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The Crisis of Liberal Democracy vs. Political Knowledge

It is a widely held view that liberal democracy is in a serious crisis. In seeking its sources, three layers can be distinguished: economic, political, and cultural. It must be pointed out that, in the public debate, the diagnosis of the crisis of liberal democracy is not followed by any proposals of how it should be overcome. Therefore, it is forgotten that for liberal democracy to function properly, the citizen with political competence is necessary. It is only a committed citizen who is able to overcome crises occurring in liberal democracy by making use of political knowledge, acting in line with political principles and developing the culture of social trust in liberal and democratic terms. Citizen political competence, as the foundation of civil attitudes supporting democracy and respecting its principles, is one of three pillars of its consolidation and, thus, it can become an instrument for combatting the crisis of liberal democracy¹. What is important, while recognizing the equality of the political components of citizen competence, special attention should be paid to the level of citizens' political knowledge because it is this level that determines their other elements. Therefore, the aim of the article is to indicate the relationship between the level of political knowledge and the consolidation of liberal democracy, and the influence of political knowledge on overcoming its crises.

¹ J. Linz, A. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1996, pp. 44–48.

About liberal democracy...

In the labyrinth of definitions and models of democracy, for the sake of our deliberations we should focus on liberal democracy. Its constituent characteristics include: the respect to democratic institutions (including their representativeness), the pluralism of values, the accountability of those in power, inter-party and electoral competition, the separation of powers (legislature, executive and judiciary) and, finally, the protection of minority rights². By observing these principles, liberal democracy can introduce relations between those who govern and those who are governed (authority and citizens) exclusively on the basis of norms specified in the constitution and other legal acts. This should serve the purpose of the implementation of the basic value of liberal democracy: the protection of citizens against arbitrary power. All the more so since the fundamental point of elections is to delegate citizens' powers to the selected representatives, who are politically accountable to their voters for pursuing their interests. As Michał Kotnarowski and Radosław Markowski point out, "the electoral procedure does not take place in the institutional void; numerous institutions of 'checks and balances' create conditions for the horizontal accountability of the authority by courts, tribunals, ombudsmen or autonomous and reliable mass media"³. What is more, as they rightly argue, these principles of liberal democracy should be reinforced today by adding two principles. Firstly, the use of populist elements in democracy, e.g., through the possibility of citizens' participation in referenda or plebiscites called by authorities (for example, concerning participatory budgets). Secondly, no contemporary democracy can ignore citizens' demands regarding the state's visible commitment to solving economic problems or taking steps towards the development of social justice⁴.

The characteristics and principles of the functioning of liberal democracy require active citizens, who have substantive political knowledge. Without their participation, the democratic package could not be extended to include, e.g., economic elements. It would also be impossible to identify the symptoms of the crisis of liberal democracy and the possibilities of overcoming it.

² R. Dahl, *Demokracja i jej krytycy*, Wydawnictwo "Znak", Kraków 1995, pp. 19–53; A. Antoszewski, *Współczesne teorie demokracji*, "Studia z teorii polityki", 1998/2003, Vol. II, p. 8; D. Held, *Modele demokracji*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2010, p. 6.

³ M. Kotnarowski, R. Markowski, *Polacy a demokracja: realizm, iluzje i fałszywa świadomość*, "Studia Socjologiczne", 2020, no. 4(239), p. 63.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

... and the manifestations of its crisis

The main manifestations of the crisis of liberal democracy are related to economic, political and cultural aspects. The fact that the sovereign demands more state intervention in the economic system undoubtedly shows that this layer is key to deliberations about the crisis of liberal democracy. This is, first of all, connected with the historical spread of democracy as the consequence of the economic development of individual countries. According to Francis Fukuyama, “economic growth gave rise to social mobilization, which led to the escalation of demands of political participation”⁵. Thus, it can be said that the economic development anticipated social and political changes and contributed to the development of countries in all spheres. This belief is shared by Adam Przeworski, who finds the level of economic development to be the most important factor of democratic consolidation⁶.

This view determines other concepts: if citizens’ economic situation deteriorates, there is a high risk of democratic deconsolidation. This can be prevented only if the state interferes with the economy. In liberal democracies, we observe that the government takes action in various public spheres in the way that links its involvement with the economic profit. Consequently, the state withdraws from the area of public security, delegating its powers in this respect to other institutions (family, self-government, etc.). This way the accusation that the government mishandles crisis situations is dismissed and their responsibility for potential failures in the sphere of citizens’ economic security is taken away. There is no doubt that this leads to the weakening of the state’s role not only in social life, but also in the economic sphere, and shifts the logic of the efficacy of capitalist economy to healthcare, education, science, etc. Thus, the state marginalizes its role, which, in crisis situations, is not conducive to the reinforcement of trust in the state and, consequently, does not contribute to democratic consolidation. The state’s withdrawal from its traditional tasks may lead to social unrest and it intensifies entitled and populist attitudes.

What is more, theoretical and model approaches to democracy (both normative and empirical) do not represent the common-sense knowledge of it. They are only constructs developed by researchers and do not reflect the knowledge of broad public opinion. This fact also gives rise to difficulties in

⁵ F. Fukuyama, *Ład polityczny i polityczny regres*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 2015, pp. 456–457.

⁶ A. Przeworski, *Democracy and economic development*, [in:] *Political science and the public interest*, eds. E.D. Mansfield, R. Sisson, Ohio Press, Ohio 2004, pp. 312–313.

interpreting the phenomenon of liberal democracy. This remark is so important because the connection of democracy with economic development is rooted in the colloquial understanding of phenomena and their interrelationships. Therefore, the state's abandonment of exercising this function may cause frustration among societies, which, consequently, may lead to the erosion of trust in the regime. This is also connected with the way democracy is understood, which rarely becomes the subject of research, but illustrates certain cognitive dualism: in empirical studies, we observe support to democracy as an abstract phenomenon, but we also see that respondents reject its actual essence⁷. This is demonstrated not only by studies conducted in Poland, but also by research projects carried out in Germany or Russia, where the level of acceptance for the generalized vision of democracy is high, but in the case of specific issues – tolerance, the pluralism of values or the freedom of speech – there appear differences, which are not conducive to the consolidation of the regime. As Krzysztof Korzeniowski argues, this is also related to politicians' activity because "on the one hand, scholars have been struggling with the complexity of the concept of democracy and people's ideas as to what democracy is. On the other hand, they constitute the everlasting and unfailing source of the high and ever-increasing level of this complexity"⁸.

This is where the economic and political aspects of the crisis of liberal democracy interface with each other. Furthermore, scientific reliability requires that we also raise the issue of the occurrence of the crisis phenomenon as such, or the crisis of the state or civilization, which makes the crisis of the liberal democracy regime only one of the manifestations of a wider problem. There is no doubt that this is connected with the clash between two standpoints: on the one hand, citizens' conviction that they have the right to participate; on the other hand, the growing social belief that the ongoing processes of changes in the economy, the labour market or the political sphere are largely beyond citizens' control. This mainly stems from the changes that the development of technology entails, which does not change the fact that the political elites should take on responsibility.

It is them that are usually the addressee of social frustration, as well as the source of the crisis of liberal democracy. As Piotr Borowiec emphasizes: "it is not liberal-democratic ideas that are in crisis, but the current elites who have

⁷ A. Schedler, R. Salsfield, *Democrats with adjectives: Linking direct and indirect measures of democratic support*, "European Journal of Political Research", 2007, No. 46, pp. 637–659.

⁸ K. Korzeniowski, *Psychologia demokracji. Szkice*, PWN, Warszawa 2020, p. 69.

abandoned these ideas”⁹. Two phenomena overlap here: the logic of economic rationality, which makes the withdrawal of the political elites from the state’s key tasks. The state’s shifting responsibility for the individual sectors of public life deepens the crisis of trust in the political elites. When this happens, the elites usually hide behind experts, which, consequently, leads to the situation in which, as Krzysztof Szewior put it, “experts have dominated politicians, not taking responsibility in the democratic sense”¹⁰.

The above is complemented by the logic of power. The political elites want to gain power just for the sake of having it. That is why they try to take over all the state apparatus to effectively pursue their ambitions. At the same time, they are not able to do away with social unrest and, thus, they use methods consisting in maintaining illusory stability by way of social distribution. Basically, this “festival” may last forever or at least until the appearance of the symptoms of the economic crisis. Then, to sustain the logic of power, the government reaches for security arguments so that social peace would be kept¹¹.

There is no doubt that these phenomena reflect the crisis of political representation, which can be analysed on a few levels and in a few spheres. In the political sphere, it is connected with political parties’ no longer representing values in their traditional sense, in the division into the left and right wing. Although the representatives of political parties seek votes, they do not define them through values originating from one specific ideology, but they draw from a number of them. The addressee should be every citizen rather than those who share given ideas or values. Therefore, political programmes are prepared to target everyone, which makes electoral campaigns not only the spectacle for many viewers, but also the synonym of the game of make-believe and democracy becomes a “hollowed” concept¹². As a result, people become a lot less interested in politics and do not want to participate in its processes. At the same time, the political elites become more arrogant as they are convinced that due to the dominance of liberalism and the lack of alternatives to representative democracy, they have secured governance or participation in politics without a time limit¹³.

⁹ P. Borowiec, *Kryzys mainstreamu – przyczyną słabnięcia zaufania do porządku liberalno-demokratycznego*, [in:] *Zmierzch demokracji liberalnej*, eds. K.A. Wojtaszczyk, P. Stawarz, J. Wiśniewska-Grzelak, Wydawnictwo UW, Warszawa 2018, p. 392.

¹⁰ K. Szewior, *Społeczno-socjalne implikacje zmierzchu demokracji*, [in:] *Zmierzch demokracji liberalnej...*, *op. cit.*, p. 401.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² P. Meir, *Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, Verso, London-New York 2013, pp. 12–13.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

The conviction of a universal character of liberal democracy is not without significance, either. It gives rise to strong trends, especially in developed states, of transferring its ideas, principles and institutions to countries which have no cultural background for planting and consolidating democracy. The examples include countries with predominantly Islamic culture and the so-called Arab Spring.

What is another problem that contributes to the crisis of democracy in the cultural sphere is the fact that societies are not mature enough to adopt this regime. This particularly concerns Central and East European countries, which are criticised that “despite significant progress in building democracy after the fall of communism – they are still somewhere between the West and the East in cultural terms”¹⁴. This results in populist tendencies and – typical of this region – the lack of full understanding of democratic principles. It is emphasized that in the Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian tradition of the rule of law, “instead of big words and big ideas, the focus is on the respect to the rules of the game, seeking consensus and solving common problems together”¹⁵. In the case of Central and East European countries, what was the source of democratic ideas was not the historical experience of societies, their tradition or citizens’ religiousness, but the strong presence of the myth of the West. Its underlying conviction was that all ideas imported from the democratic states of Western Europe are better than the local products of intellectual activity¹⁶. This referred not only to the activities in the sphere of culture, but also in economics and politics. It is safe to say that post-communist societies in the conditions of system transformation soaked up all ideas to the same degree: both those which belonged to the “dustbin of pop-culture” and those which concerned important political ideas, including liberal democracy. The picture that emerged was far from the normative models of democracy and, at the same time, it did not produce any original values, characteristic of this geopolitical area. This undoubtedly led to the intensification of crisis tendencies in the liberal democracies established in post-communist states.

This does not mean, however, that Western democracies are free of crisis symptoms in the cultural sphere. It has different sources, though, mainly the conflict between what is universal and what is particular. It was dominated by the discourse on multiculturalism, which was largely caused by the migration

¹⁴ M. Sandel, *Tyrania merytokracji. Co się stało z dobrem wspólnym?*, PWN, Warszawa 2020, pp. 74–75.

¹⁵ W. Anioł, *Szlak Norden. Modernizacja po skandynawsku*, Elipsa, Warszawa 2013, pp. 34–35.

¹⁶ J. Kuisz, *Koniec pokoleń podległości. Młodzi Polacy, liberalizm i przyszłość państwa*, Wydawnictwo Kultury Liberalnej, Warszawa 2018, pp. 63–66.

policy of individual countries. The existence of multiple separate countries within liberal democracy is its undoubted asset, but it can also generate conflicts. They are caused by strong identities, the homogeneity of communities, their clear integration and their resistance to the framework of the functioning of liberal democracy, the expansiveness of representatives and the will to dominate over a dispersed liberal society¹⁷.

Political knowledge as a chance of emerging from the crisis

As mentioned earlier, the politically engaged citizen is one of the three pillars of democratic consolidation. In the normative approach, citizens' participation depends on the level of their political competence, i.e., the knowledge of politics determined by being interested in it, the political values an individual identifies with, and the activity for the benefit of the political community. What links these elements is the culture of political trust contrasted, to quite a simplified degree, with political distrust. However, while recognizing all elements of citizens' political competence as equally important, the special role must be attributed to political knowledge because it determines citizens' behaviour to the largest extent.

Not all researchers, however, acknowledge its importance for democracy. There is quite a widely held view that "the expectations concerning the citizen's cognitive qualifications are so high that their creators believe that qualifications of this kind cannot be common in mass democracies"¹⁸. Other scholars assume that the individualistic model of citizens and the knowledge they possess is proposed in liberal democracy. This assumption recognizes the absolute rationality of individuals and the possibility of using it for pursuing individual interests that take precedence over the common good. Hence, in this case, knowledge serves only individuals rather than the whole community¹⁹.

Leaving aside further deliberations concerning the relevance or irrelevance in the discussion on knowledge in politics, we should add that rational thinking based on obtained facts is quite commonly criticised. It is connected with the belief that – in the increasingly complex world – the citizen first of all needs simplified visions rather than being perfectly informed. This stems from people's intellectual limitations in the face of the pace of civilization growth. "When an

¹⁷ P. Borowiec, *Kryzys mainstreamu*, op. cit., p. 179.

¹⁸ J. Raciborski, *Obywatelstwo w perspektywie socjologicznej*, PWN, Warszawa 2011, p. 199.

¹⁹ D. Lalman, J. Oppenheimer, P. Świstak, *Formalna teoria wyboru racjonalnego. Kumulatywne nauki polityczne*, "Studia Socjologiczne", 1994, no. 3/4, p. 124.

individual does not have enough information, they fill in gaps in their knowledge by reaching for the available possibilities supporting the decision-making process”²⁰. All doubts concerning knowledge in politics lose significance in the perspective of Robert Dahl’s argument that what is the condition of liberal democracy is every individual’s right and ability “to be informed about different potential decisions and likely consequences”²¹.

The knowledge of politics, or political knowledge, concerns collecting facts which are stored in long-term memory, in order to be able to participate in the life of the community. This is first of all manifested in electoral participation. Regularly conducted studies show that in liberal democracies we observe a rather low degree of political knowledge. It should be specified here that in every democratic society there are groups of people with different levels of political knowledge. However, it is stable in time and is of key importance to the present and future of the community: it affects election results, contributes to the feeling of satisfaction with the democratic regime and has an impact on the sense of political agency²².

Empirical research reveals that the important elements of having and verifying political knowledge are social position, the place of residence, professional status and the level of religiousness. Furthermore, other significant determinants include sources of political knowledge (traditional and electronic media) and the level and dominance of political knowledge in a given community²³. These factors contribute to the development of the political knowledge level of citizens, who are often under informed and rely on their own experience and who have so-called general competence for producing fairly conventional opinions, thanks to which they can make easy decisions “with the least possible effort and at minimum own costs”²⁴. One cannot forget, however, that it would be difficult to expect every citizen to follow and analyse all political information on a permanent basis. This is basically what only experts – politicians and political scientists – do. An average citizen is expected to have substantive political knowledge – demonstrating the high degree of cumulation, analyses and the constant absorption of it. When the interest in politics is of an irregular character

²⁰ A. Turska-Kawa, *Determinanty chwiejności wyborczej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2015, p. 234.

²¹ R. Dahl, *Demokracja i jej krytycy*, *op.cit.*, p. 39.

²² M.X. Delli Carpini, S. Keeter, *Measuring Political Knowledge: Putting First Things First*, “American Journal of Political Science”, 1993, No. 37, p. 1180; R. Vidigal, *Measuring Certainty in Political Knowledge*.

²³ S.E., Bennett, *Know-Nothings revisited: The Meaning of Political Ignorance Today*, “Social Science Quarterly”, 1988, No. 69, p. 478.

²⁴ T. Godlewski, *Obywatelskie kompetencje polityczne*, [in:] *Demokracja w Polsce po 2005 roku*, ed. D. Karnowska, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2008, p. 101.

and there is no understanding of the complexity of the world, the knowledge of politics becomes superficial and shallow. It is marked with a selective attitude to facts – the citizen focuses on scandals, gossip and bombshells the reception of which is based on impressions and emotions rather than logical ordering.

Common-sense knowledge is based on three components: ideas, intuition and value judgments²⁵. They largely contribute to the conventional reception of reality, without analysing the whole, to simplifying and specifying the vision. Thus, common-sense knowledge is not conducive to democratic consolidation – quite the contrary. People who have such knowledge are a lot more likely to be influenced by populist slogans: simple solutions to difficult problems. Their knowledge of politics is based on a simple pattern: who has stolen something has to give it back; we can't – "we can". Otherwise, even if a citizen tries to make rational electoral decisions on the basis of common-sense knowledge, his or her rationalism will still give way to a promise – because his or her knowledge has a random and unordered nature.

Political knowledge is a challenge to governments in liberal democracy. Its low level is dependent on culture and education, i.e., those spheres of the state's activity which do not bring short-term economic profit. The decreasing interest in culture or the limited access to it will contribute to the development of political knowledge on the level of digressions and impressions²⁶. This is confirmed by the study of Radosław Markowski's team, in which the reading rate was identified as one of the main drivers of the development of political knowledge²⁷. Although the acquisition of political knowledge is an individual matter, it is important for the whole community. It creates the so-called mind map, which determines making political decisions. A person who has no mental model cannot think about politics independently and often makes decisions driven by emotions, under the influence of a temporary authority or pressure. He or she can be easily controlled because his or her thinking of politics is determined by chaos and randomness. Such a person also becomes highly susceptible to populist slogans²⁸.

It is possible to overcome the crisis of liberal democracy by using a number of factors – the state's activity in the economic sphere aimed at the fair distribution of goods or electing the authority that pursues the sovereign's interest. However, they derive from citizens' activities determined by the level of political knowledge.

²⁵ M. Karwat, *O karykaturze polityki*, Wydawnictwo Muza, Warszawa 2012, p. 112.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

²⁷ See: M. Cześniak, A. Kwiatkowska, R. Markowski, *Między nami ignorantami*, "Polityka", April 26, 2016.

²⁸ J. Reykowski, *Myslenie polityczne*, [in:] *Podstawy psychologii politycznej*, ed. K. Skarżyńska, Wydawnictwo Zysk i spółka, Poznań 2002, pp. 110–138.

Its significance in the consolidation of democracy cannot be overestimated. Not only does it help to cope with the crises of democracy, but it also prevents the widespread presence of populist slogans in public life. However, one needs to distinguish here between common-sense and substantive knowledge because only the high level of the latter guarantees the success of democracy.

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Summary: It is a widely held view that liberal democracy is in a serious crisis. In seeking its sources, three layers can be distinguished: economic, political and cultural. It must be pointed out that, in the public debate, the diagnosis of the crisis of liberal democracy is not followed by any proposals of how it should be overcome. Therefore, it is forgotten that for liberal democracy to function properly, the citizen with political competence is necessary. It is only a committed citizen who is able to overcome crises occurring in liberal democracy by making use of political knowledge, acting in line with political principles and developing the culture of social trust in liberal and democratic terms. Citizen political competence, as the foundation of civil attitudes supporting democracy and respecting its principles, is one of three pillars of its consolidation and, thus, it can become an instrument for combatting the crisis of liberal democracy.²⁹ What is important, while recognizing the equality of the political components of citizen competence, special attention should be paid to the level of citizens' political knowledge because it is this level that determines their other elements.

Keywords: liberal democracy, political knowledge, crisis of liberal democracy, political civic competences

Kryzys liberalnej demokracji a wiedza polityczna

Streszczenie: W powszechnej opinii demokracja liberalna przechodzi bardzo poważny kryzys. Poszukując jego źródeł wyróżnić można trzy płaszczyzny: ekonomiczną, polityczną i kulturową. Przy czym w debacie publicznej dość rzadko, poza postawieniem diagnozy o kryzysie demokracji liberalnej, prezentuje się możliwe metody jego przezwyciężenia. Tym samym zapomina się, że podstawą dla właściwego funkcjonowania demokracji liberalnej jest obywatel posiadający polityczne kompetencje. Bowiem tylko zaangażowany obywatel jest w stanie przezwyciężyć kryzysy występujące w demokracji liberalnej poprzez wykorzystanie wiedzy politycznej, działając w oparciu o wartości polityczne i rozwijając kulturę zaufania społecznego, przy zachowaniu zasady nieufności w rozumieniu liberalnym i demokratycznym. Polityczne kompetencje obywatelskie, jako podstawa postaw obywatelskich wspierających demokrację i respektujących jej zasady stanowią jeden z trzech filarów jej konsolidacji, a przez to także mogą się stać instrumentem przezwyciężania kryzysu demokracji liberalnej³⁰. Przy czym uznając równoważność komponentów politycznych kompetencji obywatelskich szczególną uwagę należy zwrócić na poziom wiedzy politycznej obywateli, bowiem to on determinuje ich kolejne elementy.

Słowa kluczowe: demokracja liberalna, wiedza polityczna, kryzys demokracji liberalnej, polityczne kompetencje obywatelskie

²⁹ J. Linz, A. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1996, pp. 44–48.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.