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The crisis of the classical concept of liberal democracy in the context of modern challenges

The main aim of this paper is to examine the problem of the crisis of liberal democracy in the modern world, referring to the phenomenon of a loss of balance between social and personal good in a pluralistic society. There are several concepts of democracy in political science, including the classic liberal concept, which sees its core priorities collide with recent global challenges. Thus, the relevance of this problem refers to the recent disappointment in the idea of liberal democracy, which shows disillusionment in democracy as such. In response to this trend, some hybrid regimes offer an alternative in the form of so-called democracies with illiberal approaches. From the other side, the liberal democratic platforms are used by populist political forces, which results in dividing democratic societies about the questions hard to finally solve. The Brexit problem – the process of British exit from the European Union – shows recent examples of long-lasting social effects derived from the crisis of liberal democratic concept. The author of the article has come to the conclusion that when it comes to modern democratic processes, classic liberal approach brings the populism threat back to the table. When there is no balance between the totally free civil society with its direct democratic influences and the state structure with formal procedures aimed at total good of beneficial functioning, the liberal instruments would be used by populists. Populism can create severe divisions within liberal democratic societies providing dilemmas, such as Brexit, which are difficult to solve with the same liberal democratic procedures. This means that liberal democratic approach undermines itself with the very fact of the existing tendency to lose balance between the ideal personal freedom (that includes satisfying every citizen's choice) and public good.

Keywords: *democracy, political regime, hybrid regime, theory of democracy, Thomas Hobbes, Aristotle*

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Криза класичної концепції ліберальної демократії в умовах сучасних викликів

Головною метою статті є дослідження проблеми кризи ліберальної демократії в сучасному світі з огляду на втрату рівноваги між суспільним та особистим благом у плюралістичному суспільстві. У політичній науці існує кілька концепцій демократії, включаючи класичну ліберальну концепцію, чії ключові пріоритети стикаються з сучасними глобальними проблемами. Таким чином, актуальність цього дослідження виходить з проблеми сучасного розчарування в ідеї ліберальної демократії, що також визначається розчаруванням в демократії в цілому. У відповідь на цю тенденцію деякі гібридні режими пропонують альтернативу у вигляді так званих демократій з неліберальними підходами. З іншого боку, ліберально-демократичні платформи використовуються популістськими політичними силами, що призводить до поділу демократичного суспільства з питань, які важко вирішити остаточно. Проблема Brexit - процес виходу Великобританії з Європейського Союзу – демонструє новий приклад довготривалих соціальних наслідків, що походять від кризи ліберально-демократичної концепції. Автор дослідження приходить до висновку, що коли йдеться про сучасні демократичні процеси, класичний ліберальний підхід повертає загрозу популізму. Коли немає рівноваги між абсолютно вільним громадянським суспільством з його прямими демократичними впливами та державною структурою з офіційними процедурами, спрямованими на суспільне благо через успішне управління, ліберальні інструменти використовуються популістами. Популізм може створити серйозний розкол в ліберально-демократичних суспільствах, який призводить до таких дилем, як Brexit, що важко вирішити за допомогою власне ліберально-демократичних процедур. Це означає, що ліберально-демократичний підхід підриває сам факт свого існування через втрату рівноваги між ідеальною особистою свободою (що включає задоволення вибору кожного громадянина) та суспільним благом.

Ключові слова: *демократія, політичний режим, гібридний режим, теорія демократії, Томас Гоббс, Арістотель*

Introduction

Modern era provides political scientists with a variety of new questions, more complicated than ever before. Considering the fact that political science already has a number of core problems unsolved, 21 century brings more controversies, which can confuse a researcher.

Failing to find mutual theoretic ground for defining political regimes, separating types of regimes and determining democracy, political scientists face a new challenge – a crisis of liberal democratic approach. In political science there are different views on the problem of weakening democracy in the 21th century. Among the scientists who research the recent democratic and autocratic waves, one can name Y. Mounk, A. Applebaum, P. Brooker, A. Croissant, B.W. Jentleson, J. Linz, Z. Laub and others. But according to their researches the question remains unclear, whether it is accurate to call the recent state of global democracy a downfall or it is more accurate to speak about the weakening of a specific concept of democracy, namely, the classical liberal democratic model.

The main aim of this particular article is to research the core problem of weakening liberal democratic concept through the prism of modern global challenges, which question the balance of public good and personal freedoms in liberal democracies.

I. The problem of liberal democratic concept and its definition within the framework of modern challenges.

As Y. Mounk puts it, “People have been growing more and more critical of our (liberal democratic) political system - not just of particular governments or institutions but of democracy itself - for a long time”. (Laub, 13) The political theorist underlines that “over the last twenty years, antisystem parties and movements, especially on the far right, have risen around the world”. Moreover, this rise is a global trend, which includes the rise of populism, affecting almost every liberal democracy (Laub, 13). There are modern examples of

illiberal democratic order (Hungary), which pose a threat to liberal norms as “ideological competitors”. But there are many examples of illiberal attitudes within liberal democracies as well. “A turn toward increasingly illiberal attitudes pervades countries as different as Australia, the United States, Sweden, Germany, Greece, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Russia, India, and even China” (Laub, 13).

From Francis Fukuyama’s point of view, “everybody now takes democracy for granted”. This attitude brings disillusion about the liberal democratic institutions both in the United States and in Europe (Fukuyama, 5).

The idea of Y. Mounk about the threat for liberal democracy includes the thought that illiberal democratic orders (which actually use non-democratic instruments in democratic background) provide an alternative for people unhappy with liberal democratic order. “Five years ago, I was already worried about people falling out of love with democracy. But what gave me succour was that there wasn’t a clear ideological alternative. Where else were people going to go? Very few places in the world were going to emulate the Chinese or Iranian models” (Laub, 13). Hungary and Russia have created an alternative for those who fall between two extremes – liberal democracy and autocracy.

The situation with liberal democratic order becomes chaotic around the globe. Bruce W. Jentleson argues: “And exactly which established democracy can hold itself up as a model these days? Even in Scandinavia, often depicted as highly tolerant, anti-immigrant parties have been running strong. Denmark passed a “jewellery law” confiscating personal possessions of value from refugee migrants or denying them welfare benefits. A party founded by former Nazis is part of the new Austrian government. A neo-Nazi party won enough votes to gain representation in the German Bundestag. The Brexit victory was an expression of cultural anxiety as well as economic dislocation. Spain wrestles with Catalan secession. One could go on...” (Jentleson, 10).

The facts correspond to the idea of liberal democracy crisis. Bruce W. Jentleson supposes that liberal order has become outdated as the manifestation and representation of processes that took place globally after the Second World War. Being outdated, the liberal democratic order seems to fail meeting challenges of the 21st century. Thus, illiberal political orders try to provide an alternative, camouflaging and calling it a specific democracy (Parliament newspaper of Russian Federation, 14).

This situation also brings competition and controversy in the field of political regimes typology. Paul Brooker notes that tendency to camouflage hybrids and dictatorships “will pose a question of how to prevent the 21st century from being a century of pseudo-democracies” (Brooker, 3). Consequently, in modern times it has become more difficult to know what is not democracy (Linz, 12).

The same phenomenon brings another controversy. Becoming harder to define, the concept of democracy provides area for manipulation within quasi-democratic political systems as well as populists inside the democracies. As Juan Linz noted, it’s important “to use names for realities that we are just attempting to define”. Different political actors try to use definitions on behalf of their own political systems to “define these systems according to what they want these systems to be or what they want others to believe” (Linz, 12).

Yet, there is no common ground in researching and defining political regimes. The definitions and typology depend on the question explored (Croissant, 4). There are many classic and modern concepts of democracy. But liberal democracy isn’t the only point of democratic view. When political actors call liberal democracy the very manifestation of democratic order, there appears to be an additional area for manipulation of concepts within non-democratic contexts.

When a researcher fails to define concrete alternatives to liberal democratic concept, any political actor receives freedom to call non-

democratic system (be it hybrid or autocratic) an alternative, though illiberal, democratic order (Parliament newspaper of Russian Federation, 14). Critical attitude towards liberal democracy does not necessarily mean disillusion in democracy itself. But, while researchers equate liberal democracy and democracy in general, there is no alternative for transformations of the concept.

As A. Lijphart underlines, democratic pessimists can face “a danger of self-fulfilling prophecy”. If politicians and political scientists decide that democracy “doesn’t work” in plural, complex societies, these societies will not even try to make democracy work. This negative approach gives further way to non-democratic orders (Lijphart, 11).

II. The legacy of the Hobbes’ problem for the liberal democratic concept.

There are different approaches, which tend to explain the concept of “democracy”. An institutional approach explains democracy through the concept of political regime. A procedural approach underlines the political procedures as a core of democratic order. A cultural approach considers the culture of any society to be based on basic principles, such as individual autonomy, freedom of speech, etc. An axiological approach considers specific values, such as freedom, equality, human rights, etc. They cover most aspects of the democratic phenomenon when applied together, yet, separately these approaches lose common ground to explain the complexity of the democratic concept.

For example, Alain Touraine and Guy Hermet underline that any definition of democracy is far from being inclusive, and therefore it is necessary to distinguish two definitions of this phenomenon – a complicated and a realistic one (Touraine, 18), (Hermet, 8).

Bernd Guggenberger also points out that the concept of democracy does not have a common theoretic basis for one definition. Moreover, each researcher chooses their own key element, the characteristic of the phenomenon to create

statements about the nature of the phenomenon, as well as the definition of the concept. There are following key elements often taken for the basis of the democratic concept: equality, complicity, power of the majority, constraints on power and control, tolerance, fundamental rights of citizens, legal and social statehood, separation of powers, general elections, transparency, competition of interests, pluralism, etc (Guggenberger, 7).

If we take a closer look at the basic theories of democracy, we find one common dilemma they all try to solve: the balance between interests of minority and majority, particularly considering issues vital for a state. And here we inevitably come to the core problem. If a democratic theory is based on the idea of prevailing majority interests without taking into account minority interests, it loses the basic ground of personal freedom value. If a democratic theory takes into account minority interests as well as the majority ones, it loses the basic idea of taking decisions, which correspond to the will of “people” in general in the form of “the majority rule”.

This dilemma finally leads to the core question: how free can a person be in society, especially when it comes to societies based on the very idea of personal freedom. This problem was particularly represented in works of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who shared different views on the limits of personal freedoms within an artificial “agent” – a state. And it still remains to be the central problem for every researcher, who tries to work out another concept of democracy, either theoretical or practical.

Philip Pettit notes in this regard: “Hobbes made a distinctive contribution to the discussion of freedom on two fronts. He persuaded later, if not immediate, successors that it is only the exercise of a power of interference that reduces people’s freedom, not its (unexercised) existence - not even its existence in an arbitrary, unchecked form. Equally, he persuaded them that the exercise of a power of interference always reduces freedom in the same way,

whether it occurs in a republican democracy, purportedly on a ‘non-arbitrary’ basis, or under a dictatorial, arbitrary regime” (Pettit, 15).

The problem of power interference and freedom limits remains a stumbling stone for the democratic concept in general. And here appears the difference between a complicated definition of democracy and a practical one. The complicated definitions work hypothetically considering the “ideal” societies. The practical ones have to deal with multicomponent societies, complex elites and chaotic social hierarchy with profound differences in interests and views, sometimes unable to negotiate. So, when it comes to modern practice, democracy seems to be unstable and unpredictable.

In this respect, Arend Lijphart points out that it is hard enough to maintain stable democracy in modern plural societies. This idea goes back to Aristotle’s words about a state, which aims to become a society of equals. Sustainable democracy is fuelled by social homogeneity and political consensus. Otherwise, deep social differences and political contradictions become a deterrent point for democratic regime and may lead to its failure. Multicomponent society naturally represents a complex of contradictions and differences. Arend Lijphart supposes that it is possible to build sustainable democracy in plural society by introducing a specific form of democracy (consociationalism) based on the cooperation of elites within firmly defined lines of group interests. This factor is designed to smooth deep contradictions and reconcile different interests in complex society (Lijphart, 11).

But here we make a turn back to the Hobbes’ problem. Profound differences mean there’s no easy way to get peaceful consensus on the vital matters. In this case, if one wins, the other loses, if the majority takes crucial decision, for instance, in a referendum, the minority (in some cases almost half of the population, who lost the majority vote) will inevitably lose. For instance, the referendum in Great Britain about the future of participation in the European Union (so called

Brexit) represents this dilemma. The practical way to solve the problem is either to avoid questions in the field of profound differences or to use strict “majority decision” principle, with little regard towards minority interests. The Brexit situation shows that in some cases liberal approach doesn’t work simply because Hobbes’ problem remains unsolved. Yet, it doesn’t necessarily mean democracy fails.

III. Brexit as a specific representation of the modern liberal democratic problem.

The Brexit referendum has divided British population almost in half: 51.9% voted to leave European Union, 48.1% preferred Britain to remain in the European community. The same strong division was visible within regional and age parameters. The voters aged 18-44 in majority preferred to stay in the EU, while 44-65+ in majority preferred to leave. Scotland, Northern Ireland and London in majority preferred to vote in favour of the EU, while the rest of the country voted in favour of leaving. (BBC, 2) These results showed deep divisions in society's interests.

There was a poll conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner after the referendum, it pointed out that while 94% of Remain voters felt they had voted the right way, so did the 92% of Leave supporters (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 6). The same research showed that the country was divided in half in “forced choice between liberal and socially conservative position”. In polarization this high it seemed hard to find consensus on the key questions. For instance, the Leave and Remain voters thought reducing immigration was essential for the country’s future. But when it came to market access or free movement, there were profound differences in Leave and Stay views (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 6).

According to the British Treasury, there were three scenarios of economic cooperation with the EU: membership of the European Economic Area (EEA) like Norway; a negotiated bilateral agreement, such as that between the EU and Switzerland, Turkey or Canada; World Trade

Organisation (WTO) membership without any form of specific agreement with the EU like Russia or Brazil (HM Treasury of UK, 9). The first scenario (Norwegian) supposes Great Britain remains to be a part of the European economic area with market access and a range of rules from Brussels. The second (Swiss or Canadian) scenario supposes Great Britain signs a bilateral agreement with the EU. The third scenario (WTO) supposes no special agreements with the EU at all. Norwegian scenario could satisfy Remain voters, but not those who had voted to Leave. Both Canadian and WTO scenarios satisfied only those who had voted to Leave.

In this case of three prevailing scenarios no decision could become a consensus. If the government satisfied minority interests (in practice – 48.1% of voters), this logically would suppose breaking the “majority rule” principle. But if the government used strict “majority rule” principle, 48.1% of voters could find their interests disregarded. Finally, if the government rejected the results of the referendum, it could break the core democratic principle of people’s decision.

The 2019 brought light to this dilemma with the General Elections, which resulted in Conservatives’ victory. This victory automatically meant the Leave party held its positions and secured a specific way out of the Brexit democratic dilemma. Thus, the British Parliament notes: “The 2019 General Election resulted in a Conservative victory. The party won 365 seats, 48 more than in 2017 and 43.6% of the vote, up from 42.3% in 2017. The Labour Party won 202 seats and 32.1% of the vote, down from 262 seats and 40.0% of the vote in 2017. The Liberal Democrats won 11 seats, one fewer than in 2017, and 11.5% of the vote, up from 7.4%. The Scottish National Party won 48 seats, up 13 seats compared with 2017. Plaid Cymru retained its 4 seats in Wales. In Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) won 8 seats, two fewer than in 2017, while Sinn Féin won 7, the same number” (Sturge, 17).

The General Elections solved the dilemma by providing another direct democratic instrument of civil decision-making without breaking or reversing the previous one. «Brexit was the third most important reason for people when choosing to vote for a particular party. Among those who voted Conservative, it was the most important reason. For Liberal Democrat voters it was third. Among Labour and SNP voters, it did not feature in the top three reasons. For these voters, Brexit was displaced by: trust in the party; preferring the promises made; and believing the party would improve the running of the economy.

Brexit was an important reason for people to vote for a particular party. But the polling also suggests that it was not necessarily the determining factor. In most cases, people would have been as keen to vote for their party of choice even if Brexit were not an issue. The majority of Conservative voters (79%) stated that they probably would have voted for the same party, even if Brexit had not been an issue. The figure was 84% among Labour voters, 87% among SNP voters and 62% among Liberal Democrat voters» [Sturge, 17].

This resulted in the UK's EU withdrawal on January 23, 2020 when this decision finally became a law. On January 31, the United Kingdom officially left the EU. The very fact of civil decision-making through General Elections solved the tension inside the Parliament, which helped to pass the bill relatively easily compared to the pre-election process.

But the 2021 polls show that though technically the dilemma has been solved, the civil discontent and tension remain, dividing British society evenly. According to the Statista poll data “as of March 4, 2021, 45% of people in Great Britain thought that it was wrong to leave the European Union, compared with 41% who thought it was the right decision” (Statista, 16).

According to the Statista, Brexit remains among the top questions the British society is worried about: “At the height of concern over Brexit in September 2019, around 71 percent

of British adults thought it was one of the main issues facing the country. While it remained an important issue, it is clear that following the UK's official exit from the European Union on January 31, 2020, that it receded to the background, especially after the arrival of the Coronavirus pandemic. Towards the end of 2020 however, the issue started to grow in importance, due to the difficult trade negotiations between the UK and the EU, which almost broke down at the last minute” (Statista, 16).

This dilemma is the modern manifestation of troubles which undermine the classic liberal democratic approach. As Aristotle writes in “The Politics”, only an individual is indivisible, but a state is something made of plural phenomena. Egoism is natural - thinks Aristotle - and a state cannot be generalized to create an abstract unity. There's nothing wrong in human egoism when it is limited to a certain measure (Aristotle, 1).

Aristotle thought that monarchy, aristocracy and politeia were the best forms of governing. Among these three, politeia represented an ideal fusion of two bad forms - oligarchy and democracy. In the case of government decay politeia turns to democracy - thought Aristotle - which turns to ochlocracy (power of crowd). This cycle is based on the balance of majority and minority interests. Losing governing balance for the sake of crowd interests, influenced by populists, turns politeia into a crowd rule for the sake of manipulating minority.

Conclusions

When it comes to modern democratic processes, classic liberal approach brings the populism threat back to the table. When there is no balance between the totally free civil society with its direct democratic influences and the state structure with formal procedures aimed at total good of beneficial functioning, the liberal instruments would be used by populists. Populism can create severe divisions within liberal democratic societies providing dilemmas, such as Brexit, which are difficult to solve with the same liberal democratic procedures. This means that liberal democratic

approach undermines itself with the very fact of the existing tendency to lose balance between the ideal personal freedom (that includes satisfying everybody's decision) and public good.

Modern challenges – populism, rise of illiberal political regimes, autocratisation, anti-liberal movement, euroscepticism, crisis of classic democratic values put liberal democracy in the position, when it should deconstruct its ability to balance between public good and personal freedoms.

The Hobbes problem, the so-called problem of order, somehow brings modern democracies back to the question of to what extent the state restricts the activities of individual, completely rational actors pursuing their goals. If the goals of individual actors, including all citizens of the state, are fundamentally different, but the liberal concept is pushed to its limit, proclaiming the absolute priority of the personal over the public, the state will have a number of problems, which are described above.

First, the struggle of personal freedoms inevitably leads to the fact that the general level of freedom in society decreases, following the example of how the absolute freedom of one actor leads to the lack of freedom of another.

Secondly, the struggle of personal freedoms becomes the basis for the flourishing of populist political forces. On the example of the situation with Britain's exit from the European Union, one can observe how a direct democratic instrument

(referendum) in the hands of populist forces can lead to a deep split within society. Such a split exacerbates the problem of the effectiveness of democratic instruments' use in a liberal context, when agreement with the majority opinion is assumed while taking into account the interests of the minority.

Thirdly, the social struggle of absolute freedoms, which causes a crisis of the liberal-democratic concept and calls into question the effectiveness of this concept in practice, leads to the active promotion of quasi-democratic concepts. Such concepts are understood as the concept proposed by hybrid or autocratic political regimes, where an undemocratic system of government is “sold” under the appearance of an effective model of democracy.

Based on the above challenges, it is necessary to revise the liberal-democratic concept taking into account the balance of public good and personal freedom, bringing personal freedom from the absolute to the balance with the public good. Finding new balance and practical form of consensus within highly divided, individualistic postmodern society is a matter of democratic survival. Democratic disillusionments do not threaten liberal reality more than the lost balance between general governmental stability and personal freedoms. Solving this dilemma means finding new ways of bringing democratic theory to practice in the face of possible autocracy promotion around the globe.

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