

## DEMOCRACY AND DICTATORSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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**Abstract.** *One of the main aspects of ideological construction of social reality is the shaping and using of public discourse in accordance with the interests and preferences of the ruling classes. It is justified to say that modern age is characterized by powerful influence of the media sphere of social praxis which, with the assistance of information development, certainly affects the forming of public discourse. Glorifying or demonizing certain notions (forms of political power in this case) come out of this kind of construction and from certain (mostly particular) interests, though to a lesser extent those can be the interests of a whole society. In this paper the author discusses the meanings of the notions "democracy" and "dictatorship", their use in everyday language, that is, on the situation where these two notions became diametrically opposite.*

**Key words:** *ideology, public discourse, political power, democracy, dictatorship.*

Many politicians, journalists, public workers or even scientists tend to describe the president of Belorussia Alexandar Lukashenko as "the last European dictator" (after the fall of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia). In that sense one wants to connect this political system with some others which, according to this train of thought, also carry the mark of "dictatorship". Therefore, numerous examples of violence, political repression or violation of human rights are stated for the purpose of characterizing this particular regime as a dictatorship. But it is quite obvious that ideological mimicry of the notion of dictatorship depends on the contemporary geopolitical interests: Sadam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic and Lukashenko are dictators, but repressive monarchs of Saudi Arabia are not; China is "forgiven" for the specific "communist capitalism". And the most recent example in North Africa (so-called "people's revolutions" against autocratic presidents of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya) shows these regimes were not "dictatorships" (with the exception of Libya),

until this huge collapse took place, even though they were autocratic, corrupt and more or less repressive from the very beginning.

The notion of dictatorship is, as many others in dominant contemporary public discourse, so ideologically colored, burdened and saturated, that it seems almost impossible to draw a straight line which will detach democracy as a free and dictatorship as non-free type of political power. However, the difference may exist if one concludes that "every explanation of the true meaning of democracy which tends to be plausible has to adopt a certain number of basic liberal and liberal-democratic policies, among others, those which relate to the central meaning of the 'impersonal' structure of public power, the constitutionality which protects and guarantees rights, the differentiation of power centers inside and outside the state, as well as institutional forms that promote open discussion and debate between alternative points of view and platforms" (Held, 1997:31). Now it seems obvious that in the remarks of theorists there is no difference between totalitarianisms and they are all the same (Friedrich, Brzezinski, Sartori, etc.) come from the impoverished and yet hard bipolar opinion of Good and Evil, ensued from the elation of the breakdown of real-socialism and "the global triumph" of democracy. For example, Tito's regime in former Yugoslavia can hardly fit into the same category with the one in East Germany or the one in North Korea. Namely, all three regimes should be regarded as "communist dictatorships", but the amount of personal and political freedoms vary from one regime to another.

Certain efforts to draw this "line" between democracy and dictatorship have been merged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into a specific "supertheory" – theory of totalitarianism (see more in: Kuljic, 1983), which had and still have a great influence on the formation of contemporary public discourse. The notions of dictatorship and democracy from then on can hardly go out of the frame of daily-based political ideology and propaganda; after all, both of the notions are accepted and treated as something immanent exclusively for the modern age, something given *a priori* and unquestionable. "The list of the terms which can be used as opposed to democracy – clearly and simply opposed – is long: tyranny, despotism, dictatorship, absolutism, authoritarianism, totalitarianism and autocracy." (Sartori, 2001:166) This means democracy has a lot of "enemies". In contemporary public discourse – that is in the dominant one, which is Anglo-American, one is completely clear and has no doubt: the notion of dictatorship confronts the notion of democracy, that is, presents its opposite. Since in today's dominant public discourse democracy has a positive connotation, dictatorship therefore possesses a negative connotation and characteristics. One could ask the question of whether it is appropriate to refer a non-free political regime as a dictatorship, while it seems more reasonable to call it tyranny or autocracy, or even despotism.

Strictly scientifically speaking, when one accepts the traditional meaning of the notion, dictatorship would be "the unlimited power of a person or a group over the state" (Bracher, 1978:79, Neumann, 1964:195 in Kuljic, 1994:278). As a form of political power dictatorship was born in the Roman republic and it represented a specific form of government in the time of danger for the state, either from the outside invasion or because of inner ferments, differing from the regular *magistratura*. At the beginning, it did not have a negative meaning as it has today, quite the contrary. Namely, roman dictatorship was precisely defined, with precise empowerments and limitations and it lasted no more than six months, even less if the task for which it was established has been fulfilled, while "the risk of conversion of a dictatorship into the permanent form of personal power... was

cut back by the circumstance that the elevation of an influential person to the status of deity during his life and even after his death was unknown in this period." (Kuljic, 1994:73) It actually represented the process of the consolidation of political power in unstable times – a dictator was "a supreme judge", and unlimited power was embodied in the fact that consuls were completely subordinate to him, just like citizens did not have the right of appeal (Neumann, 1974:196).

The degeneration of the notion of dictatorship finally happened in the first century BC: Sulla became a dictator in 82 BC, although he was a consul at the same time, so it was the first case of these two functions intertwining. After that, Julius Caesar was proclaimed a dictator on three occasions: in 49, 48 and 46 BC. In the year 46 BC he was named dictator for a period of ten years, while the empowerments of *dictatura perpetua* were transferred a year later. It is interesting that the Romans emphasized moral criteria in the comprehension and marking of political regimes less than the Greeks. What Roman people regarded as a "dictatorship" in today's sense of the term certainly were Hellenic tyranny and oriental despotism.

As for tyranny, two main types existed: the first ones were so-called "old tyrannies", known for their positive connotation. Namely, the first Greek tyrants (Pisistratus from Athens, Phalaris, Cleisthenes, Cypselus etc.) were famous for being defensive towards the people, protecting them from aristocrats. That is why they entered people's memory as the "good ones", since they were defending mainstream policies of the equality of (free) citizens. Opposite to that, the second type consisted of "new tyrannies" (between the fifth and third century BC) which had negative characteristics and a negative connotation (Dionysius the Elder, Dionysius the Younger and Dion from Sicily, and "The Rule of the Thirty" in Athens). They represented the interests of reactionary aristocratic forces at the time of the pauperization of the Hellenic middle class; thus a tyrant became a ruler who now goes for his personal, particular interests or for the interests of the surrounding elite/oligarchy, not of society. As one may see, the notion of tyranny has also been transformed in the sense of its connotation, from positive to negative in the public and academic discourse just like the notion of dictatorship; maybe the autocratic regimes in North Africa were something like "old tyrannies" in the first place, delivering their own people from the rule and influence of colonial forces.

It should be noticed that the establishment of a dictatorship does not necessarily need to be enforced. The victory of the National-socialist party at the elections in Germany preceded Hitler's totalitarian dictatorship. The modern term is connected to the violent seizure of power, such as *coup d'état*. Different theorists have different definitions of dictatorship: Friedrich set the list of characteristics of "totalitarian dictatorship" (Friedrich, Brzezinski, 1956), Neumann argued there are three types of dictatorship: totalitarian, simple and caesaristic, and it is not contextually limited by the form of political power, as well as its analysis can be found in the economic system, class relations and personal structure (Neumann, 1974:213-216). Sartori also writes about three types: simple, authoritative and totalitarian dictatorship. He noticed that "only the name of dictatorship was left" but he does not examine reasons, causes and consequences of that change (Sartori, 2001:174). Lord Haishlam in 1976 coined the phrase "elective dictatorship", trying to describe that a legislative program of parliament is determined by the government, because of the particular nature of the governmental majority in parliament, while governmental costs virtually always bypasses parliament.

Dictator certainly is not "an individual who uses his monopoly on force across the territory and through the time to impose own preferences" (Artige, 2004:13). Even though it starts with the understanding of a dictatorship as a political regime, not as a simple individual power, and therefore connects it with economical determinants, this conception, while researching the behavior of "a dictator" in certain social-economic situations and by using mathematic formula and equations, comes exactly to an individualistic conclusion of the existence of an isolated person who rules, characterized by a "predatory appetite". Mancur Olson, for example, criticizes this metaphor (Olson, 1993:569). Dictatorship is the imposing of preferences, but narrow limitation on the power of a dictator "from above" disables the analysis of a wide spectrum of social (hierarchical) relations, interests and circumstances that allow this kind of imposition.

A generic analysis of dictatorship (Sharp, 2002/03), which would help to the prevention of the appearance of dictatorship, goes from the well-known division on "free" and "non-free" countries, according to the definition of the American NGO Freedom House, so the non-free are, among others, repressive monarchies like Saudi Arabia and Bhutan, as well as the countries in which "one dominant party" exists (China and North Korea). This understanding of a dictatorship as an absolute opposite to western representative democracy, even if it is about "a dominant political party" (as if political parties in the western world are not dominant, even though there are many of them) is naïve and pretentious. It neglects all the various social and cultural aspects, patterns and experiences which mark a certain society (country).

One should remark that the relation between democracy and dictatorship is not an opposite in the scope of some other theoretical approaches, but sometimes a dictatorship may present a manner for preserving a democracy or a preparation for it; the ideological confrontation of these notions cannot be continued as a simple battle of Good and Evil, because "moralizing on political systems disables the perceiving of their functions." (Neumann, 1974:211) Dictatorship, as Norberto Bobbio reminds, had a positive connotation and this notion finally got a negative one just after World War II. For example, in the 1920's and 1930's, dictatorship did not have a negative meaning, on the contrary: democracy was not in the fashion in the epoch consciousness of the time – which led to the rapid growth and spreading of dictatorships in Europe between two world wars. Bobbio also emphasizes the division between the modern concept of dictatorship (starting from the regime "introduced by Napoleon, understood as a military dictatorship in modern use") from the concept of monocratic rule, so he brings the example of Marx and Engels, who understood the rule of a certain social class under the terms of "bourgeoisie dictatorship" and "the dictatorship of the proletariat". "Besides that, the most important difference between classical and modern dictatorship is the spreading of power which is not limited solely by an executive function, but it spreads by means of legislative and constitutional function" (Bobbio, 1995:149-153).

Aristotle's thoughts on democracy (Lukic, 1995:141-145) were that it is the depravity of a free state, just like two other depravities (tyranny of monarchy and oligarchy of aristocracy), but still it is the least bad type of depravity of these three mentioned. According to Aristotle, there is no *single* democracy in existence. He distinguished five types of democracy – the fifth one is where laws do not rule, but instead of them the majority rules; it is despotic democracy, similar to tyranny and it is governed by a demagogue. One may notice that "despotic democracy" is nothing else than contemporary "elective dictator-

ship" in the sense of the so-called terror (or dictatorship) of a majority – the situation which can certainly be found in some contemporary democratic states, where the majority in parliament uses its power to create the laws which will be the legislative frame for its actions. This state is possible because "in earlier days governments had fewer possibilities than nowadays to create a situation which reflects their own definition of a task necessary to society as a totality and to lead the population to accept it passively." (Moore, 2000:366) This conclusion applies to the ideological construction of contemporary political power, either democratic or not.

Two questions (of many) appear in the scope of the theoretical analysis of contemporary representative democracy. First of all, who exactly is *demos*, the "people that rule"? What is happening with one of the main democratic principles, the one of the people's (or should we say national) sovereignty? It can be said that modern democracy passed the way from people's sovereignty (the rule of the majority) to the rule of elected (chosen) ones, that is, the elite (Kovacevic, 1980). Also, "*the people* do not appear as an objectively understood, nationally or traditionally given concept: it is a creation of a state and law is the one which allots what the people are, that people who act politically, who play a part in the state, who supplement and control the operation of a government." (Weil, 1982:216) Second question refers to evident oligarchic tendencies in contemporary democracy, tendencies embodied in "the permanence of a management" (Goati, 1990:164).

If one tends to be completely precise, the contemporary (capitalist) representative democracy was introduced as an opposite and adversary of the absolutism of late feudalism, that is, aristocracy as a whole. It certainly must be said that contemporary democracy has shown itself as (relatively) good, or "the least bad" system of political power, that is the most useful to the vast majority of society, but it does not mean it does not have defects, of course, those defects need to be criticized. Although it is "the least bad" type of political power, this remark as well can be problematized: for example, in the consciousness of a great extent of the ex-YU area population, the self-management of socialism is still an incomparably better system than today's democracy.

At this point we come to a paradoxical situation (embodied, for example, in the term "USA as a bastion of democracy", which is an oxymoron): in the majority of post-real socialist countries, democracy, its principles and their state almost cannot be questioned, in fact, this kind of inquiring and potential critique which would ensue are regarded not solely as unnecessary, but as dangerous, as a sort of "heresy". Therefore, a specific situation is set, a situation which can be called "the totalitarianism of thought", where democracy is not only the best, but the only possible form of political power and state governance, so it must be "imposed" in "primitive" and "democratically undeveloped" countries and societies (Southeast and East Europe, Iraq, Afghanistan...but never and by no means in Mauritania, where death penalty is executed by beheading, Saudi Arabia and other repressive monarchies on the Arabic peninsula). One should remember that the imposing of a democracy with or without using military forces is not quite a modern concept: in one period of their history the Athenians imposed democracy on other Greek city-states.

The trials of politicians on charges of corruption and using illegitimate political power in general can be a solid base for the qualitative separation of democracy from other forms of government. It is impossible to talk about a real democracy in the situation where the people of a certain country do not possess complete insight into the processes of making political decisions, state finances and the flow of capital, and where truly democ-

matic relation between the public and political elite (especially "hidden structures") is not established. The most recent support for this remark is the aftermath of the so-called global economic crisis based on financial malversations and speculations: even if the actors are well known, not a single one of them has been tried or convicted.

One can say that, even if they are connected by an essential link, democracy and capitalism are more separated than ever, because of the real inability of joining democratic principles and the principles of oligopoly capitalism at the global level, especially with the main one – the maximization of profit. It seems that dictatorship and autocracy, as well as other "non-free" regimes do not have these "moral" problems.

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## DEMOKRATIJA I DIKTATURA U SAVREMENOM JAVNOM DISKURSU

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*Jedan od ključnih aspekata ideološke konstrukcije društvene stvarnosti jeste oblikovanje i upotreba javnog diskursa u skladu sa interesima i preferencama vladajućih klasa. Uputno je reći da savremeno doba karakteriše, između ostalog, snažan uticaj medijske sfere društvene prakse koja, uz pomoć informacionog napretka itekako utiče na formiranje javnog diskursa. Glorifikovanje, odnosno demonizacija određenih pojmova (u ovom slučaju oblika političke vlasti) proizilaze iz te i takve konstrukcije i određenih, uglavnom partikularnih interesa, mada se u manjem broju slučajeva može raditi o interesima čitavog društva. U ovom radu autor diskutuje o značenjima pojmova „demokratija“ i „diktatura“ i njihovoj upotrebi u svakodnevnom govoru, to jest o situaciji u kojoj su ova dva pojma dijametralno suprotna.*

Ključne reči: *ideologija, javni diskurs, politička moć, demokratija, diktatura*