tells me: "Ledi, the US is the land of equal opportunities, yet nobody gets rich without getting to do something." Albania has to do the same. Only if we get to work, democracy can get real.

I am one of the thousands of young people who would like to make Albania a country of equal opportunities. Should I go on and on with this? No opportunities, no chances. Democracy can have a value only if people are entitled to the same opportunities.

I am sure this will happen one day and that I will live to see that day.

Bojana Spahija
Shkodra/Tirana

What is democracy to me?

I am Bojana. I was born in Shkodra. People say Shkodra is a town that is very much known for the qualities of its democratic citizenry. My parents proudly told me that my town was always like this, not only during the time of the dictatorship. Shkodra people stood up against the former regime, and they had to pay the price for this. The toll was heavy. Shkodra accounted for the biggest number of political prisoners and of political executions. In particular, clergy was persecuted on account of its perseverant clinging to its freedom of thought and opinion

Today I am free to speak out. I can explain what is democracy to me. I am free to do so.

I study foreign languages in the “Asim Vokshi” high school. I always try to define the keywords and check the dictionary before drafting a text. So, when I embarked upon writing this essay, locking up “democracy” in the Dictionary of the Albanian language was the first thing I did.

DEMOCRACY,-noun. 1. A political system or regime, in which the power is exercised by the people, directly or through elected bodies, where people enjoy equal rights; a state or country who is based on this regime or political structure. 2. Type of organization of a group of people, of an association, party, etc, ensuring the active participation of all associates in the functioning of the organization; the collective or peoples’ right to freely express their opinion on politics and society. Democracy in the school (in the family).

The following phrase got a hold on my mind: Democracy in the school (in the family). That is, freedom and equal rights in the family and in the school. This is how I shall understand democracy as per the definition in the vocabulary, and in a manner that suits my age. Accordingly, the keywords that will stretch across my essay on democracy are “freedom” “Shkodra”, “family”, “school”, and “knowledge”.

My family lives in Shkodra. My mother worked for a long time as a teacher in a village where migrants from very remote areas lived. Once she came home very worried and told me that Arlina, her best student, whom I had seen in a picture giving flowers to my mother on the occasion of the 7 March, was forced to live in full seclusion with her brothers and parents because of a blood feud. Her family was involved in a *vendetta*. Arlinda could not go to school any more. She and I did not enjoy the same rights any longer. We could not live the same way, we could not go to school the same way anymore.

Arlinda had lost her freedom.

I kept remembering her shining eyes in the picture for a long time, and I thought they should be filled with tears, sorrow and missed opportunities. She could not hang out with her friends any longer. Nobody would hear her voice in a free space. She would have to lead a prison life; she would have relinquished her passions.

A total, inhuman isolation, because of her parent’s decision to spare their children from a premature contact with the world of the grownups, an eye-for-an-eye, and a tooth-for-a-tooth world.

How can this be happening in a democratic country? So close to a town renowned for its culture such as Shkodra? “Citizens enjoy equal rights and freedoms” – as per the dictionary.

Maybe, but not here.

I came back home one day and I told to my parents that I did not get the highest mark in my English test. They worried quite a bit.

“The more you invest in knowledge, the bigger the space of your freedom” my mother said on that occasion.

What about Arlinda, I said, did you forget about her? How can she attain freedom through knowledge? She cannot be free from ignorance any more. She can see the sunlight only from the back of her window. Can anyone speak up about her rights in her family or in the society?

Isn’t her family a prison? It is a prison defined by the Kanun, or whatever it

is called? Her family has no say on what should happen to the girl. Her right to life has been infringed upon. It happens right now. Today. In my town. In a democracy. Shkodra has the highest number of blood feud killings. An ugly truth. In a democracy, Shkodra still has its innocent prisoners.

They are not locked in the state dungeons any more. It's in their very houses they lock themselves in. A 17-years girl is deprived of every right she is entitled to in a democracy.

What would be the form of social organization that would save Arlinda's life that would uphold her right to live, to learn, to enjoy her rights, to be a normal person, inside and outside her family? I don't know the answer.

All I can say is that there could be possible solutions, but not under the present form of the organization of the society we have right now, which is called a democracy.

If this is democracy, then what I once read about it in a history textbook that "democracy is the worst form of government.." (of course, except everything else), maybe true. Maybe these are the ways of the world, just as the ways my parents told about during the times of dictatorship.

I would like to bring back the rays of hope to Arlinda's eyes and to her friends sharing the same fate, I would like to shout out loud against this "democracy" that is filled to the brim with indifference: "Yes to life and to freedom!"

What is democracy to me?

Democracy is a widely accepted and applied system of government in our times.

There is much discussion about democracy in Albania, about how real it is in our country. A study shows that Albania's democracy is ranked at the 80th position at the global level. Should we be proud about this or should we start working in earnest for a better democracy?

History has shown that a solid democracy takes a long time to consolidate. There are quite a lot of theoretical definitions of democracy. One of the definitions lays out that democracy is the government by the people, where the people are entitled to the highest command.

This may sound overly simple from an outsider's perspective; yet as I spend my days in a country with a 23-year's old democracy, I can't help thinking about the problems lying behind this seemingly simple definition.

In theory democracy is a dream equaling paradise. Paradise is an option worth pursuing, but, as Dante puts it: "Doubting charms me not less than knowledge".

There are plenty of doubts in me when it comes to the functioning of the state, about the meaning of democracy and about my role in it. Much was said about the possibility to include 16-years old students in the voters' lists, which did not happen in the end. In Albania, only people aged 18 are entitled to vote and to bring to power the rights ones for representing them.

Voting should be free of coercion. Everyone is entitled to vote regardless of color, sex, language or region. This is part of being democratic. I would have liked to be part of the ones who voted on 23 June, as I am 16 years old and I believe that I am able to contribute for a better future of my country, as many others who think as I do.

Yet participation in the elections has to be written into the laws of a democratic

country, which should be amended, if they end up being obsolete.

I believe my generation has sufficient knowledge and capacities to decide upon its own fate. If we switch the TV on, we are able to discern what the politicians say. They throw heavy accusations at each-other, they fight for their share of power. Democracy consists of three powers, and the division of powers implies that they have to function independently from each-other. Yet, what we hear the most about is not institutions, but corruption.

Corruption; that is, profiteering and making a profit at other persons' costs. In a real democracy such a thing is heavily punished. The state is ultimately responsible to the citizens; hence it has to act, by factoring in the citizens' needs.

Democracy is not about equality of condition; it's about equality of opportunity. To me democracy means absence of crime and violence. These are two factors, which heavily affect society. A well-organized government ought to keep these factors under check, so as to provide for a safe society.

Democracy to me means justice, where everything is governed by democratic standards, where everyone gets what he deserves. Democracy means opportunities to study where you want and the way you want it.

Democracy to me means good schools, where students can learn about democratic values, about their own country, about culture and science.

Democracy means that nothing is taught to you against your will. Democracy lies at the root of Albania's future. To me, democracy also means a well-organized army, able to protect the country, and a society that is able to build up the character of a state.

The ultimate guarantee for the survival of democracy lies in the vast army of the people who engage towards building a democratic society.

Democracy to me means a good local administration that does not influence its citizens politically, that is able to provide for cleaning, water, transport and social protection, an administration that has an open door for everyone. Democracy to me means freedom of the media.

Very often media is divided along party lines.

This does not bode well for democracy. Media should be free and independent. Democracy to me means political tolerance, inter-party dialogue, and respect for the other peoples' ideas, open decision making and admission of one's defeat in elections. To me, the political elite are the head that controls the body, which is the administration.

Knowledge and truth are common to everyone. Nobody has their monopoly. A democratic country is based on a solid political culture. The later encounters difficulties in our country.

The educational system plays a central role in the establishment of a political culture.

The aim of the educational system is to educate independent individuals, who are in a position to apply what they have learned. A democratic country should be able to build on economic growth and on a work ethics, where everyone works for a living.

Democracy means the end of the intrigues, of injustice, of everything that threatens the weak. Democracy means a system in which the state is accountable for the welfare of its citizens. Our country is moving ahead towards democracy, but I have a feeling that our democracy is fragile, it is often placed on shaky ground, and it cannot find a way out.

So the foreigners come to take us by the hand.

At this point I feel sorry for my country, for our democracy, for all of us. How long will it take until our politicians understand how fatal this is for our country and for them? The examples from the countries with a consolidated democracy are not lacking.

At any rate Albania follows the footprints of the great democracies. We find ourselves in a learning process, and we hope we will know how to best use what we learn to help the citizens of this country that is condemned by history. It looks as if we Albanians cannot make a clean cut with the past. Some old people will tell you, when they see that things aren't really going the right way: "If only Enver Hoxha were alive! Then you would see!" What would we see then? Fear, nostalgia or pathology?

I believe we should concentrate into looking into the future rather than seeking a shelter in the past. There will be always someone capable of outlining our future, but there will never be anyone capable of erasing our bitter past. My generation and I will try to find this eraser, so as to remove the useless ideas from the past, and to heighten everything of value for the future. The time we are living does not belong to nostalgia. It belongs to democracy.

Adela Vagollari
Korça

What is democracy to me?

Democracy seems to be a trend, something that is mainstream in its own house in the West. Democracy is “en vogue”; cheered by the media, promoted by governments, addressed by academia, expounded in speeches, researched by generations of scholars, asked for in popular protests, penetrating into different aspects of life, inherited from the past, a companion of the present, programmed to be with us in the future. Democracy is a complex concept.

Then, nobody should wonder if the simple question “What is democracy?” gets as many answers as there are people in the world. Especially at these times, when us, young people, have been internalizing the concept of democracy since a while.

All of us have some sort of concept and definition about the “glorious” democracy. It is directly linked with our account of the world, with the reality we live in, with the ideas, ambitions, and our big plans for the future.

In my attempt to describe my understanding of democracy, I will try to make it in good order, by carefully listing the thoughts and definitions that immediately come up, reflexively, each time the word democracy is mentioned. I will try to move away from the rigid definition we hear every time in the class, which sounds more or less “Democracy is the political system that provides for the rule of majority, or, to be more precise, for the governance on behalf of the majority of the people. The constitution of this system provides for real opportunities for the active participation of the people, directly, or through their elected representatives, in the country’s political life.”

First and foremost, democracy is history. I would go as far as claiming that democracy is human history more than it is political history

Similarly to all human phenomena, its birth can be tracked in the past (and luckily it’s end is not yet in sight). Democracy originated in ancient Greece, in the city-state of Athens. Its development peaked thanks to its pioneers: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, etc, in 5 B.C.

Democracy made a long way through the centuries; it took Roman and medieval colors on. It slowly spread out in the Western Europe, through upheavals, bloody and glorious revolutions, reforms and peace conferences.

It was revived stronger than ever in the United States, and recently, through heavy causalities and war, it spread out in almost the whole world.

Democracy has been the companion of the humanity for quite a while. It is part of human history. It's worth noting that such a system has been able to survive to all social, political, economic and geopolitical upheavals so far.

Let's first consider democracy then as a thread that connects all times, not bound by any limit in time or space.

Secondly, democracy is a system created by the people, for the people. This is its political dimension. The famous quote from Lincoln gives a very clear definition of what democracy should be; maybe it gives a better description of democracy than hundreds of thick books. Seen from this perspective, democracy is simple: power should belong to the people; power is used by representatives coming from free and fair elections; the government is accountable to the voters; equal opportunities prevail; there is a continuous political and social cooperation between the government and its subjects. This is what one reads on paper, or at least this is how I imagine democracy. The rest is a matter of reality and practice.

Thirdly, democracy to me, beyond any political or social definition, is a way of living, especially a way of cooperation and co-habitation in a society. Democracy is not simply a political system.

A couple of examples: democracy is one way to work out decisions in a family, it is one of the ways a group of children decides to organize a game, it is one of the ways a group of young people use to decide where to have a party. Democracy is the system used to elect representatives to the school's senate, it is the system used to operate a charity organization. Democracy is the system used to govern the societal relation, democracy is fairness, respect, human right protection and correctness in delivering one's duties in a social group.

Coming back to the start, democracy is an expression of globalism. It is as widespread as the use of global expressions and brands such as OK, jeans,

Facebook, Coca-cola, and so on. Democracy is part of our lives, it shapes the lives of most of the world's population. Most of these people want democracy, even though the meaning of democracy may be unclear. Democracy is the political trend of our times; it has an universal dimension. It is more liked than properly applied.

Democracy means freedom. The conceptual vicinity of democracy and freedom makes a lot of sense. Democracy, at least on paper, enables one to live your life as a free and independent person. Democracy enables you to express yourself, to get informed, to get an education, to reach out for your dreams, to engage in social projects, to be entitled to a fair trial, to have religious freedom, to learn your native language, to have a family, to work and far more than this.

Each of us has once said: "Why shouldn't I do this? It's a democracy!" We know democracy is freedom, yet it would be great if everyone knew democracy is responsibility as well.

Democracy means responsibility. It functions only in the presence of a continuous cooperation between the voters and the elected. That means that we have to fulfill our obligations towards the state as the state has to honor its commitments towards its citizens. We have to respect the rights of the people, we have to abide by the law even though we might not like it, we need to take on the civic responsibility to react against the things we find unfair, to support what we think is just, to vote, to contribute in the realization of the great social designs, we have to shun indifference...and much more than this. All this means democracy: a right, an obligation. Seems easy at first sight, yet it's a hard thing to tackle with. Cooperation, responsibility, determination!

Now, to sum this up (as if one could summarize the myriad of meanings that constitute democracy), democracy is a way of life and work that builds on freedom, justice and respect. It seems quite an utopia, and one has also to bear in mind another more realistic approach, that sees democracy as the worst regime, except for the other ones, which humanity has experiences in its history. Let us keep this realistic approach in mind, and let us accept that democracy is full of problems, yet we should not ignore the dreams, the ideals and ambitions we young people have. All these are strongly connected to democracy.

Let's put it as follows: Democracy is a journey. At times all is nice and quiet; at times the tempest rocks the boat. It comes upon you, it frightens you, it

“destroys” you, yet every step you make brings you closer to your goal. We are not there yet. Yet we are on our way.

What is democracy to me?

Democracy (demos – people, cracy – governance) means people’s rule. In theory, democracy is the perfect form of governance, in which the people are the one to decide upon their fate. What is the country that practices the theory in the right way? None, in fact. Neither the US, nor the Western European countries, which are known as the world’s most democratic countries.

What can we say about democracy in Albania then, as we have been practicing this system for only twenty years or so? Albania, as any other country with a totalitarian past, faces a host of problems when it come to being democratic.

I was born and grew up in a slightly distorted democratic system. This system has influenced the way I see democracy. Democracy ought to be a fair representation of the people, a fulfillment of their will, from the people, for the people.

Democracy ought to be a fair system of governance that punishes those who commit crimes, pays those who work. Everything ought to be supervised by a functioning mechanism. Democracy, the rule of the people ought to be controlled by the people, not by the strongest among the people, by the ones capable of doing everything for the purpose of clinging to power.

Governance ought to belong to those who want, can and deserve to govern. How can this come true in our reality? Or in my country at least, where over 50% of the voters are not acquainted with the electoral programs of the candidates. If they don’t know them, they don’t really have a choice, if they don’t have a choice, whose choice is it then? Another question-mark. I don’t pretend to have an absolute democracy, we know all systems can’t be perfect, yet if what we have is far away from real democracy, then we should not call it a democracy. At least we shouldn’t lie to ourselves.

If we discussed democracy only as a system of government, as it is on paper, then no criticism would be needed. Everyone would be happy with what democracy

has in store. Yet, if we discuss democracy as it is, then we see that we are discussing quite another thing. First of all, I believe democracy is overrated. You are free to vote, to have a private business, to represent your constituency, yet what is the value of this if the important decisions are taken from the top of the pyramid, and you and your equals are not asked about it at all?

Even though a country might pretend to consider itself democratic, this would be of little value if the fundamental rights and freedoms are not respected, if there are no basic living conditions.

The mere label “democracy” ought not to suffice to anyone. All democratic criteria need to be fulfilled, if you want to be called democratic.

Real democracy, applied democracy, in addition to be overrated, is also misunderstood. Democracy doesn’t entitle anyone to do as you please, to kill, to rob and to get drugs, even though the latter is something very personal.

Democracy means that you can be the one elected to govern. It does not mean that once elected you can use everything in your hands or everything beyond the imaginable to cling to power until you retire.

Democracy dear friends, is government by the people, it’s fair governance, its governance for the people, it’s governance that brings development, that promotes values, that ensures equal opportunities to all.

Regardless of this, I sincerely doubt whether true democracy can be truly applied, ever.

I wish it could, but I think it’s impossible.

What is democracy to me?

I will try to approach this theme as openly as I can. It seemed very hard to start writing this essay, because its concluding words came to my mind almost immediately. I got the inspiration to write about this whilst I was staying with my family.

I was watching television with my family as usual. The show was about democracy. I really did not pay much attention to the TV then, as i was rewinding the tape of my memory looking for something else. Maybe I was just sitting idle. The mentioning of the word “democracy” rang a bell in my mind. I remembered the title of the essay competition. So I started watching the TV show.

The invitees discussed the concept of democracy. They asked what it really meant. And then, what were, in their personal opinion, the differences between democracies of different countries? I started to get interested, so I asked my father: “Is there any really democratic country out there, or is democracy only a mental creation?”

My father replied: “A country is considered democratic, if it is built on democratic foundations.”

I kept on watching; at some point they mentioned Norway. I didn’t know that Norway was at the top of the democratic countries. So I started thinking what made Norway so democratic. To my knowledge, democratic countries were quite developed in terms of economy.

I could not believe that maybe I was wrong, so I went to my room to do some research over the internet. I switched on my PC and started to look into the concept of democracy, so as to clarify my ideas. I waited for the search to complete, then I read: democracy means a constitutional government, democratic legitimacy of political power, division of state powers, recognition and respect of civic and political rights. In this regard Albania was ranked at number 82, Norway was the first. As I felt I had to write about democracy, I decided I had to make a comparison between the two.

First of all, what's the difference? It is a difference that lies in the distance between 1 and 82. The difference means that Norway has fulfilled the necessary criteria to be considered democratic. In order for a country to be democratic, it has to succeed in almost all walks of life. Norway has shown this in politics, economy, sport and in many other aspects. The last time Norway and Albania had anything in common was a football match. Norway lost the match, one to nil.

Even though they lost the match in their own field, the Norwegians showed themselves worthy of a democracy. They conceded defeat, they did not make a mess of it, they did not throw objects into the field.

Albania is a bit different. Maybe it does not deserve to be called democratic; when it comes to sports and politics it goes at great length to prove this. Politics is tainted by corruption.

Corruption makes everything look so trivial. Today we are getting to know that even football matches are being sold out. Yet if everything is for sale, then you have a problem with the respect for the rule of law. We have not achieved the rule of law. The Albanian state resembles a car with a broken tire. It fails to move ahead, or, if it does so, its brakes fail to work and you get a car crash. It is a common knowledge that our politicians manage to behave until they get your vote, then all they do is ignore you.

We have sufficient proof of this at the time of elections. Politicians from both sides hold rallies in which unrealistic promises are made. We are sick and tired of it: they insult, they shout, they offend! Albania ought to have enough of this!

There are plenty of other countries, capable of deciding in a different manner about their own destiny. Above all, their behavior is different.

I am only 16-years old, I have much to look forward to. Yet, if I think about the future, I am not certain whether Albania will change. Maybe I will not miss the present that much. Maybe hard days lie ahead of us. In order to move ahead we have to be strong. We want to study at the university, we want to show ourselves worthy students, but what we hear is that everything, instead of being based on merit, can be actually bought, the university too.

We aim at becoming teachers, doctors, journalists. When it comes to the

journalists, I have some doubts. Does the freedom of speech, the freedom of the media really exist? A sort of uncertainty prevails, related to the fact that journalists are divided along party lines, to the fact that they represent certain interests. The mission of journalism has been abandoned. The only journalists who were brave enough to face these challenges are the people of the "Fiks Fare" show. They are the heroes of the truth, capable of facing the powerful ones, the ones who think they own democracy.

Maybe it's not up to me to discuss these things, even though I feel I can. I am still considered a child, and our opinion doesn't really matter. Kids like me are not entitled to vote.

People who take some pleasure to listen to us are hard to find. Yet we are eager to discuss and to debate. Maybe we deserve more attention. Maybe we can move democracy to the next stage. Or maybe not. Maybe corruption will bring us back to Enver Hoxha's times!

Those times were tough. Nobody who lived through it wants to get it back. My generation only knows what we are told about it. We want a true democracy, not a fake one, ruled by nepotism from the East to the West, from the North to the South. Many people say we live in a democracy. To what extent is it true? We want to know more. If I were to respond, I would rather ask another question.

Does the Albanian state do what it should so that freedom, democracy and independence are possible? There are pretty many pros and cons about democracy. Much can be said about democracy in Albania, even more so if we compare our democracy with other democracies. Yet I believe that Albania can change, I hope that we can feel the real power of democracy. We are a democratic country, and I am confident we can make it!

What is democracy to me?

Each of us is surrounded by the tunes of his present; each of us tries to make his own tune pleasant to the others. This marks us and our life cycle. What is democracy to us? In the immense shelves of the world's libraries, in the dense lines of letters in the books, silence follows the words and thoughts about the meaning of democracy.

We aren't at loss about concrete terms on democracy. All famous philosophers have provided convincing and comprehensive definitions that democracy is "freedom", or, as the Greek original term puts it: rule of the people.

Socrates: he brought democracy to its fullest value. His understanding of democracy is still studied. The philosophy of democracy is deeply rooted in the human mind. Democracy comes as freedom. Freedom: the unavoidable goal of democracy, boundless thoughts, practices and actions. Yet, one can still ask, is there something like freedom, if yes, to what extent?

The reflection on the difference is positive and complex. It greatly varies, depending on the one who makes it, and the way it is made. The positivity that comes to light when reflecting about democracy shows that every human being who cherishes democracy will also cherish freedom. If humans cherish freedom, they will love their next. Far from entering into the realm of politics we can maintain that democracy starts from the very human being. First and foremost we have to start from ourselves. We have to look into our own actions. Not all of us are big orators, yet we can still speak out; after all, not all of what makes the world is perfect.

We live in freedom; this means our existence depends from our thought, from how we react on a given issue, from the level of our impulse towards it. We are the ones who make the tissue of democracy. Democracy is not just another word in the dictionary. It is not just a spoken word. Democracy is everything around us.

Democracy is our daily life.

What is democracy to me?

Democracy should be a form of governance in which people ought to be present at all times. The people's presence should influence decision-making; it should clarify a course of action in the myriad of differing interest, in shaping an opinion that goes to the benefit of everyone.

The concrete participation of citizens in the governance makes the work of the government much easier. The ones at the top ought to advance an agenda that takes into account the "achievable" part of the people's requests.

Yet, this does not always happen. It is, on the one hand true that Albania is a democratic country aspiring to become a member of the European Union. So far, it has achieved some sort of success (NATO membership, visa liberalization, motorway to Morina, and so on), yet much remains to be done.

Not everyone is happy with this governance. Poverty persists. Plenty of people are in a situation in which they cannot afford to get much. It is held that this situation unavoidable, as not everyone is capable of keeping pace with the rest of the society. Most of Albania's development takes place in the urban areas, in a way, rural Albania is left behind.

The year 1990 was marked by the collapse of the communist system. Once it became democratic, Albania had to face the bitter truth.

It was a tough situation. 23 years have passed since then, technology has advanced, schools are better, yet poverty is still there. Albania's democracy is still an unfinished business.

A functional democratic system is still missing in Albania. Poverty persists because of a growing inequality, because of the human weaknesses, because of too much drinking and smoking, which in their turn produce more poverty, more spending for trifles, and less savings.

Unemployment is another root of poverty, making life harder in this country. Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon, gravely damaging those who can't find a way out of it. Low family income greatly affects the social, cultural and economic life. The growing distance between people never bodes well for an emancipated society. Democracy thrives in a cooperative environment.

Knowledge lies at the basis of democracy. Democracy ought to pay off bright minds. Eradication of poverty is possible through education, and education ought to be open to all, regardless of race, religion or gender!

Power from the people ought to be more consolidated. The people should not allow to be ruled by governments that address their own interests instead of the people's needs.

Albania will be a democratic country when poverty will be ultimately dethroned. Albania will be democratic when people will start feeling that their country is a place worth living in.

The perfect democracy does not exist anywhere. If there would be such a thing like perfect democracy, we would live in a perfect world.

What is democracy to me?

There are two conceptions of democracy in Albania, inspired by the positive developments of the countries that have embraced this system of government over the last years, decades and centuries: democracy seen as something locked inside its transition phase, marked by lacking economic, social and political development on the one side, and a democracy capable of developing itself, even though it is not yet consolidated, towards a wholesome transformation, on the other.

It is clear that nothing can be perfect, even less so when it comes to the democracy of a country which has still to struggle with the wounds of its past. Still, I believe that our democracy, fragile as it may be, is still dynamic.

A democracy is marked by free and fair elections, which are citizen-centered. On the other hand, Winston Churchill once said: "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter".

This statement is easily conceivable for the very fact that democracy is identified with the government by the people, who chooses its representatives by the means of the vote.

The choice of their representatives entitles the people to hold them accountable. It is clear that the failure to fulfill the expectations results in the disenchantment of the voters.

Therefore, particular attention ought to be paid to the monitoring of the electoral promises. They should not be used as an instrument to convince people to vote for one party or for another; their application in real terms ought to be treated as the goal to be achieved.

The achievement of this goal would result in a better life for the citizens, and if this were to be the case, into another mandate for the government.

Accepting the result of the elections would be an indicator of the level of civilization, of higher standards of cooperation “for the sake of the people”. Acceptance of the will of the majority is one of the main principles of democracy. If François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy accept the results of the elections and shake hands like two worthy rivals, why shouldn't the same thing happen in Albania?

The journalists struggle to bring about change in the political mentality, but to no avail. Media, the fourth power, plays a key role in achieving democratic standards. Being at the forefront of all developments, and responsible for the correct transfer of information, journalists connect people with the politics. They are an indispensable bridge in this communication scheme.

Their function could be considered productive if they would use their power to directly express their opinion as true citizens. Having a political affiliation shouldn't necessarily mean overrating your political force or brutally attacking the other party. On the contrary, media freedom can fulfill its goal only if it pushes political parties to implement their electoral program.

The endeavors to strengthen the role of the NGOs in the local and regional governance show a will that is geared towards changing mentalities and countering wrong practices in the society.

These organizations may create the preconditions for the inclusion of civil society in the efforts targeting the solution of social problems such as domestic violence, lack of gender equality, emancipation of the women, or cultural and natural heritage protection. The achievements of these organizations that commit themselves towards working without any profit, add value to their humanitarian mission. Their activity in Albania is supported by Law No. 8788. At present, there are 900 NGOs in Albania.

Still, with the exception of the international days, such as the women's' day, the family day or the day for the environmental protection, most of the NGOs seem to slumber, and to forfeit their crucial role in the promotion of democratic standards.

Maybe this is a sign of the insufficient level of support by the Albanian state. In my opinion, the intensification of the NGO activities would be a good sign. It is clear that these organizations are important for the inclusion of the opinion of

the civil society in the decision-making, by thus educating for the promotion of human and natural values.

The young people are considered as a vital force for the country's development. In order for Albania to successfully make it from the transition period to another period of democratic development, innovative ideas need to be supported, since they can bring about the needed change.

Young people are often ignored, their thoughts are considered as superficial and they are underrated because of their young age. Many of their demands remain unanswered. It shouldn't be this way; young people happen to have very productive ideas. If their ideas were to be put into practice, everyone would benefit. Taking this into account, many Albanian politicians, aware of the benefits they can get by tapping into their productivity, try to get their best out of the Albanian youth, by opening up new territories for their engagement.

Young, brilliant minds sustain the hope for a transforming society, capable of adopting the new democratic mentality.

As a general synthesis, in her attempt to provide for a democratic environment for the conduct of free and fair elections, for a greater engagement of the journalism to the cause of the advancement of the quality of public opinion, for a greater involvement of NGOs in local and regional governance, and finally for the consideration of the youth as a vital force for the country, Albania will factor in a new dynamics into democracy.

Artjola Avdia
Puka

What is democracy to me?

Democracy is a system of government, which consists of a host of rules and procedures, coming as a result of an agreement or compromise between the social actors who are politically relevant and the other actors and institutions who are present in the political arena. To make it clearer, in a democracy, power comes from the people, it belongs to the people and it should be used for the people.

This form of government brings hope and creates illusions for everyone: for the women, the poor, the colored people, the ethnic minorities. Democracy, based on the constitution, equalizes the rights and responsibilities of the citizens, providing for a harmonized co-existence.

Albania has left behind a totalitarian regime for 23 years now. That regime was marked by physical and psychological violence, injustice, lies, serfdom, poverty and isolation. The severity of the regime erased the hope for freedom, justice and development for more than a half of a century.

This sad vision of the past brings into one's mind frightful images of desperation and suffering, ugly prisons of the regime, pavements tainted with the innocent blood of hundreds of citizens, written accounts of these crimes, which shed some light on that heavy veil of darkness and death.

That frozen past came to an end in the years 1989-1990. It was a past that stopped Albania from breathing for fifty years in a row. Now it's time to move ahead, together with the rest of the free countries, free from old rancors. Over the last 23 years, Albania underwent radical changes. It became a parliamentary democracy, it rewrote its constitution, it restructured its economy according to the model of the free market, it prioritized private property.

Even though more than two decades have passed from the times of the totalitarianism, fragments of that sad reality still obstruct the pace of democracy. The Albanians haven't yet been able to fully grasp the meaning of democracy, which puts rights and responsibilities on the same plane. We are

all equal in front of the law. Yet we still haven't been able to remove the old totalitarian stain that holds hostage the development of our country.

I believe corruption is one of the major obstacles for the development of democracy in Albania. I would like my country to move forward, to get the EU membership, to have a better economy and a greater equality amongst its citizens.

I hope that in the near future I will be able to switch on the TV and to be spared from the news on murders, countless incidents, domestic violence, and corruption in the state administration. I hope I will be able to watch good news one day, news of the kind that makes one feel safe and proud about one's country.

I appreciate the efforts of the different international organizations aimed at a better functioning of democracy in Albania. In order for this to work out, the Albanian people need to be sensitized. The Albanian people ought to understand that the power to govern the country lies in their own hands. They are the ones who choose their political representatives.

I appreciate the courage of the media, even though media isn't yet totally free. The censorship of the politics still dominates the free will of the journalists. I would like to thank, from the bottom of my heart, all those journalists and intellectuals, who are brave enough to tell the truth, regardless of the interests they affect.

They ought to be credited for putting public interest first, for paying attention to the vulnerable groups.

Still, controversies arise at every development stage. Trade unions ought to speak with one voice, yet very often they remain silent. They fail their mission to fight injustice. On the other hand, the organizations for the environmental protection do not fight the destruction of the green areas, whilst women organizations focus on towns, by totally neglecting rural areas, which badly need information and support. Yet, these are the very places in which violence against women is perpetrated, as time seems to pass at a slower pace there, and old mentalities and tradition still prevail.

If we were to understand that democracy is a common good, and that the law

has to be obeyed, our democracy would be in a better position. Often we forget that we are not obliged to pay for public medical services, or for getting a job. Often we forget that recruitment should be merit-based, and that we should not trade on our free and independent vote.

Our courts of justice can be called everything but places where justice is done. If you want to win a trial, all you need to do is to pay out, even though you're totally guilty.

Albania is a country where private property is handed over as a gift; it is a country where the punishment terms for criminal offences can be very short, it is a country in which trials can last for years. Money corrupts everything.

Regardless of this, politicians still have the guts to engage into debates about trifles. They do not see the families that have no subsistence means, they fail to see the burgeoning unemployment, they fail to see that people's wages are not being paid; they fail to see that many persons have no means to pay for their medical treatment. These issues are sidelined in their quest for power. Albania is currently ruled by a dictatorship with a democratic face!

Reality ought not to be covered with a lie, nor should lies be spoken out with the terms of the reality.

We ought to stop thinking that great changes can be achieved only from the political actors. We are the ones who effectuate change; change originates from every single citizen.

Let us feel, as Albanians that love for our country ought to be our biggest driving force. The meaning of the existence for the Albanians ought to be the love for their own country.

Let's think of democracy as a recipe prescribing a healthy life, encouraging our dreams, as a sweet melody that nourishes the soul with love and positivity, so that we can keep on working for a better Albania...

What is democracy to me?

Democracy. This world comes up everywhere, in the television, in the radio, newspapers, political speeches, and in the small talk of the common people. Yet, what is democracy, really? What do you get from it?

The replies in my mind come by thousands. To me democracy is first and foremost freedom, freedom to choose, freedom to think, freedom to believe, and freedom to act.

Democracy is our way of moving away from our country's painful past. It is a form of governance that gives comfort to our monotonous present. We all live our lives grasped on this concept, even though we don't abide by its laws and rules.

The freedoms enshrined in the concept of democracy are misused. It is very disappointing to see that at times we take steps behind towards a dark historical past. We live in the twenty-first century, in the free years of democracy, yet we don't feel democracy. It can well happen that you are threatened because you say something different from the rest. If you have a different opinion, you will have to face an anonymous mass that threatens your very self. If you act differently, you may be killed. Yet, this is part of living in the years of democracy.

I you are yourself, you are prejudiced, you are attacked and you are transformed in something that differs from what you used to be.

Is this the meaning of living in a democracy?

They say this is democracy. No it is not. Never. Our democracy is the facade and the fake logo of this country. It is a lie that makes life easier to those willing to lie to themselves. To me, living in a democracy means justice, freedom, change.

Change in every aspect, change in the economy, industry, tourism, mindsets, ideas. Democracy is freedom that respects other peoples' freedoms. Yet no

state can be free without real justice. Yet the reality is different. The reality is an excellent example of the form of government we have adopted.

This form of government does not really match with the parameters that define the concept of democracy. We are overwhelmed by news about murders, violence, threats that are never fully dealt with. These are indeed crimes that aren't punished, and then allowed to be forgotten.

Maybe people think everything will get better as time goes by. Everything will be fine tomorrow. This is the world we are living in, this is the way we live our present.

Democracy is easy to mention. Yet, much lies behind the spoken word. Is it what we really want? That raises many other questions, which recall mixed responses and speeches from the past. All this makes me think that we can have many ideas and take many actions to make our country a real democracy.

We are the change, we are the ones who should shape power through our thinking and our acting, and we are the ones who should define the future of democracy. It's us, the people; we are the ones who should bring about a solution as democratic as possible.

Everything depends on us. It's up to us to choose whether we should keep on living the way we do, by sticking to the mere word "democracy", or by living up to its real application and meaning.

The myriad of questions and hypotheses about democracy risk to confound us when it comes to pursuing its real meaning. Yet, I still think of the early years of transition in Albania, those happy years for democracy. I have read articles about the first sparks of the democratic movement, for the collapse of the socialist system, triggered by the students' hunger strike.

All of this makes me feel the importance of living in a democracy. I get a feeling of what my parents have done, so that we can live free, in peace, in harmony with democracy.

Do we do what we ought to keep democracy real? Was it ever real?

The transmitted memories of the sufferings under the communist and the

fascist regime are really painful. It took many years of struggle and dreams to make some difference for Albania. The democratic movement was initiated by the political emigrants, who spearheaded the democratic processes in Albania.

Of course, the student movement was the main carrier of the democracy in the country. The students staged a hunger strike, that hit the heart of the communist system. Yet life goes on as nothing happened.

On the eve of its democratic change, Albania had to struggle for the first time with enormous problems. People had to pay a high price for the transformation.

Yet, looking back in the past, I ask myself whether is it of any use to behave the way we do in the present, by neglecting our democratic system and by acting well outside the norms that sustain it.

Albania has undergone significant political, economic and social changes once democracy was established. It has tried to establish democratic institutions, and "democratic" relation between its institutions and its people.

Yet, the recent developments have shown that many problems lie ahead in the road towards democracy, in the establishment of the rule of law, and in the conduct of free and fair elections.

It's hard to build a true democracy, if the economic basis is simply lacking. The inability of several subsequent governments to provide for the country's economic stability, to fight poverty, to solve social and political problems, may, at the end result in a widespread disenchantment with democracy.

A real democracy can be established only if real efforts are made to solve our problems. I believe it is possible; Albania can still provide plenty of opportunities to this end.

We can still rely on a favorable geographical position, natural resources, a long tradition of hospitality. All of this can make Albania a place worthy of being considered a democracy.

We have started our journey quite a while ago. We are still underway, hoping that we can really make it, hoping that one day we can say that we are a really democratic country, where the law is enforced and the rules are respected.

What is democracy, after all?

To me democracy is a deeply-felt word, which reminds one of the past and brings about a feeling of security for the future, for a future of democracy for our children.

The future of my country lies certainly with a democratic system established by capable people, with a clear commitment for the well-being of the country and of the people.

The future for my country is democracy, real democracy.

Griselda Meti
Lezha

What is democracy to me?

Democracy (demo – people, cracy – rule) is a form of government, where people have the power. To be noted the fact that the definition of democracy only refers to who the ones who rule. Despite varying interpretations, the definition of democracy does not say anything on how democracy is brought about, that is, how the elected ones are bound to rule. To my opinion, “the democratic method” is an institutional arrangement that enables for a political decision-making allowing certain individuals to take decisions once they have successfully competed and received the largest share of the peoples’ votes.

I don’t want to discuss only competitions, but also values, the existence of majorities and competitive minorities, which balance the whole system based on the distribution of the people’s votes.

I maintain a democratic system has to be built upon general elections, in which males and females, regardless of their race, in other words, all population, can participate.

Democracy is a set of rules and procedures arising out of an agreement or compromise aimed at the peaceful solution of the problems through the cooperation between politically relevant actors and other institutions that are active on the political scene. This definition allows us to consider an element of democracy that is often underrated: democracy is a system that builds on the principle of balance of power.

A basic agreement on the rules of the game is a precondition to any democracy. On the other hand, democracy ought to accommodate possible conflicts and disagreements on the contents of these rules.

Democracy should live with the uncertainty that relates to the elections’ results on the one hand, yet on the other hand, it needs the certainty of clear and respected rules of game, which in their turn, contribute to relativize and limit any uncertainties.

Democracy ought to apply the rule of the majority, as the main decision-making principle. Yet it ought to safeguard the rights of the minority. In certain cases it has to adopt the rule of unanimity. Democracy ought to ensure a wide representation of interests and identities in decision-making, in the parliament and in the regional and local assemblies. On the other hand it cannot relinquish the principle of effective decision-making, which is difficult to achieve when the optimal representation of communities is called into question.

Democracy bears in itself a paradox: the stronger the consensus that sustains it, the more conflicts it can handle.

Democracy... countless words are used to define this concept. Still, this was what I hold of it.

Some thoughts by the competitors...

In a nutshell, the notion of democracy is defined by the following terms: people's sovereignty, rule of majority, respect for the rights of minorities, equality before the law, enforcement of the law, pluralism, tolerance, cooperation and compromise.

No one may ask for his rights to be observed, if he or she does not fulfill his or her duties first. Reciprocity can have a value only if one starts from oneself.

If this doesn't work out, a democratic state may not exist.

**Ersila Ahmetaj
Lezha**

In my opinion, the main obstacle to the development of democracy lies in the domination of the high decision-making bodies by incompetent persons. In theory, everyone adheres to democracy, in practice the real democrats are really few.

**Ilvi Deda
Puka**

Fair enough, we're a democratic country, yet we do not stick to the rules of democracy.

**Rinada Asllanaj
Puka**

We often blame the state for our low income level, as if it were the duty of the state to provide income, without us making any effort. We forget that we are the state. The state, however, has no written laws stipulating that they are bound to be infringed upon, that Albanians should not love other Albanians, and that, in order to help one-other, we have to pay in advance.

There is no law stating that, without exception, we have to all go to college, regardless of whether or not we feel capable to succeed. Nobody has told us to bribe to get enrolled in a university, or to receive medical services. We are the ones who taught those in power in such a way; therefore, the first step to be taken by the Albanian people is to be aware that there is no reason to keep making these mistakes.

Everyone thinks that almost everything is about the money, a banknote through which you can buy a myriad of things. But the truth is that wealth comes from health. With no health, banknotes have no value. The problem is that you have to pay more in order to have good health. You need to pay even for an injection. Isn't that a bit too much?

Kristina Demollari
Korça

Although many countries have democratic systems, they are not real democracies. In the long run, probably for decades, they are ruled by narrow political elites.

I am always thrilled by the question whether our “democratic society” is a mere reflection of our political establishment. Is it so? Or, alternatively, can it be that our political establishment is just a projection of this “democratic society”?

Romina Marku
Lezha

Don't look for democracy where it's impossible to be found, don't look for it in strange dimensions. Live it - in your thoughts and in your acts, live it by helping others, by caring for your family and friends, and for the others who are different from you.

Gjyste Ndoka
Lezha

Our adolescent democracy

I thought that when young people write about democracy, they somehow divest themselves of the habitual buoyancy of their age, become more serious than they should normally be, and even more formal. In other words, I would expect essays to be written by “small women and men”, using terms they would borrow from the world of adults. I was wrong. Those essays, especially the winning ones, are really amazing. Disarming questions, raised in full honesty and intelligence; questions of the kind that really make us think. High school students write about democracy as a natural right belonging to everyone, including them, and the democracy they see is actually a right they have been denied. Denied by whom? By us, the adults.

In fact, the questions that high school students raise, and the states they describe, are the most important questions that the most educated part of our country has long ago raised, without managing – as we will see below – to really drive in pillars, provide clear answers, or blaze new paths.

Being that the democratic moments that we, as a people and as a state, have experienced before 1990 have been rather insignificant, democracy by us has and continues to be **improperly understood**. Since democracy has been originally considered simply and only as an antipode to dictatorship, there was no way that democracy could possibly have been comprehended right away. That holds true for the early '90s, but to some extent, also for the present; even today, democracy is seen as the immediate cure to all problems, especially to poverty. By us, democracy was and is still considered the means that bring people their personal happiness, often entirely separated from social wellbeing or group wellbeing. The concept of freedom is about a man who is given the right to do anything: occupy somebody else's land, house, and anything, and behave as he pleases – are we, or are we not in a democracy? It is only dictatorships that use strict rules – even take people's lives in unimaginable easy ways. Such democracy and personal freedom, which is seen as violence against others, are the most characterizing features of our democracy.

In addition to not being understood, our democracy is also **misinterpreted**. It looks like we just had to pass some laws, curse the system we had left behind, and keep waiting, as if we had planted a tree, one of those which bear fruit

already in the first year. A sort of rush, sometimes even justified, to quickly achieve what many other people have struggled to achieve for centuries, has accompanied us every day, every hour, and every second for the last twenty years. It is very easy for people that take such hasty steps, without thinking, to make mistakes, to fall and be hurt, and even get disappointed. From time to time, disappointment has gone so far that people often say: Ah, the only way for this country to manage is a strong hand! It is usually some governing approaches carrying not so small doses of dictatorial remnants of the past that often stand behind such pseudo-patriotic thinking.

As if the two first ones were not enough, our democracy has also been **misused**. True democracy is the triumph of the values and merits of women and men raised in freedom. Instead of such women and men, we have often come to glorify people who have no social, professional, or intellectual values whatsoever. The only attributes that have come to count have been family and geographic connections with the rich and powerful, and the noise they militantly make in political rallies. A political *demimonde* is thus created, composed of servile followers and eager lickspittles, creating a big canal like that between the thick walls of medieval castles and the masses of ordinary people. It is probably not necessary to mention that the tribal-militant part is at the same time the less educated part of our people, and, as we have come to know, democracy and ignorance don't go well with each-other.

Here, the term 'democracy' could probably be more accurately defined as 'post-dictatorship'. Albanian democracy is like a teenager, who, from time to time is impetuous, unpredictable, stubborn, selfish, inexperienced, but always so zealous to be a 'somebody'. And as it always comes to pass, there comes a day when even the most classic of teenagers suddenly feels of age. Such day is also coming for Albanian democracy.

Fatos Baxhaku, publicist
Tirana, August 2013

As a member of the jury, I was impressed by the approach young people adopt towards politics. Browsing their essays, one can see how attentive and well-informed they are. Young people have their own perceptions about what democracy means. They seem to be aware of the necessity to embark upon efforts to change the opinion according to which 'citizens are in the opposition'. The opposite is true: the citizens are in power and accountability is the first rule of a functional democracy. To all essay contributors: Thanks for sharing!

Mimoza Koçiu

I really appreciated the opportunity to be part of the jury. Writing an essay is not easy, as this is a demanding literature composition requiring philosophical thinking. I was very much impressed by the achievements of these young people. Their thinking is sharp and cultivated. I am happy to see that the young generation has an understanding of democracy that was totally absent in the past.

Frok Çupi

At the outset of this endeavor, I had my expectations and doubts. But as soon as I started travelling around the country and meeting young people of Puka, Korça, Lezha and Kukës who were more than able to eloquently and perceptively express their views, concerns and ideas about the world and people around them, I felt that democracy has a chance. This was true for larger towns with a considerable tradition of civic engagement spirit, as well as of smaller towns and those in remoter areas. The young men and women we met were just amazing. They were debaters with great potential, citizens who are capable of making a change and want to do more. I shared this opinion with the members of the jury I had the pleasure to work with. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them: Ms Mimoza Koçiu, Mr Frok Çupi and Mr Fejzi Braushi. I also extend my thanks to Ms Alma Puka, Ms Ereandra Taipllari, Mr Astrit Brasha and Mr Rustem Strugaj for their support, and to Ms Rezarta Delisula, Mr Gjergji Bojaxhi and Mr Fatos Baxhaku for kindly sharing with us their views on democracy.

Dr. Alenka Verbole

