ФІЛОСОФІЯ ТА ПОЛІТОЛОГІЯ В КОНТЕКСТІ СУЧАСНОЇ КУЛЬТУРИ

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DECELERATING FACTORS OF THE LIBERAL-DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATIONS IN LATVIA

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Abstract

The problem of the quality of Latvia's democracy during the period of EU membership (2004-2020) is studied. Latvia's progress / regression in strengthening the stability of the principles and values of liberal democracy is assessed. The author's estimation of the reasons of growth of defects of democracy in Latvia is offered. Attention is drawn to the extent to which the political culture of Latvians corresponds to the values of liberal democracy.

Keywords: *Latvia, EU, liberal democracy, quality of democracy, defects of democracy, deficit of democracy.*

Чинники сповільнення ліберально-демократичних реформ у Латвії

Анотація

Вивчається проблема якості демократії Латвії за період її членства в ЄС (2004-2020). Оцінюється прогрес/регрес цієї держави Балтії у зміцненні стійкості ліберальної демократії. Запропоновано авторську оцінку причин росту дефектів латвійської демократії. Аналізується відповідність політичної культури латвійців ліберально-демократичним цінностям. Авторка доводить, що попри три десятиліття процесів демократизації, ліберальна демократія в Латвії не є стійкою, а її цінності гостро-дискусійними в латвійській громаді. На основі даних соціологічних опитувань, індексів демократизації тощо зроблено висновок про висхідний характер дефектів демократії в Латвії. Наголошено, що до прийняття цієї держави до ЄС чинник євроінтеграції був ефективним мотивом ліберально-демократичної трансформації. Водночас після розширення ЄС 2004 року темпи реформ сповільнилися, мотивація Латвії (як і багатьох інших «молодих» демократій Центральної та Східної Європи) форсувати демократичні перетворення знизилась. Однією з найбільших проблем демократизації Латвії авторка статті вважає потребу переформатування цінностей населення відповідно до західного ліберально-демократичного стандарту в умовах певного внутрішньосупільного спротиву суспільства, прихильного до консервативних цінностей. Констатовано зростання недовіри латвійців до традиційних партій і політиків, а також органів влади. Підкреслено висхідну присутність на політичній арені Латвії популістських та праворадикальних партій. Як одну з перешкод стійкості ліберальної демократії у Латвії названо недостатній прошарок середнього класу. У статті проведено паралелі з іншими державами Балтії (Естонія, Литва) з акцентом на спільних і відмінних характеристиках якості ліберальної демократії.

Ключові слова: *Латвія, ЄС, ліберальна демократія, якість демократії, дефекти демократії, дефіцит демократії.*

Articulation of issue.

For the second decade, the deficit of democracy has been growing in the EU member states, as well as worldwide. The defects of democracy

are becoming clearer, and their range is increasing. Various radical socio-political organizations actively oppose neoliberal-democratic values and undermine them with hate speeches, intolerant

actions, etc. In the context of global deterioration of the quality of democracy, to a greater or lesser extent, the EU countries are examples of the rising support for political organizations that promote narratives that are inconsistent with the principles of neoliberal democracy.

Therefore, nowadays, it is justified to speak of a deterioration in the quality of democracy or an anti-democratic reversal, which is more or less common for almost all states, including those that are gaining experience in democracy. Democracy seems to be gradually losing its liberal origins. Various forms of inequality are increasing, thus, the middle class is shrinking, which leads to the rise of anti-liberal populism. The global financial crisis of 2008, the migration crisis of 2015 as well as the recent pandemic of coronavirus infection have intensified the fragility of democratic systems and jeopardized democratic consensus. Thus, a number of questions arose: do the EU countries, in particular, the young Baltic democracies that are studied by us, meet the liberal-democratic standard at the institutional and value levels? To what extent are they currently characterized by a deficit of democracy and what defects of liberal democracy do these countries face? How threatening is the democratic retreat of the young European democracies to accomplish the EU's goals and objectives?

Although Latvia do not currently express an illiberal reversal, as Hungary or Poland do, these countries have recently stagnated and even regressed in strengthening liberal democratic values. Thus, we suggest the hypothesis that in recent years the Baltic States, which joined the EU during the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union in 2004, have distanced from the commitments made in the course of fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria to the candidate countries. The emergence of this hypothesis is explained by certain inconsistencies with the liberal-democratic standards of the EU in Latvia, both at the institutional and value levels.

Literature review.

Despite the interest of the scientific community in the liberal-democratic progress of Latvia, the compliance of this state with the principles of liberal democracy is insufficiently studied. The source base for the preparation of the article is:

reports of the EU institutions; regulations of Latvia; results of public opinion polls on discrimination; research by Latvian political scientists (J. Rozenvalds, R. Rungule, S. Senkāne).

The purpose of the article: to analyze the factors that slow down the liberal-democratic reforms in Latvia in the period 2004-2020.

The research outcomes.

In spite of the fact that Latvia is a full member of the EU, liberal democracy in this country is not stable, and its values are controversial for many citizens. According to the V-Dem Institute, Latvia is a liberal, not an electoral democracy, however, it is characterized by an increase in defects [Lührmann 2020]. The Economist Intelligence Unit did not classify Latvia (as well as other Baltic States) as a stable democracy in its ranking of democracies, due to the shortcomings in terms of political culture and political participation. According to the results of 2019, Latvia ranked 38th in the world [Democracy Index 2019 2020] which corresponds to the assessment of governance as flawed democracy.

Undoubtedly, Latvia's fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria as a candidate country for EU accession and membership since 2004 has significantly reduced the impact of negative external factors on domestic political processes and contributed to the democratization of Latvian society. European integration was as an effective tool for liberal democratization. Therefore, it was expected that the European vector of development restrains populist, right-wing radical and other destructive processes in Latvia. But, after Latvia's accession to the EU, liberal-democratic transformations decelerated and the symptoms of democratic "fatigue" became more vivid. In particular, this idea is developed by the Latvian political scientist J. Rozenvalds [Rozenvalds 2014: 16].

The stability issues of liberal democracy are obvious considering the results of the last parliamentary elections in Latvia (October 6, 2018) which showed an increasing distrust of traditional parties and politicians. Recently formed (2016-2017) political parties entered the Latvian Seima. As the newest populists, they based an election campaign on the standard topics, such as anti-corruption, the need to renew the political class, etc.

This reflects the latest Pan-European trend, that is, the growing popularity of right-wing radical, populist parties in the context of the economic decline, migration crisis, high-level corruption revelations, etc. At the same time, despite the Latvians' sensitivity to corruption, the society has not formed a firm understanding of its threats yet. Particularly, this idea was reflected in the significant support (19.8% of votes) of the Social Democratic Party "Harmony" ("Saskaņa"), although the favor of this party decreased compared to the previous elections (2011 – 28.4%, 2014 – 23%). Numerous corruption cases involving the Riga City Hall are connected with this party.

In the last parliamentary elections in Latvia in 2018, significant electoral support was received by anti-systemic populist political parties which for the first time declared themselves as subjects of suffrage. These elections restructured the political landscape of Latvia, as a transition to a more conservative, nationalist agenda took place. For example, the conservative populist party "Who owns the state?" (KPV LV), which had 14.3% of votes, manipulated Latvian sensitive matters: cheap medication, creating favorable conditions for population growth to 2.5 million people (now, it is about 1.9 million people), increasing funding for medicine etc. This party advertised itself "being with the people" as opposed to the elite, and its main task was to "cleanse" the Latvian political system. Another political party, the New Conservative Party (JKP), which held 13.6% of votes in the first election campaign, based its election campaign on supporting the introduction of a unified school system in the state language (i.e., for minority schools), defining marriage exclusively as a union of a man and a woman, arguing that the introduction of institute of civil partnership in Latvia (as in Estonia) is unacceptable, in particular, for same-sex couples, etc.

Latvian support for populist, conservative-nationalist parties demonstrates clearly the high electoral distrust of traditional parties and state institutions. This attitude was largely affected by allegations of corruption, particularly, in connection with ABLV Bank which laundered money mainly from post-Soviet countries. We assume that the growing popularity of populists

was promoted by the fact that criminal banking activities were exposed not by the competent Latvian government agencies, but by the financial department of another state (the USA) [Higgins 2018]. This case caused a critical assessment of the effectiveness of the Latvian state apparatus, thus, a decrease in public confidence in the government. In the light of the corruption scandal, there is a need for the new political forces that have declare the socially expected slogans of criticism of the government and the necessity to effectively prevent and combat corruption.

The high sensitivity of Latvians to populism proves the instability of liberal-democratic values, readiness and desire to control the state institutions by civil society in their political and legal culture. There is a tendency for decline of voter turnout which jeopardizes the legitimacy of the powers. For instance, in 2010 elections to the Saeima 63.1% of people voted, in 2011 – 59.5%, in 2014 – 58.9%, in 2018 – 54.5%¹. There is a noticeable increase in the alienation of the population from the ruling elite due to a wide range of reasons. At the beginning of 2020, 10.4% of the Latvian population had the status of non-citizens [Latvijas iedzīvotāju... 2020]. However, the positive aspect is the automatic granting of Latvian citizenship to children who were born (from 01.01.2020) to non-citizen parents. It should be noted that, at the same time, the number of non-citizens in the Latvian population is gradually decreasing, for example, at the beginning of 2014 there were 13% of them.

The majority problems that we consider as significant threat to the further democratization of Latvia, are influenced by the political and legal values as well as political culture in general. Most Latvians are characterized by a sense of political powerlessness, low confidence in politicians. According to the Eurobarometer survey [Standarta Eurobarometers 92. Latvija 2019], Latvians have extremely low confidence in the government (28%), parliament (19%), the justice system (37%) and political parties (6%). This leads to a counterproductive alienation from politics, thus, it reduces the prospect of strengthening democratic political culture, establishment of the liberal-democratic values.

¹ To compare, there were 88.4% of voters in 1993 elections to Saeima.

Despite the liberal-democratic vector of Latvia's development, its policy continues to be destructively influenced by oligarchy. For a long time, the country was actually ruled by representatives of the oligarchy. Although, the oligarchic capture of the state is not typical characteristic of Latvia nowadays, the destructive impact of the oligarchs on state policy persists still in a latent form. Some politicians who are close to the Latvian oligarchs (A. Lembergs, A. Šlesers, A. Šķēle, etc.) have authoritative power now. Therefore, it is justified to question whether the efforts of Latvians are sufficient enough to finally oust oligarchs and criminal economic groups from Latvian politics.

In spite of the fact that the value segmentation exists in society, the value of cohesion is increasing for Latvians; according to sociological polls, such values were stability and security a few years ago [Latvijas iedzīvotājiem... 2018]. Latvian cohesion is strongly linked to traditional family values which means conservatism, thus, it can be a problem for the integration of the certain liberal-democratic values into Latvian society. Latvian sociologists emphasize on the high importance of security values and the dominance of conservative values in general for Latvian society [Rungule & Senkāne 2016: 274]. Today, values are not divided only in the context of "citizens – non-citizens", but also by age groups: survival values remain especially significant in older age groups, while for young people it is the values of self-expression which are the basis of liberal-democratic progress of any country.

Latvia's rating in the Press Freedom Index continues to grow. In 2020, the country ranked 22nd in the world (for comparison, Estonia – 14th, Lithuania – 28th place). However, in our opinion, a major obstacle to the sustainability of democracy is the underfunding of state media. Back in 2008, the Latvian government responded to the beginning of the global financial crisis with austerity and reducing the funding of state broadcasters by 25% and has not increased their support since. A lot of journalists lost their jobs, and many programs were closed. Therefore, the issue of quality and efficiency of content in the Latvian media became relevant. The closure of Latvia's oldest commercial TV channel, Latvijas

Neatkarīgā Televīzija (LNT), on 1 January 2020 is likely to further weaken pluralism in Latvia's media environment and make it more difficult to prevent and combat fake news and misinformation. The danger of the situation for the quality of Latvian democracy is that Latvia is in the group of countries targeted by foreign (primarily Russian) toxic disinformation propaganda campaigns [Lührmann 2019: 34.].

It should be noted that the supervision of the Latvian media is highly politicized. The National Electronic Mass Media Council, which administers all kinds of media, is elected by the Saeima and consists of representatives of political parties. As a result, this public body operates in a highly politicized environment. During the election campaigns, the leadership of the Latvian, especially state, media comes under political pressure from both the government and the opposition. However, we should emphasize that Latvian journalists, particularly public radio, produce independent content and try to be an objective controller of the government.

In our opinion, the prospect of Latvian democracy is complicated greatly by destructive demographic changes, in particular, the rapid reduction of youth in the population. At the beginning of 2019, in Latvia there were living twice as many people aged 18-24 than in 1991 [Jaunieši Latvijā... 2019]. The country has one of the lowest number of youth in the EU. Eurostat estimates that half of Latvia's population will be over 50 years old in 2040. In addition, the total population of the country is declining; in 2010–2019 alone, it decreased by about 225 thousand people. Another problem for the stability of democracy in Latvia is a quite fragile middle class, as traditionally this class is the social base of democratic transformations.

In recent years, new identity conflicts have arisen in Latvia. The focus shifted from issues related to the Russian-speaking minority and non-citizens to matters regarding the place of neoliberal and national-conservative values in the Latvian community. It is exemplified by the problems of the Latvia's ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence) and the Global

Compact on Migration.

The Lithuanian parliamentary parties were divided on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. It should be mentioned that Estonia was the only Baltic State which has passed the legislative ratification procedure. The position of national-conservative political organizations is greatly influenced by the authoritative institution of the church in Latvia which is critical of certain points of the Istanbul Convention. Ratification of the convention was seen as threatening by a number of high-ranking officials, including Dzintars Rasnačs [Klūga 2018], the former Minister of Justice. The issue of ratification of the Istanbul Convention has even divided scholars of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, who have failed to develop a common scientific view [Stambulas konvencija... 2018]. Critics of ratification point out that the document includes pro-Western liberal legal norms that are unacceptable from a conservative standpoint, as well as are inconsistent with traditional Latvian family values, and that more than 80% of the Istanbul Convention rules are already enshrined in other Latvian regulations. At the same time, ratification of the Istanbul Convention is crucial for the liberal democratization of Latvia, as domestic violence is much more common in this country than the EU average. Moreover, gaps in national legislation prevent victims of domestic violence from defending themselves and bringing the perpetrators to justice.

Another intense topic in Latvia was the refusal to ratify the Global Compact on Migration (2018). On December 6, 2018, the Saeima of Latvia did not support the signing of this document. While the parliaments of Estonia and Lithuania had some difficulties, they voted in favor of the pact. Latvia is in the group of countries that insist on the sovereign right to pursue a migration policy. It should be highlighted that Latvia's active participation in mitigating the migration crisis was supported neither at the governmental nor at the public levels.

When the migration crisis in Europe began to aggravate, public polls showed that more than three-quarters of Riga residents disapprove of refugees being admitted under EU quotas. This is despite the fact that the country granted refugee

status to only 63 people in the pre-crisis period (in particular, 1998-2014). At the end of 2015, Latvia agreed to accept 531 asylum seekers at the request of the EU, but did not fulfill its obligations in full (374 people were accepted) as well as it did not make adequate efforts to integrate them, to overcome prejudices, xenophobia, etc. As in other Baltic State, migrants sent to Latvia under EU quotas have been severely alienated and impoverished, they were given insufficient support from the state to meet even vital human needs. Thus, the vast majority of them have tried to change the country of residence after acquiring refugee status. The biggest fears of Latvians concern refugees and terrorist threats, and it seems that at the state level no considerable efforts are made to dispel groundless fears and overcome prejudices.

There are no official restrictions on the right to association and peaceful assembly in Latvia, but the authorities have obstructed certain public events, especially those organized by sexual minorities. We should mention that all the issues related to the rights of the Latvian LGBTI community is very sensitive and is linked with intolerance. Back in 2005, the Latvian parliament adopted an amendment to the text of the constitution (Article 110) which defines marriage as the union of a man and a woman. This amendment has strong political and social support and is unlikely to be repealed in the near future.

The progress of liberal-democratic transformations in Latvian society is hindered by immature social assets, low confidence in the government, etc. The popularity of populists in Latvia as well as the strengthening of anti-elite atmosphere in society is promoted by top-level corruption and cases of evasion of responsibility of high-ranking officials. Latvia is characterized by fragmentation and weakness of political parties, all civil society institutions, and general public distrust of state institutions. In our opinion, although Latvia has made significant progress in liberal-democratic transformations during the preparation for the EU accession, the intensification of democratic changes has stagnated since 2004, furthermore, even regression is evident on some issues.

Conclusions.

For the young Baltic democracies, the pros-

pect of joining the EU has been a driving force for democratization, but after gaining the desired status of EU member states, the motivation to advance democratic change has diminished. The Baltic States solve fundamental problems (such as EU accession, breakup with Moscow), as well as the growth of European issues against the background of the global economic crisis (since 2008), the increase of Euroscepticism and populism, the migration crisis (since 2015), the beginning of another socio-economic downturn

as a result of large-scale quarantine restrictions due to the global coronavirus pandemic (2020), etc., slowed liberal-democratic progress. There is no significant deviation from liberal-democratic transformations (as in Hungary or Poland) in the Latvia, however, there is an obvious stagnation in the strengthening of liberal democracy. Latvia do not embody or support tendencies of Euroscepticism, populism, radicalism, etc. extensively, but in the post-integration phase, liberal democracy is being tested for stability.

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