

IS DEMOCRACY THE ONLY „GAME IN TOWN“ IN POST-TRUTH EUROPE?

Asst. prof. Lyubomir Stefanov, PhD

New Bulgarian University, Sofia

Abstract:

Just a decade ago democracy was the sine qua non of the EU. Combined with rule of law and market economy it stood for the quintessence of the Union. However, post-truth politics struck recently the so-called democratic Euro-Atlantic community and everything changed literally overnight. People started wondering, especially in the aftermath of the economic crisis from 2008 whether their leaders and elites are underperforming or just collaborating to become richer by stealing from the states they govern. State-capture of unseen kind became the word of the day of numerous post-truth apologetics. Populism marched relentlessly across Europe, while authoritarianism and strong non-democratic leadership suddenly looked competitive to the long-deliberating and tolerant democracy.

So, the question in mind is as following: is democracy just going through a period of self-actualisation and rediscovery of its virtues or it has become redundant in the eyes of the majority of the Europeans? Through broad and general comparative analysis, the paper will attempt to contribute to the ongoing debate of what is the nature of the crisis in the representative government model of modern-day democracy across Europe. By outlining some features in the existing models, it will give a perspective to the possible developments in the near future.

Key words: Democracy, representative government, rule of law, elections, justice

It could not have been more convenient for the purpose of this paper that the world and in particular Europe are currently going through such a devastating crisis caused by a medical virus. For one might argue that it is not just a respiratory infection but a disease that engulfs the world as we know it – socially, economically and politically. And of course, such a statement is not far away from reality. It appeared that the implications and the consequences for the virus-stricken world overcome even the wildest of fantasies.

Social distancing, i.e. the only true method for prevention of spreading/catching the virus known to the science so far, is appearing to be both inspirational and destructive. But above all it seems to cause a stir in all of the principles upon

which the concept of modern liberal representative democracy is built on. This in turn opens the door to future political experiments which gladly will take centre stage once the rules and regulations of democracy are all but gone. These will most likely take the form of somewhat authoritarian dictatorships or demagogue-populist semi-republicanism. Either ways the political sightseeing on the both sides of the Atlantic will not be the same in the near future.

However, there is still hope. Regardless the timing of the vaccine discovery or some medicine breakthrough in the fight against the new virus, societies might become more cohesive and integrated in the pursuit of the common goal, which will probably become the word of the next few years – recovery. Apparently, there is no rolling back method which magically will return the world to the previously somehow fragile state of equilibrium. That is not necessary by the way for now we might have another goal far more ambitious and realistic – make the world a really better place. Let's reinvent democracy for a starter.

Following its undisputed rise after the downfall of Soviet-bred communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe it looked like the world has only one direction to follow – to the end of history and eternal prosperity (Fukuyama, 2006). Shorty, it was demonstrated to the Europeans at least, that it was not meant to be. First Yugoslavia and then the ripples of its demise in Kosovo and Macedonia shocked the EU. Most disturbing was the fact that despite all proclamations for belongingness to the coveted European civilization from the involved parties they turned a blind eye to the appeals of the EU for ceasefire and peaceful negotiations for settling their records with brutal force and unseen bloodsheds and massacres. Still the Union kept on repeating that accession to its ranks would have prevented the atrocities as it is well known that democracies do not wage wars against one another. The fact is that they do, though not that often.

Then came the first wave of enlargement of the EU in 2004. The Big Bang was a controversy from its construction as the membership of two of the negotiating countries – Bulgaria and Romania were put on hold for another three years. This unprecedented move together with all of the surrounding ambiguities in the so-called post-accession monitoring procedures installed some serious doubts in the newcomers to the Union. All of them took the note that regardless what they've been told or assured during private meetings what mattered at the end of the day was the opinion not of diplomats but of the general publics in the respective host countries. In fact, it was the good will of the political parties holding office across the EU on their behalf that shaped the process for they bore more responsibility for their own and then for newcomers. And are still doing it today.

Soon afterwards the new member states discovered how to take the best out of their new status and started learning swiftly how to skip if not avoid at all the responsibilities that come along together that way. Some did it more successfully than others. Learning successful bargaining became the most popular skill across Central and Eastern Europe. Conditionality on the other

hand was not completely exhausted as a transforming tool on behalf of the EU. Still, the role model for the newcomers was, of course, Greece, for its decades of mimicking reforms and economic prosperity on the back of the hole Union.

Being for long time counted in the ranks of West more out of pure sentiment for its ancient and glorious past rather its economic and political performance, Greece was demonstrating nothing but how to enjoy a prosperous life in EU, without paying much attention to its rules and regulations. Yes, it took part in all of the official meetings and discussions along the process of inviting new members to the club but only for its own goals and good. It is true that the negotiation process of accession was based on the quintessential set of rules set upon the Maastricht and Copenhagen principles. However, one still wonders today what EU would have looked like if those rules were at play when the Union expanded in 1982 and 1986? Were Greece, Portugal and Spain prepared at the time? Highly unlikely. But standards change overtime and not always for good.

The goal to spread democracy across Europe worked for a while but when the World Trade centre twin towers went down in 2001 that ambitious plan needed quick rethinking. So, the new applicants to the club of prosperity and welfare needed to demonstrate not that much of a humble and righteous behaviour rather readiness and commitment to fight the new common enemy - the global terrorism. The most convincing evidence being that each of the new EU members became NATO enlisted first. The goal justified the means, especially when Uncle Sam said so.

That politics of compromising with democratic principles and economic stability continued when the immigrants from Asia and Africa started their push to Europe. Being for long in need of an actually working protocols and measures regarding migrants, emigrants and immigrants from around the world the EU simply failed to cope with the pressure. For almost a decade each and every wave of people either fleeing from terror or looking for better life in Europe splashes against a wall of sophisticated ignorance and hardly hidden sense of superiority. Europe is a homeland for its members regardless their deficits for they declared ardent belongingness to its credo and civilizational identity. All those in need from outside are of secondary if of importance at all for they are not „us“. Our home, our rules, our walls. The paradigm of the democratic Open society prophesied by Popper enshrined in the core of EU by the free movement of people, stock, goods and capital was no more.

Was democracy a victim of its own success?

Well, that might be the case, especially if one looks into the story of the Hungarian prime-minister-Victor Orban. In a decade the once young man who studied in Oxford with scholarship from the foundation of another popular individual of Hungarian origin - George Soros turned not just against his sponsor, he turned seemingly against everything that the transition to democracy was all about. While taking willingly the public funds support from the EU Orban openly criticised the Union for its policies regarding immigration, freedom of speech, rule of law, human rights, the institutional framework and above all, cohesion

and further integration. Even more, Hungary openly defended Russia when the latter was sanctioned for annexing Crimea and later invading Eastern Ukraine.

Unsurprisingly, Orbán and his party Fidesz, which run the country during the past decade were continuously criticised by the EU and its respective institutions for excessive infringement of its directives and regulatory framework. Orbán counter attacked his critiques by stating openly that Europe will be saved by the newcomers for it lost its identity – a remark which struck accord with many Europeans as well, especially in the aftermath of the string of terrorist attacks in France, Spain, Germany, Belgium and the UK. The Syrian refugee crisis was the last straw in that controversial behaviour, but it was not until Orbán publicly attacked the then president of the EU Commission and fellow EPP member, Jean-Claude Juncker that things turned sour. The EPP decided to freeze the membership of Fidesz and is still mulling over the idea whether to terminate it or just keep it in the fridge. Either way it is a situation considered as a win-win one for Orbán for he only gains popularity across Europe both amongst far-right fellow formations like Marine le Pen's Rassemblement National or Matteo Salvini's Lega Nord as well as within the Visegrad club. For the illiberal democracy openly sold by Orbán looks far more tempting to former communist states than the responsibility laden liberal one defined by the rule of law, transparent market economy and human rights. Nationalism became the trade mark of Orbán's surge for rectifying the injustices done to his country in the first two decades of transition to liberal democracy.

Remarkably he said in a speech in 2014 that „*a democracy is not necessarily liberal. Just because something is not liberal, it still can be a democracy. Moreover, it could be and needed to be expressed, that probably societies founded upon the principle of the liberal way to organize a state will not be able to sustain their world-competitiveness in the following years, and more likely they will suffer a setback, unless they will be able to substantially reform themselves*

[\(https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadvurdo-of-26-july-2014/](https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadvurdo-of-26-july-2014/) last accessed on April 12th, 2020)“ The new social order should be based on the principle of national sovereignty, economic equality and state reform under the values of Christianity, freedom and human rights. The new credo goes further that way instructing the respective „*political leadership to harmonize relationship between the interests and achievement of individuals – that needs to be acknowledged – with interests and achievements of the community, and the nation. Meaning, that Hungarian nation is not a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organized, strengthened and developed, and in this sense, the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom, etc. But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organization, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead*

(ibid.)“. One might be excused for mistaking it with something copied from a Soviet communist textbook on running the state and society under one-party dictatorship.

However, striking the Hungarian case is it is not the only one and definitely not an exempt. All of the abovementioned members of the Visegrad group-

Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia are contributing gladly to the topic. Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, Austria and Spain are also showing signs of not just disenchantment with democracy but even ready to test something bordering closely the Hungarian scenario. Even France and Germany are struggling with far-right nationalist surge and populism. It is hardly a coincidence. Especially when having an eye on what is going on across the Atlantic.

The common denominator between the rise of Donald J. Trump and his European counterparts is the general failure of the establishment, or much more precise of the elites of various nature, but mainly political to meet their responsibilities and deliver what is expected of them. Which is leadership in turbulent times like the ones after the global economic crisis of 2008, awareness for the major social problems and decisiveness for tackling them and on top of that role modelling for appropriate behaviour ranging from the model of the car one drives to the word choice in the public communication. Failing to perform their duties was considered and is considered a treason by the general public. A betrayal mainly out of private interest to private interests.

The conspiracy goes that all politicians are no different for they have common interest which is to remain in power as long as possible. The truth is that they must be alike in order to understand the very fabric of the society they govern in order to provide the policies which will do whatever that society needs to function and prosper. That is why regardless of personal political affiliation or membership politicians from around the spectre in modern liberal representative democracies must be open to hear from their opponents for democratic societies have many voices and various interests. But when continuously failing to demonstrate decent behaviour with eyes on the public good under the rule of law, politicians deservedly become suspects of wrong-doing and foul play, namely state-capture.

And that is mainly due to the fact that the general public is convinced that the elites stole what was belonging to everyone – the power to determine the course of the polity through elections. Conspiring against the people on a large scale with other politicians from around the world or with homegrown capitalist or with huge economic multinationals, national governments stole or sold the country's institutions. That is why every ardent and vocal critique of the old establishment was given a speed train ticket to the focus of the public interest whenever pointing a finger at the 1 % who own the 99 % of the economy. And that in turn produces, of course with a little push from the likes of Cambridge Analytica, Google and Facebook, national saviours who storm the elections in one go on the promise to make the respective country great again and save the commoners from the oppression.

Ironically, as Levitsky and Ziblatt famously wrote, today democracies do not die with tanks on the streets as it was the story not so long ago. These days „*constitutions and other nominally democratic institutions remain in place. People still vote. Elected autocrats maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance. This is how most democracies die today: slowly, in barely visible steps*“ (2018-21). It is true that these days the Winter palace is stormed by no bloodlust

mobs, nor is the Reichstag in flames but people from all over Europe are looking for savours who threaten to change the very core of the democratic political process established in the aftermath of the Second Great War. Referring to no other authority but God's and nation's these self-proclaimed patriots oversimplify the whole nature of the political contest between ideas and interests framing it instead as a struggle between two ultimately homogeneous and „antagonistic social camps, „the pure people“ versus „the corrupt elite“, arguing that politics „should be an expression of the volontü günürale (general will) of the people“. (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017-6)

Once considered a fundamental achievement of modern liberal democracy – tolerance of different opinions and opposition, now it is under severe pursuit if not threat. Illiberal post-truth democracy does not guarantee its opponents any room for disagreement and immediately jumps over it whenever something or someone expresses or takes different from the official viewpoint. That partisanship which Hume was scared long time ago will dismember the very fabric of the common good is back in action but now as a threat against democracy. For the opponents are no more treated like counterparts rather like enemies. The political process as a whole became warfare in the post-truth politics.

Denying the independent or other-minded individuals or groups the very right to argue for their positions openly actually undermines the core of liberalism which is vested in the undeniable right of free will and free choice. Blaming someone who expresses thoughts that are not convenient or challenging the government was a practice inherent to totalitarian regimes and yet, they become norm of the day in so called democratic world led by the example of the USA. Never before has the world seen such scorn and animosity towards political opponents as demonstrated by Trump and his presidential campaign. „Fake“ became its slogan and trade mark, a tool which was used randomly in defeating opponents and allies alike. The real world was brought to light and clashed against the safe haven of the establishment at the Foggy bottom in Washington, D.C. The consequences could have hardly been more devastating and long-resonating across the democratic societies.

A wave of home-grown Trumps surged to prominence seeking their own version of his success, still in different environment. Most of them failed but the tide of populism both left and right one swept Europe. Barely overnight, speaking in processual terms, the Age of reason and the Enlightenment were undone by prophets of the national spirit – *Volksgeist*, which was declared once again the ultimate principle. Common good and free will transformed into national welfare and strong community in the speech of those who declared democracy if not void than at least exhausted. The prime of their critiques was that democracy and its elites failed to deliver to everyone but some, thus defaulting itself and proving incapable of bringing prosperity and wellbeing to all members of the society. Of course, its principles fell victim to that zealous attack for democracy was blamed of imposing unnatural principles of equality, tolerance, political correctness and false truths.

One has just to recall the campaign across Europe during the ratification of the so-called „Istanbul convention“, which demanded for more transparency and control over domestic violence against women and children. It was met with string of protests in many Central and Eastern European countries which in some of the cases-Hungary, declared it an open violation and infringement of their national identity and civilizational values, namely Christian ones. That rediscovered religious zeal comes as no surprise given the efforts which Russia invests across Eastern Europe to promote the idea that Christianity will bridge the gap between itself and old Europe, and moreover Christianity is what differentiates civilized Europe from the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, in post-truth Europe those appeals struck accord with plenty newly self-declared national saviours who embraced religion and nationalism as their new political *modus operandi* both at home and abroad. So next to the political warfare imported overseas Europe became invested with religious fundamentalism which threatens to take over even the moderates. For religion became a mandatory part of the public discourse as identification factor and its open challenging automatically is associated with national betrayal and „otherness“. Laicism, not so long ago considered as a norm for the general public when concerning its public matters is now increasingly becoming a sign of individualism, i.e. something differing from the community, not good and sanctioned by it. The end result is a process of transformation of the society into a homogenous faceless mass that is no different to the atomized, flat class-society under communism.

How can Europe save democracy? There is always the paradox since the time of J. S. Mill and the Founding Fathers that „constitutional liberalism is about the limitation of power; democracy is about its accumulation and use“ (Zakaria, 2007-354). By demanding more form, itself and delivering more to its citizens democratic governments across the continents must prove that they are aware of their faults and willing to overcome the deficit of public trust by limiting themselves in order to deliver more to a broader public. Endless bragging about how bright, civilized and successful, free of discriminations place EU is in the past decades led only to a growing number of people willing to come to it and to the resulting discontent of those living already there by the inconsistency of that narrative. For EU was not a happy place, rather it was a multi-layer limited responsibility entity which cared more for its image than for the actual prosperity of the citizens who lived inside it. Or at least this was the impression for many Europeans who started doubting the Union and its core political and economic principles especially after 2008 and more recently highlighted by the Greek debt drama. The perception, especially among the newcomers that the EU is not exactly a union between equals is vividly demonstrated by the Schengen area agreement and the Eurozone as the most striking examples.

„Modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives“ (Schmitter and Karl, 1991-76). That is where EU and its member states should focus their

efforts – amending the relationship with citizens, restoring the feeling of trust and common sense, rebuilding the understanding that Europe is a far better place in result of denouncing nationalism not fostering it under any form. For the memory of the Second World War still lives and we all know where the path of national superiority, independence and pride leads regardless its newly sophisticated rhetoric, rediscovered identity and precious values.

Only through transparency and accountability can the democratic order reinstate the belief in its potency and discourse. The failure to do so will open the door to various forms of political experiments on the basis of authoritarianism and even totalitarianism. For if democratic institutions remain incapable of protecting, delivering and maintaining reasonable social prosperity new political favourites, new people's tribunes will take it over overnight on the promise that they are actually saving it and restoring its former glory. Once in power they will attempt an attack on the judiciary power. For if they might control over parliaments, they still remain subjects of legal norms, which they either despise or frame as not just. Forging new legislative framework that amends injustices and pretends to clean the judiciary and prosecution of corruption while actually subduing it to the executive power is a trade mark move of each and every wannabe authoritarian ruler. And there are plenty of those attempting within the EU.

„Without robust norms, constitutional checks and balances do not serve as the bulwarks of democracy we imagine them to be. Instead, institutions become political weapons, wielded forcefully by those who control them against those who do not. This is how elected autocrats subvert democracy – packing and „weaponizing“ the courts and other neutral agencies, buying off the media and the private sector (or bullying them into silence), and rewriting the rules of politics to permanently disadvantage their rivals. The tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy's enemies use the very institutions of democracy – gradually, subtly, and even legally-to kill it“ (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018-27).

Insightful writing though not too surprising given the fact that those who actually threaten to kill democracy are easily recognized before doing so by their open and true admiration for non-democratic regimes. Russia and China are the favourites sources for borrowing practices to save democracy. The competitive authoritarianism which those countries export is not attacking the political paradigm of democracy directly instead gradually undermining its biggest accomplishments and core principles. By doing so they attempt to demonstrate that democracy is a weak political regime which is incapable of delivering freedom and security for all but just a chosen few. Their advice to those willing to listen is: reduce liberty and individual rights and freedoms to be able to become a success as a nation and country. Unfortunately for Russia and China, significant parts of Europe have already been through variations of their prospective success and millions of citizens do remember very well where this path leads to.

The answer to the initial question posed in the beginning could have been shorter. But it deserves reminding all of us through what we have been in order to understand the contemporary challenges we are facing. Democracy

will survive and thrive not because it is the best political formula or there are no lucrative alternatives, at least from outside and faraway. Democracy in Europe will outlive and this current outburst on militant populism as it had done with its previous waves. It will come stronger, immune for the time being but still vulnerable for its inherent weakness is its core strength – tolerance for variety and guarantees for political representation. The most fundamental lesson learned from the crisis should be that there is no universal recipe for how to construct, apply and maintain a successful democratic political system for every case is a unique mixture of national culture, socio-political and economic specifics, historical discourses and above all different individuals with different perceptions. Democracy, unlike totalitarianism resides within variety, competition and liberty not fear, coercion and imposed equality.

References:

1. Fukuyama, F., *The end of history and the last man*. Simon and Schuster, New York 2006.
2. Levitsky, S. and Ziblatt, D., *How Democracies Die*, Crown Publishing, New York, 2018.
3. Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, C.R., *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press 2017.
4. Schmitter. P.C. and Karl T. L., *What Democracy Is ... and Is Not*, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 2, Number 3, Summer 1991, pp. 75-88.
5. Zakaria, F., *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2007.