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The impact of anti-democratic values on the deconsolidation of liberal democracy in Western Europe: an empirical analysis

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Abstract

This article tries to answer the question: “What is happening with liberal democracy: the model collapses or experiences difficulties while adapting to uncertainty?”. As the methods of the research the authors of the article have considered international practices of democratic development in the 21st century and revealed reasons for the divergence of institutional orders and cultural practices. This discrepancy is manifested in the deconsolidation of democracy, i.e. there are no guarantees of certain democratic procedures, agreement on political rules, and behavioral patterns. The study aims at revealing the degree of correlation between the deconsolidation of liberal democracy and the effect of institutional and cultural variables. The study is relevant since it provides well-grounded scenarios of regime transformations in different countries, depending on the existing institutional environment based on generalized reciprocity, including reciprocity in the recognition and observance of dominant cultural values and constitutional norms by all actors.

Keywords: political-cultural approach; emancipatory values; institutional order; cultural practices; anti-democratic values.

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El impacto de los valores antidemocráticos en la desconsolidación de la democracia liberal en Europa Occidental: un análisis empírico

Resumen

Este artículo trata de responder a la pregunta: «¿Qué está pasando con la democracia liberal: el modelo se derrumba o experimenta dificultades para adaptarse a la incertidumbre?». Como métodos de investigación, los autores del artículo consideraron las prácticas internacionales de desarrollo democrático en el siglo XXI y revelaron las razones de la divergencia de los órdenes institucionales y las prácticas culturales. Esta discrepancia se manifiesta en la desconsolidación de la democracia, es decir, no hay garantías de ciertos procedimientos democráticos, acuerdo sobre reglas políticas y patrones de comportamiento. El estudio pretende revelar el grado de correlación entre la desconsolidación de la democracia liberal y el efecto de variables institucionales y culturales. El estudio es relevante ya que proporciona escenarios bien fundamentados de transformaciones de régimen en diferentes países, dependiendo del entorno institucional existente basado en la reciprocidad generalizada, incluida la reciprocidad en el reconocimiento y la observancia de los valores culturales dominantes y las normas constitucionales por parte de todos los actores.

Palabras clave: enfoque político-cultural; valores emancipadores; orden institucional; prácticas culturales; valores antidemocráticos.

Introduction

The obvious attractiveness of democracy as a system of government and a type of political relations explains the fact that today most people live in democratic countries (Mironyuk, 2015). Scholars emphasize the merits of the democratic system and its ability to create favorable conditions for human life. Compared to autocracies, democracy promotes economic well-being (Amartya, 2000) and equitable distribution of public goods (Reuveny, Li, 2003); does better at protecting human rights of their citizens (Poe, Tate, Camp Keith, 1999); promotes happiness and life satisfaction (Inglehart et al., 2008; Russett et al., 1993); less inclined towards military resolution of international conflicts; reduces the likelihood of a civil war (Gurr, 2000).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the trend towards a gradual decrease in the world average level of democracy became obvious, which also affected the Western developed economies. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, a UK company, only eight out of 28 countries did not face a drop in

the quality of democratic institutions between 2006 and 2019 (Table 1). On average, the level of democracy for such countries decreased by 0.26, and equated to 7.99.

Table 1. A drop in the quality of democratic institutions

Country	2006	2019	Fluctuation
Ireland	9.01	9.24	0.23
Estonia	7.74	7.90	0.16
Canada	9.07	9.22	0.15
Latvia	7.37	7.49	0.12
Lithuania	7.43	7.50	0.07
France	8.07	8.12	0.05
Finland	9.25	9.25	0.00
Australia	9.09	9.09	0.00
Spain	8.34	8.29	-0.05
Bulgaria	7.10	7.03	-0.07
Portugal	8.16	8.03	-0.13
Germany	8.82	8.68	-0.14
Italy	7.73	7.52	-0.21
Slovakia	7.40	7.17	-0.23
USA	8.22	7.96	-0.26
Luxembourg	9.10	8.81	-0.29
Denmark	9.52	9.22	-0.30
Austria	8.69	8.29	-0.40
Slovenia	7.96	7.50	-0.46
Croatia	7.04	6.57	-0.47
Czech Republic	8.17	7.69	-0.48
Sweden	9.88	9.39	-0.49
Belgium	8.15	7.64	-0.51

Romania	7.06	6.49	-0.57
Netherlands	9.66	9.01	-0.65
Poland	7.30	6.62	-0.68
Greece	8.13	7.43	-0.70
Hungary	7.53	6.63	-0.90
Average score	8.25	7.99	-0.26

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit. The EU countries, the USA, Canada, and Australia.

The falling dynamics of democracy indicators are confirmed by the data of Freedom House, Polity IV, and Varieties of Democracy. In addition, other indicators closely related to the functioning of democratic institutions have worsened over the past decade. Thus, all the quality indicators of public administration for the same sample of 28 countries decreased in the period from 2006 to 2018. This contradicts the position of Western science that countries with a consolidated democratic regime cannot experience a state of democratic backsliding.

However, protests in the USA (BLM movement), France (“yellow vests”), the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, large-scale protests against coronavirus restrictions in Western Europe have shown that even countries with a developed democratic tradition were unable to provide an effective response to the economic, migration and energy crises triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. This conditioned deep frustration with the existing democratic institutions. Moreover, the leaders of some Eastern European countries, for example, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, declared that they wanted to “build an illiberal state” (Tóth, 2014). The concept and institutional model of liberal democracy came into conflict with the new reality, which was the reason for statements about the “end of the consolidation paradigm” (Foa, Mounk, 2017a).

1. Causes of the crisis of liberal democracy

- **The institutional approach**

For a long time, the deconsolidation of democracy had remained outside the consideration of Western scholars and poorly studied. At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, stable and continuous development associated with democratic institutions and values faced global threats and challenges. These transformed the beneficial effects of exogenous and endogenous factors of the former material well-being of the Western countries.

In the context of growing social diversity supplemented by the information revolution and the migration crisis, democratic institutions were unable to ensure the *systemic integration* of various groups based on the values and norms of *generalized reciprocity*. Such principles as the equality of citizens before the law, the recognition of individual rights and freedoms, and their guarantees by public authorities gradually replaced privileges. At the microenvironment level, the political self-organization and coordination of individuals are based on the norms and values of *specific reciprocity* (ethnic, friendly, group, kin, or clan ties).

There was a gap between formal relations governed by universal rules of law and morality and particular (local) relations, which led to the divergence of the institutional order and cultural patterns. At the beginning of the 21st century, Western science provided extremely controversial assessments. Various factors were considered as reasons for the crisis of liberal democracy, which conditioned different approaches to its interpretation and evaluation.

The crisis of liberal democracy is most evident within the institutional approach. While considering the British model of democracy, E. Grayling concluded that the “failure of democracy” in Great Britain was a consequence of the dysfunction of political institutions (Grayling, 2017). Among the causes of institutional dysfunction, the author mentioned the merger of powers; the dictate of corporate interests; the majority system or the “first-past-the-post” voting; an ideological gap between the elite and the population.

In his opinion, the necessary measures to combat these institutional vices are extremely dubious options, including the introduction of proportional representation and compulsory voting, the separation of the executive and legislative powers. This raises the following questions: “Why did the institutional order that has been ensuring the effective functioning of British democracy for a long time suddenly become dysfunctional?” and “What is the likelihood that a change in the institutional structure can overcome the crisis of the democratic system if even co-social democracies with proportional representation and separation of powers have not been able to avoid it?”.

The thesis that the crisis of Western democracies resulted from the dysfunction of institutions was mentioned by S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt (2018). The emphasis is placed on the modern Western political elite that proved to be unable to construct a democratic agenda and support democratic norms. According to S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt, the signs of an impending authoritarian setback comprise the heterogeneity of the elite.

Its structure includes the following types of politicians: those who deny in word or by action democratic rules of the game; those who doubt the

legitimacy of their opponents; those who encourage violence as a method of political struggle; those who encroach on the rights and freedoms of their opponents, including mass media. In their opinion, the crisis of elites was manifested in the following forms: Brexit, the election of D. Trump as President of the United States, and the right-wing populism across continental Europe. In general, S. Levitsky and D. Ziblatt blamed the crisis of democracy on modern Western political elites. The authoritarian trend within the ruling class expressed itself in the governance of radical right-wing leaders (the leader of the Austrian People's Party, S. Kurz) and the growing influence of neo-nationalists. Thus, the nationalist party "Alternative for Germany" (ADG) became the third parliamentary faction in the German Bundestag in 2017.

- **The political and cultural approach**

Under the political and cultural approach, the crisis of liberal democracy is associated with the growth of anti-democratic values among the population of Western countries. For example, S. Foa and J. Munch explained the ineffectiveness of formal institutions of liberal democracy by generational shifts that form new priorities.

The political system causes discontent among young people since it does not create social elevators and cannot integrate its potential into social creation (Foa, Mounk, 2017b). The decline of liberal democracy was mainly influenced by the growth of authoritarian views among the youth. The authoritarian cultural transformation was caused by a drop in living standards, an increase in social inequality, and, as a result, widespread populism, the rise to power of neo-Nazis in some Western European countries, Brexit, and the election of D. Trump as President of the United States.

Not all scholars agree with the pessimistic conclusions of S. Foa and J. Munch, some of them differently assess the values of young people in Western countries (Zilinsky, 2019). For instance, the British Pippa Norris highlights the illogical judgments of S. Foa and J. Munch (Norris, 2017).

If growing dissatisfaction with the democratic system among the younger generation causes the erosion of democratic institutions, how to explain the fact that the supporters of Brexit and D. Trump were mainly senior people? In turn, Pippa Norris provided a different assessment of the erosion of democratic institutions. She believed that fluctuations in the indicators of loyalty to democratic institutions in Western countries were insignificant, in contrast to the indicators of some countries in Eastern Europe.

The Dutch political scientist Eric Voeten supported this opinion and associated growing dissatisfaction with the democratic system and declining trust in democratic institutions with increased demands of citizens and wishes for their own political system (Voeten, 2016).

Such German scientists as E. Alexander and C. Welzel did not see any signs of declining democracy in Western developed economies (Alexander, Welzel, 2017). In their opinion, the slight decline in the indicators of democracy is temporary and is due to a constantly growing value gap between different generations and social classes. Most young people have pro-democratic and pro-liberal views, while the older generation professes anti-democratic and anti-liberal attitudes.

The methodology for measuring the internalization of anti-democratic values used by S. Foa and J. Munch also gives rise to doubt. R. Inglehart who studied cultural values in 80 countries believed that citizens' commitment to democracy or their inclination to anti-democratic tendencies, such as the desire to have a strong leader, could not be regarded as harbingers of democratic governance.

It is paradoxical but the population of some autocracies has an extremely positive attitude to democracy and, nevertheless, continues to live in an autocratic environment (Inglehart, 2016). According to *the World Values Survey Wave 6*, the population of authoritarian states often (Egypt – 98.7%; Zimbabwe – 96.8%; Ghana – 95.6%) is much more supportive of democracy than the population of some democratic countries (Netherlands – 80.6%; USA – 79.7%; New Zealand – 77%). Nevertheless, most citizens of authoritarian countries do not like the concept of democracy since there is no direct relationship between democratic governance and the real life of the population.

The deconsolidation of democracy in Western countries is interpreted in different ways, and methods of its analysis are not fully developed. As a result, the statements and conclusions of different authors are sometimes directly opposite. There is no consensus on how to fix those values that influence the functioning of institutions.

In addition, no empirical studies prove the connection between anti-democratic values and the deconsolidation of democracy in developed Western countries. To understand the nature of destructive processes occurring in Western democracies, it is necessary to conceptualize the discourse of “democratic deconsolidation”, form its theoretical model, and identify its driving forces.

- **The deconsolidation of democracy**

The consolidation of democracy is among the key discourses in the theory of democracy. Since its introduction into science (Linz, Stepan, 1996), various authors have been trying to determine criteria for the consolidation of a democratic institutional order.

Democratic consolidation is understood as the process of rooting democratic values and attitudes in the minds of individuals, which clarifies

the implementation of the roles and functions of institutions and increases the predictability of decisions based on competition-cooperation relations.

Markers of consolidation quantification are as follows: the internalization of democratic norms by various groups of elites (Linz, Stepan, 1996), the role of civil society organizations in the political process (Paxton, 2002), the distribution of post-material (Inglehart, 1997) or emancipative (Welzel, 2013) values in society, etc.

Despite different approaches, the common thing that unites all the authors is that the effective functioning of democratic institutions is possible only if there are indispensable conditions. Their sufficiency excludes the subsequent erosion of institutions and the possible deconsolidation of liberal democracies.

The hypothesis about the relationship between the deconsolidation of democracy and the growth of anti-democratic values requires a theoretical reflection on the “democracy” term that has no clear definition in modern political science. To distinguish between democracies and non-democracies, we used the matrix of R. Dahl who understood it as a political regime that meets two criteria: a) fair, competitive, and inclusive elections; b) the observance of civil and political rights (Dahl, 2010).

R. Dahl called all the regimes that meet procedural and civil-legal criteria “polyarchies” or democracies. Thus, liberal democracy is a political regime, whose functioning is based on the fair, competitive, and inclusive elections of government bodies that guarantee the observance of civil and political rights of individuals.

Modern democracies ensure the integration of society thanks to the institutional order based on: the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, the rule of law, the freedom of opinion, alternative sources of information, the protection of minority rights, etc. Some scholars call these institutions inclusive (Acemoglu, Robinson, 2012), while the others refer to them as an “open access order” (North, Wallis, Weingast, 2009).

The functioning of democratic institutions is ensured by a set of dispositions conditioned by values and cultural norms of generalized reciprocity. Culture usually embraces the values and beliefs of various ethnic, religious, or social groups passed down from generation to generation in a relatively unchanged form (Alesina, Giuliano, 2015).

Within the political-cultural approach, any consolidated political regime is the result of a balance between cultural patterns and institutional practices at the current moment (Almond, Verba, 1963). The divergence of cultural patterns and institutional practices leads to the deconsolidation of any regime. It is worth mentioning that deconsolidation is a process, not a result of certain changes within the political system.

Many scholars associate the deconsolidation of democracy with the first signs of institutional anomalies that do not fit into a common worldview, including the election of D. Trump as the President of the United States or the voting on Britain's withdrawal from the EU (Grayling, 2017).

One can hardly agree with this statement since institutional practices reflect the content of dominant values and cultural norms. For this reason, the analysis of democratic deconsolidation should focus not on certain institutional practices but on cultural values and norms. The latter stipulate the political self-organization of social groups.

The balance of any regime should be viewed as the interaction of cultural patterns and institutional practices. Based on this rule, the main driver of democratic deconsolidation is the divergence of cultural patterns and institutional practices, between which the balance is upset. Institutional practices are all forms of political communication within the framework of the existing political institutions. Cultural patterns represent the dominant political values and dispositions that develop sustainable behavior.

At the initial stage, developed democracies are characterized by the democratic equilibrium of their cultural patterns and institutional practices, which ensures the consolidation of any regime and its stability. At a certain stage of their development, cultural patterns are influenced by various factors and begin to change, which upsets the initial balance.

The consequence is the deconsolidation of the regime. In this pair, cultural patterns serve as the independent variable, and institutional practices are the dependent variable. Due to changes in cultural patterns, institutional practices also transform. This concept complies with the main provisions of G. Eckstein's congruence theory.

To maintain the stability of a political system, "the patterns of power that characterize the political system of some country should be compatible with the prevailing beliefs about power among the population" (Eckstein, 1997).

Thus, cultural patterns and institutional practices are two basic variables, whose interaction determines the transition from the previous regime equilibrium to a new state. Furthermore, deconsolidation is regarded as a temporary process since the adaptation of institutional practices to the changed cultural patterns creates a new regime equilibrium.

The theoretical matrix of the subsequent analysis of flexible interaction between institutional practices and changing cultural patterns can be presented in the following combinations: the *balance* of cultural patterns and institutional practices – *divergence* of cultural patterns and institutional practices – *deconsolidation* of cultural patterns and institutional practices – *convergence* of cultural patterns and institutional practices – *new equilibrium* of cultural patterns and institutional practices.

The above-mentioned model can be used for describing regime transformations of liberal democracies and consolidated autocracies that differ only in the transformation of cultural patterns. The expansion of democratic cultural patterns in autocracies leads to the deconsolidation of the regime, an increase in the level of democracy, and quality improvement of democratic institutions in an indefinite continuum.

The deconsolidation of democracy caused by a change in cultural patterns in favor of authoritarian values is manifested in democratic backsliding and decline in the effective functioning of democratic institutions. A state in which there is a significant gap between cultural patterns and institutional practices can last for a limited time. The existence of a stable authoritarian or democratic equilibrium is possible even if cultural patterns and institutions are not congruent. This state can be caused by the actions of leaders or elites, as well as institutional inertia.

In this case, the duration of such a delicate balance is severely limited. For example, there are demonstrations in support of the presidency of Donald Trump and against the results of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, followed by the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol. Then discontent reached its peak and began to decline thanks to the socially-oriented actions of J. Biden's administration. The balance was restored.

- **The specific measurement of parameters and inductors used in the model**

To indicate democratic institutional practices, we will use the EIU Democracy Index. It includes four parameters: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, government functioning, political participation, and political culture. Until the early 21st century, it had been difficult to evaluate cultural patterns of democracy due to the lack of big data databases and cross-national research in the field of culture.

The main manifestation of anti-democratic values is the feeling of *hostility* to the democratic political system and its institutions, which can be assessed through four indicators:

1. *skepticism* – disbelief in the ability of democratic institutions to effectively solve the existing problems, challenging the advantages and merits of democratic political systems.
2. *optionality* – acceptance and approval of non-democratic alternatives, the need for a strong leader to achieve stability and order.
3. *procedurality* – a negative attitude towards democratic procedures: free elections, the alternation of power, the desire to achieve a practical result despite procedures.

4. *conformism* – a disdain for the freedom of thought and speech, a tendency to obey the imposed political will.
- **The impact of anti-democratic values on the development of liberal-democratic regimes**

Some Western countries, whose political regime can be regarded as liberal-democratic, experience an increase in the level of anti-democratic values. However, it is not a universal but rather a local phenomenon, i.e. many Western liberal democracies demonstrate a decline in the level of anti-democratic values, including Great Britain, whose problems have been actively discussed (Grayling, 2017).

In addition, the intensity of this process remains rather moderate, namely, a sharp increase in anti-democratic values is observed only in a few countries, including Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. It is worth mentioning that none of these countries has a long experience of democratic governance so the cases of Hungary, Poland, and Romania can be viewed in the context of a failed or incomplete democratic transition rather than the deconsolidation of democracy. The case of Greece has a quite logical explanation in the form of economic problems associated with the debt crisis and solving problems of a purely economic nature. After that, the Greek cultural patterns will return to their previous state. In any case, more empirical data is required for a better understanding of the ongoing processes. Open access to the data of the seventh wave of the World Values Survey in July 2020 shed light on the current changes.

Due to such findings, alarmist claims about the widespread and inexplicable decline of liberal democracy in the Western countries seem exaggerated (Foa, Mounk, 2017). These conclusions are consistent with the results of other studies analyzing cultural transformations in Western countries (Alexander, Welzel, 2017).

Conclusion

Authors conclude that, the reason for concerns about the impending triumph of authoritarianism is that one of the most influential Western countries, the United States, is showing negative dynamics in terms of democratic development. Nevertheless, the United States represents only a part of the Western world, albeit a crucial one, and it does not mean that all countries have the same problems.

Thus, we distinguish between two clusters of countries that differ in the intensity of anti-democratic values:

1. Countries with a rapid increase in anti-democratic values (Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania);
2. Countries with a moderate increase in anti-democratic values (USA, Austria, Czech Republic, Belgium, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden).

On the contrary, the other countries demonstrate a decline in the level of anti-democratic values, which shows no signs of democratic deconsolidation.

Anti-democratic values have a statistically significant relationship with the level of democracy, while cultural patterns are associated with institutional practices and determine their specifics.

For our future research with the aim of better understanding the deconsolidation of democracy in Western countries, it is necessary to find out how their cultural patterns have changed in recent years. Consequently, it will be possible to answer the question: “Do Western countries go through the process of deconsolidation and, if they do, how it is manifested and what impact does it have?”.

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