



Jerzy J. Wiatr*

Uncertain Future of Democracy in the 21st Century

[Niepewna przyszłość demokracji w XXI wieku]

Abstract

The history of democratic regimes in our time shows that there exists a sharp difference between America and Western Europe on one hand and the rest of the world on the other. Democracy survives best in conditions of economic affluency and when ethnic diversity does not generate sharp conflicts. Authoritarian regimes of the present century differ from the older ones in the sense that they are mostly based on popular will expressed in competitive elections. The survival of democracy depends on the ability to avoid deep polarization based on conflicts of identities rather than of interests.

Keywords: conflicts, democracy, polarization, transformation.

At the end of the twentieth century the dominant perception of the future of democracy was optimistic. There was a strong, almost universal belief that democratic transformation will continue in the new century and that – at least in the long term – democracy constitutes the most likely future of mankind. Francis Fukuyama’s book on the “end of history” (1992) became symbolic for this kind of optimistic forecasting.

Compared to the recent history of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956), the world of the end of the twentieth century looked safe for democracy. The dominant mood of the time was that the dark years of dictatorship were gone and that future bellowed to democracy.

There were reasons for such optimism. The last quarter of the twentieth century was marked by the unprecedented growth of the number of democrat-

* **Jerzy J. Wiatr** – Full Professor of Humanities, DSc, sociologist and political scientist, former Minister of National Education (1996–1997), honorary rector of EULA (affiliation); <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8632-7669>; jiwiatr@ewspa.edu.pl / prof. dr hab. nauk humanistycznych, socjolog i politolog, b. minister edukacji narodowej (1996–1997), rektor honorowy EWSPA (afiliacja).

ic regimes in the world. In the nineteen-seventies three remaining nondemocratic regimes in Western Europe (Greece, Portugal and Spain) underwent peaceful transitions from authoritarian to democratic systems. In the nineteen-eighties the wave of democratization changed the political landscape of Latin America and in the first years of the next decade a similar process took place in East-Central Europe. The collapse of the rule of communist parties in Europe (peaceful everywhere except Romania and, partly, Yugoslavia) had a profound impact on the structure of international relations. The bipolar division of the world was gone, substituted for a short time by the hegemony of the United States.

The declared policy of the American presidents of the post-cold war era was the promotion of democracy worldwide. The political and ethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia were met with the direct American military involvement – first such action on the other side of what only a few years earlier was the Iron Curtain. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001 were used by president George W. Bush as a pretext to justify aggressive policy toward states unwilling to accept American dictate. This led to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and armed intervention in Afghanistan. The result was detrimental to the American strategic interests. It provoked a strong anti-American reaction in the Middle East and intensified political divisions at home. The policy of promoting democracy by the use of military strength was short-sighted. It resulted in the crisis of American leadership at home and the growth of anti-American sentiment in many parts of the world. One of the consequences of this trend was the growing attraction of non-democratic politics in those regions of the world where the opposition to American hegemony was the strongest, particularly in the Middle East and Southern Asia (Applebaum, 2020).

It does not mean, however, that the present crisis of democracy is caused exclusively by the American policy of intervention and by the reaction which such policy causes. The roots of the crisis of democracy are deeper and called for a complex analysis.

The Stagnation of Democratization

When Samuel P. Huntington published his study of democratic transformation (Huntington, 1991) there were reasons to believe that the impressive growth of the number of democratic states would continue in the next century. The number of democratic states grew from 30 in the year 1973 to 58 in 1990. Democratic state constituted 45 percent of the world total. The “third wave” of democratization produced more massive change than the

two previous ones (of early nineteen-twenties and of early nineteen-sixties). The number of nondemocratic states went down from 92 (in 1973) to 71 (in 1990). There were reasons to believe that this process would continue (Huntington, 1991: 29).

Soon, however, it became clear that the process of democratization had its limits. The “third wave” of democratization lasted only for three more years after the publication of Huntington’s book. In 1994 first fully democratic elections (both parliamentary and presidential) took place in the Republic of South Africa elevating the African National Congress and its leader Nelson Mandela to power. It was the last such turning point in the long contest between democracy and authoritarianism, not to be replicated in the next century.

Thirty years later the world is still dominated by nondemocratic regimes. According to the calculation of the Freedom House (Democratic Index 2021–2024) only 20% of world population live in fully democratic (free) states, 42% in states defined as “partly free” and 37% in “not free” states. Moreover, only in Europe and America the majority of people live under democratic regimes (82% in Europe and 70% in two Americas). In the Middle East 93% of people live under nondemocratic regimes, in Africa 50% and in Eurasia (former USSR) 84%. Africa (south of the Arab belt) has 50% of its population living under nondemocratic regimes, 43% in partially democratic states and only 7% in democracies. No meaningful change took place in the respect during last two decades.

One of the most important aspects of the stagnation of the democratic transformation is the way in which the “Arab Spring” of 2011 affected the Middle east and North Africa. The collapse of the authoritarian Arab regimes rarely produced a democratic transformation (Tunisia, Egypt) and where it happened the democratic change turned out to be unstable, like in Egypt where the armed forces removed from power democratically elected (but governing in nondemocratic way) Muslim Brotherhood. There are reasons to believe that the Islamic heritage constitutes a barrier to successful democratization. What happened in the Arab world resembles the experience of the Iranian revolution of 1979. In Iran the revolt which terminated the rule of emperor Mohammad Reza Pahlavi resulted in the establishment of the theocratic regime of Islamic fundamentalists who use the quasi-democratic practices (like elections) to legitimize their almost absolute power.

The cross-national studies of the processes of democratization (Linz and Stepan, 1996) suggest strong correlation between democracy and cultural heritage of the West. Democratic systems survive and emerge mostly in the Western hemisphere, in the cultural climate created centuries ago by the Reformation and the Enlightenment. This cultural-historical conditioning

is particularly obvious when one compares Russia with the rest of Europe, including its Eastern regions. Barriers to successful democratization have been created by centuries of specific histories and are not easy to overcome in a short time. Consequently, one has to accept the pessimistic scenario according to which the present division between democracies and authoritarian regimes will continue for many generations.

Stagnation of the democratic transformation worldwide has its consequences for the architecture of international relations. The hegemony of the United States was replaced by the renewed system of competition between great powers, with China replacing the USSR as the main rival of the United States in the struggle for the future of the world. The impressive economic growth achieved by China has been conditioned by the pragmatic economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in late nineteen-seventies.

The unquestionable success of China in the economic and political fields takes place without any signs of democratization. At the maximum one may say that the main change in Chinese politics consists of ending the extravagances of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, replaced by the rational (but authoritarian) policy at home and moderate policy abroad. China remains a “communist state” in name only. In reality, it has abandoned the ideological dogmas of communism, replacing them by nationalist values. Among the consequences of such change one of the most important is the attractiveness of the Chinese model of development for less developed countries of Asia and Africa. China builds its position as the second strongest world power on the promise of economic development and independence from the hegemony of the West. Its political and economic development results in the creation of the “Asian model” of development without democratization (deLisle, 2008: 197–232).

Russia is a more complex case. The collapse of the USSR left the biggest part of it – the Russian Federation – in deep crisis, which lasted until the turn of centuries. Russia of the nineteen-nineties was no longer a totalitarian party state but it has not become a stable democracy either. The dominant mood of the Russian population at that time was disappointment with both the totalitarian past and the post-totalitarian present. For many Russians the lose of the empire was a tragedy and they look forward to a leader who would offer them the chance to become a world power again. Vladimir Putin’s success as political leader can be understood only when one takes into account such mood of his nation (Shestopal, 2016). The most rational explanation of the Russian decision to restart the war with Ukraine in 2022 is that Putin and his entourage looked for an easy way to consolidate their rule and to create a new source of legitimacy based on a military success. As long as the Russian regime is able to build its strong international position, it can more or less successful-

ly avoid democratization. The outcome of the present Russian–Ukrainian war have consequences for the future of the authoritarian Russian regime. If the war ends in a way which Putin will be able to sell as his success, it will make the present regime stronger.

For comparative political science the crucial question is what explains success or failure of democratization. Part of the answer refers to the capacity of leadership (Wiatr, 2022). History is not deterministic in a way which would make human decision irrelevant. The history of democratization points to several instances in which the role played by politicians had the potential to change the course of events. Leaders of mass movements – Nelson Mandela, Lech Wałęsa – mobilized the masses of followers and, in doing so, changed the course of history. But it was also some of the leaders of the regimes – Mikhail Gorbachev, Deng Xiaoping, Wojciech Jaruzelski – who by their decisions made the change possible.

Important as the leaders are, the successes or failures of democratization cannot be explained in terms of their decisions only. There are three sociological factors of particularly great importance which affect the outcome of democratization: economic conditions, ethnicity and cultural tradition.

Democracy and Free Market: A Dilemma of Development

One of the most interesting explanations of the problems of democratic development has been offered by Adam Przeworski. His analysis of the origins of modern democracy points to the linkage between it and the functioning of free market (Przeworski, 1991). A few years later, in a book which reflects results of the debates conducted by the working group of the International Political Science Association, Przeworski argued that the very survival of democracy depended on the choice of economic strategy and that rapid, full-scale privatization puts democracy in danger because it deepens already existing conflicts of economic interests (Przeworski, 1995: 111). Conflicts, argues Przeworski, are inevitable but their intensity differs. Democracy is about the institutional regulation of conflicts but democracy works well only when conflicts are not too sharp and can be regulated by political institutions (Przeworski, 2019: 4).

The relation between democracy and economic affluency is complex. It is true that all states which are listed high on the scale of democracy are economically well developed and that their population enjoins high standard of living. Of the twenty one states listed by the Freedom House as “full democracies” none can be defined as economically poor. Democracy does not work well in economically backward countries.

It does not mean, however, that all economically affluent countries are democratic. Among fifty-nine states listed as authoritarian four belong to the richest states of the world. They are Arab monarchies (Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia) which – largely because of natural resources – combine authoritarian political regimes with highly developed economies.

The vast majority of authoritarian states belong, however, to the category of economically underdeveloped. It can, therefore, be argued that democracy is more likely to survive in economically well-off countries, in which socio-economic conflicts are not too sharp. It is not the level of affluency itself but the intensity of economically generated conflicts which explains this phenomenon. Economic backwardness generate hardships which led to intense social conflicts over the distribution of scarce resources. Democracy fares well when conflicts are not too sharp. Therefore, one may argue that democratic stability is more likely to take place in more affluent countries in which the intensity of economically motivate conflicts is not too great.

Political and economic transformations which took place in Poland in the last decade of the last century illustrate this tendency. The radical economic reform introduced in 1990 by Tadeusz Mazowiecki's cabinet ("Balcerowicz's Plan") included massive privatization of state-owned economy and produced sharp economic polarization. Writing in the first years Polish democratic transformation I have identified economic conflicts as the most important challenge to successful democratization (Wiatr, 1992: 81–83). Commenting on this stage of Polish transformation I have argued that the radical economic strategy would result in social conflicts too sharp to be safely handled by democratic institutions. The survival of Polish democracy was due to the fact that after the parliamentary election of 1993 (won by the social-democratic Left) the economic strategy has been modified in the direction of greater and more effective state intervention blueprinted by Grzegorz Kołodko – deputy prime minister and minister of finances in four Center-Left cabinets. This observation has been confirmed by political events in those post-communist states where radical liberalization of the economy was not combined with the active role of the state in moderating socio-economic conflicts. Russia of the nineteen-nineties is one of the best examples.

Ethnic Division and Democracy

Socio-economic conflicts are not the only factors explaining crises of democracy. In ethnically plural societies conflicts based on ethnic identities can become as destructive as the economic ones, or even more.

One of the fundamental principles of democracy is the rule of the majority, expressed in free, fair and competitive election. The underlying provision of such election is that the voters constitute a cohesive unit, divided by political orientations but considering themselves members of the same community. Ethnic homogeneity is not a necessary condition for such self-identification providing that the vast majority of citizens consider themselves primarily as members of the common state.

While ethnic homogeneity is not a necessary condition of successful democracy, it is by far more likely that democracy would survive in ethnically homogenous societies. Of the twenty one states listed as full democracy by the Freedom House only four (Australia, Canada, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) can be defined as ethnically plural societies. On the other side the opposite is true. States listed as authoritarian are mostly heterogenous in the ethnic composition of their population.

In ethnically divided states the majoritarian democracy does not work as smoothly as it is usually the case in the homogenous ones. The majoritarian system of government has to be replaced by so-called consensual democracy, in which complicated mechanism of election and of decision-making results in the necessity to find compromise solutions (Lijphart, 1984).

History and Cultural Heritage

Democracy is most stable when it exists for a longer period of time. Of the twenty one full democracies -according to the Freedom House ratings – only five (Taiwan, Germany, Japan, Mauritius and South Korea) were not democracies before 1945. In the majority of cases democracy is more stable when it functions without interruption for at least two generations.

To understand this phenomenon one has to consider the role of cultural patterns. Sociological analyses of such phenomena have demonstrated the importance of long-term historical heritage (Almond and Verba, 1963). Cultural pattern are formed by generations and reflect the specific characteristics of national history. Consequently, the longer is the history of democratic government, the most likely is the survival of democracy. This makes “old democracies” of America and Western Europe more consolidated and safer than the new democracies of East-Central Europe, Asia and (particularly) Africa.

Dangers From Within: Is Democracy Safe in the West?

The preceding analysis points to the factors which make democracy by far more secure in the highly developed countries of the West than in the other regions. Does it mean that democracy is safe in its traditional environment of North America and Western Europe?

Empirical evidence tends to confirm the optimistic scenario according to which democracy is – and will remain – the only “game in town” within the Western hemisphere. Except for the abortive coup d’état in France in 1958, there have been no serious challenges to the democratic governments in Western Europe and North America. These two regions differ radically in this respect from the rest of the world, where democratic governments are regularly challenged by authoritarian forces. The East-Central region of Europe – composed of formerly communist states – is an interesting case of weak democracy which, however, have been able to survive the attempts of nondemocratic reaction.

The survival of democracy depends, however, on the ability of the democratic governments to deal with the process of polarization (von Beyme, 2019). Polarization is a process of political change in which conflicts become so strong that the adversary is seen as an enemy rather than a rival, and political conflicts becomes a zero-sum game with zero chance for a compromise solutions.

Such polarization takes place when conflicts of interests are substituted for by conflicts of identities – religious, national or other. In the United States, such polarization deeply affected relations between two main political parties, destroyed the political consensus of the past and caused the intensification of political conflict. Donald Trump’s election in 2016 was to large extent caused by the reaction to the fact that his predecessor was the first American president with partly African background (Klein, 2020: 66). Trump’s return to power in the election of 2024 (the second such event in American presidential elections) points to the stability of his Right-wing political support.

Parallel political change takes place in several European democracy. Radical right-wing populism replaced communism as the main challenge to the democratic order of Western societies. Political parties such as Alternative for Germany or the National Front in France, while not strong enough to win power, are powerful enough to cause concern about the future of democracy. So-called “illiberal democracies” become a realistic alternative at least for some traditionally democratic countries of the West (Zakaria, 2007). In new democracies they have become more than a distant possibility.

The emerging authoritarianism differs from the old one in several respects. Not only does it differ from the totalitarian model (Linz, 2000), but also it is different from “old authoritarianism” the essence of which was the use of armed forces both to capture and to consolidate power. Most important

is the fact that it is based not naked power but on the consent of the people expressed in basically fair election. In this sense I have suggested a new term (“new authoritarianism”) to distinguish between it and the traditional (old) authoritarianism (Wiatr, 1996b: 201–214).

Young democracies, like Poland, are particularly endangered. Populist Right-wing parties (like Law and Justice in Poland or Fidesz in Hungary) can appeal to the egalitarian tendencies of the poorer strata of the population and to the traditional conservative values, stronger among less educated and less well-off members of the lower class than among the affluent and better educated middle-class. The peculiarity of this constellation is that it is the populist Right – rather than the reformist Left – which can count on the support of the poorer strata of the society.

Political polarization intensifies with the growing role of conflicts of identity as compared with conflicts of interests. The later can be handled by compromises, while the former are by definition immune from compromises. If one considers abortion “killing of an unborn child”, one is not likely to accept any solution which would permit abortion under some circumstances. The final decision is to be made by democratically elected state authorities but this would not make them legitimate in the eyes of those who perceive such decisions as violation of fundamental (natural) law. Democracy has no easy answer to such beliefs.

Can democracy defend itself nonetheless? Poland offers an optimistic alternative. In 2023 parliamentary election the coalition of Left-of-Center parties defeated the ruling Law and Justice party and stopped the process of transforming Poland into an authoritarian regime of the Right. This was the first case of the electoral defeat suffered by the ruling populist Right. Once more Poland showed the way to defend democracy against its enemies. Only future will show how lasting this trend has become.

Abstrakt

Historia systemów demokratycznych współczesnego świata wskazuje na wyraźną różnicę między Ameryką i Zachodnią Europą z jednej strony a resztą świata. Demokracja funkcjonuje najlepiej w warunkach dobrobytu ekonomicznego i przy nieznacznym zróżnicowaniu etnicznym. Współczesne reżymy autorytarne różnią się od dawniejszych tym, że są głównie oparte na woli obywateli wyrażonej w opartych na rywalizacji wyborach. Przetrwanie demokracji wymaga unikania głębokiej polaryzacji opartej raczej na konflikcie tożsamości niż konflikcie interesów.

Słowa kluczowe: konflikty, demokracja, polaryzacja, transformacja.

REFERENCES

- Almond Gabriel A. and Verba Sidney (1963), *Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Applebaum Anne (2020), *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lust of Authoritarianism*, New York: Doubleday.
- Beyme Klaus von (2019), *From Post-Democracy to Neo-Democracy*, Cham: Springer Publishing.
- DeLisle Jacques (2008), *Development without Democratization? China, Law, and the East Asian Model* [in:] Jose V. Cipurut (ed.), *Democratizations: Comparisons, Confrontations, and Contrasts*, Cambridge, Mass.–London: The MIT Press.
- Fridrich Carl J. and Brzezinski Zbigniew K. (1956), *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Fukuyama Francis (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press.
- Huntington Samuel P. (1991), *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman–London: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Klein Ezra (2020), *Why We're Polarized*, New York–London–Toronto–Sidney–New Delhi: Avid Reader Press.
- Linz Juan J. (2000), *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers
- Linz Juan and Stepan Alfred (1996), *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, Southern America and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore-London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Liphart Arend (1977), *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Explanation*, New Haven–London: Yale University Press.
- Lijphart Arend (1984), *Democratic Patterns in Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-one Countries*, New Haven-London: Yale University Press.
- Przeworski Adam (1991), *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Przeworski Adam, ed. (1995), *Sustainable Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Przeworski Adam (2019), *Crises of Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shestopal Elena, ed. (2016), *New Trends in Russian Political Mentality: Putin 3.0*, Lanham–Boulder–New York–London: Lexington Books.
- Wiatr Jerzy J. (1992), *Four Essays on East European Democratic Transformation*, Warszawa: Scholar Agency.
- Wiatr Jerzy J. ed. (1996a), *Political Sociology and Democratic Transformation in Poland*, Warszawa: Scholar Agency.

Wiatr Jerzy J. (1996b), *Democracy Versus a New Authoritarianism in Eastern Europe* [in:] Richard Kilminster and Ian Varcoe (eds.), *Culture, Modernity and Revolution: Essays in Honour of Zygmunt Bauman*, London–New York: Routledge.

Wiatr Jerzy J. (2022), *Political Leadership Between Democracy and Authoritarianism: Comparative and Historical Perspectives*, Opladen–Berlin–Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich.

Zakaria Farred (2007), *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracies at Home and Abroad*, New York: W. W. Norman.