

The dichotomy of democracy – autocracy through the prism of the covid-19 pandemic

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Bible, Mathieu, chapter 20.

15. Is it not lawful to me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?

16. So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

A little music spreads into the western world, putting forward the quick success of the authoritarian China face to coronavirus, while the European and American democracies prove to be disorganized, without real preparation, and undisciplined in the hour of confinement. Dictatorship 1-democracy 0? [1].

ABSTRACT

2020 and 2021 can generally be classified as “Years eaten by locusts” (allusion to the title of Borislav Pekić’s book “The Years Eaten by Locusts”). In the spirit of Durkheim, this period, especially the first period of the epidemic, from December 2019 to June 2020, could be called “the period of acute anomie”. The global exchange has come to a brutal halt, large numbers of people have been imprisoned for weeks, entire sectors of social life have been blocked, and socio-economic inequalities have become even more pronounced. This situation gave birth to a specific type of anomie, pandemic anomie [2] in which there was a new restructuring of the positions of China, and the West.

Since the end of World War II, and especially since the fall of the Soviet Union, democratic Western regimes have dominated the international scene, imposing their economic and political model as the only correct and desirable one. However, their difficulty in finding the key to effective pandemic control has called into question their hegemony and the superiority of their model. Not only was their crisis management less effective, but it was not more democratic compared to so-called authoritarian countries.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19, Democracy, Autocracy, China, West, Pandemic.

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Introduction. Epidemics, by taking human lives, also put entire societies in the grip of social tensions and are a threat to states and their survival. The consequences of long-term policies are coming to light. Thus, the constant reduction of investment in public health services and the cessation of industrial production of medical materials has led many countries into great difficulties in the fight against coronavirus.

Institutions face challenges to which they have difficulty finding adequate answers, which clearly shows the demagoguery between the proclaimed principles and their actual application. The gap between the proclaimed and the real is particularly striking in the “best of all arrangements” – in democracies. Democracy, which is based on the election of representatives of the people who are supposed to work for the benefit of the electorate, should be the best political system, protecting its citizens in all aspects and situations. However, Covid-19 has questioned this premise of the superiority of democracy.

Theoretical approach. With the end of the Cold War, the economic, political, and social model of the West has shown its superiority and seemed to spread to the entire planet. So, Fukuyama in his famous article “The End of History?” [3] predicted that the world would peacefully fit in and rearrange itself according to the Western mould, adopting liberal capitalism under US hegemony. However, the adoption of the economic model of the West by countries such as China and India has, paradoxically, weakened its primary bearer and propagandist. Freed from the rigidities of a planned state economy, China and India waged silent revolutions, which, just a few decades later, permanently changed the levers that moved the world. The West won, it imposed its model, but that victory led to its own loss [4].

“I remain convinced, as far as I am concerned, that Western civilization, more than any other, was the creator of universal values, but proved incapable of conveying them in the right way” [4, p. 56]; “His drama (drama of the West), today, as yesterday, over the centuries, is that he has been constantly divided between the desire to civilize the world and the will to dominate it – two irreconcilable demands” [4, p. 66].

In his book “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order”, Huntington says that modernization differs from Occidentalization and by no means produces a universal civilization [5]. According to him, the world order is organized around civilizations. Societies that share cultural affinities cooperate; states are grouped around the guiding-state of their civilization. The West’s claims to universality are increasingly bringing it into conflict with other civilizations, especially China and Islam. Westerners must accept that their civilization is unique, but not universal. A war between civilizations can be avoided if political leaders accept that politics has become multicivilizational and if they cooperate to preserve such a state of affairs [5, p. 17, 18]. “Every civilization considers itself the centre of the world and writes its history as if it were the central drama of human history. This is certainly even more true for the West than for other cultures. This mono-civilizational view is increasingly losing its relevance and use in the multi-civilizational world” [5, p. 67].

The notion of democracy, the political doctrine that considers that sovereignty should belong to all citizens, is so deeply rooted in Western culture that it is generally regarded as a purely Western concept. Thus, democracy is a value that the West considers having a mission to expand and establish in countries where it did not exist before.

Amartya Sen tries, in addition to the idea of universal suffrage to which democracy is often reduced, to underline the question of its complexity. According to him, there are general roots, common to all forms of society. Sen shows through numerous examples that pluralism, diversity and freedom are in the history of many nations. According to him, this common heritage is a sufficient reason to question the thesis that democracy is a purely Western concept. By democracy, Sen means not only the mechanical exercise of the right to vote but a free and responsible discussion of political issues concerning the community. These roots can be found outside of ancient Greece and the West in general: for example, in ancient India and elsewhere in Asia, as well as in Africa. In his book, Sen illustrates the existence of ancient democratic traditions in various civilizations with concrete examples and warns that the sin of "cultural imperialism" should not be repeated in the future, that is, the attribution of democracy exclusively to Western countries. Instead, he advises that those aspects that represent the values that all people have adopted and shared at different moments in their history should be explored and developed [6].

The beginning of the Covid-19 epidemic and the approach to solving the sanitary crisis

With the first cases of Covid-19, the very existence of the epidemic was analysed as if it automatically stemmed from the authoritarian characteristics of China. According to analysts in Europe, the oppressive bureaucratic structure has prevented the transfer of information from the local to the central level of government, transforming the local epidemic into a global pandemic.

It is not new to explain the problem of natural disasters as a political problem arising because of the lack of democratic governance. This theory finds its origin in simplified interpretations of the works of Amartya Sen, who in his 1982 essay argued that famine was not so much a matter of food shortages, as of undemocratic governments, because the free press would have initiated the government of the country to react [7]. In undemocratic regimes, the lack of accountability stems from a lack of transparency due to the lack of freedom of the press and information.

On the other side of autocracy, in the West, the notion of democracy is not just an analytical category, but functions as part of Western identity, its essence. In this sense, democracy establishes and maintains a complex of Western superiority over others. Since Fukuyama defines it as the end of history, that is, the universal model to which all countries of the world will eventually adhere, Western Democrats have long been irritated by the fact that China does not openly transit to democracy, according to the prophecy of democracy as the end of history and the West as the destiny of the world. Thus, Fukuyama in an interview he gave to France culture in August 2019, states: "China challenges the hypothesis that it will become more democratic as it becomes richer" [8].

In the west, the coronavirus has been treated less as a public health problem and more as a political issue. When the confinement of the Chinese population was announced in January 2020, this interpretation was further reinforced: lockdown was presented as a totalitarian measure, stemming from the very nature of the authoritarian Chinese regime, not as a consequence of an epidemic. The Chinese authorities' decision to isolate tens of millions of its citizens has heightened a sense of radical diversity between Europe and China. During this period, the superiority of democracy was vigorously affirmed [9].

Then, when the prospect of closure seemed no longer so exotic in Europe, while, at the same time, Wuhan started easing epidemiological measures, the media began to question the capacity of democracy to manage the crisis better than it was done in China. A new question has been asked: is, after all, authoritarianism better equipped to deal with sanitary crises? The answer, however, remained unchanged: of course not [10]. Beginning April 2020, when China announced its success in eradicating the virus, Western democracies imposed quarantine measures, as the death rate in Europe was significantly higher than in China. However, disbelief and uneasiness over their own inability to fight the epidemic effectively, were suppressed by the claim that Chinese figures were forged, which is typical of Chinese propaganda. Thus, it is said that since there is no accurate information, it is not possible to make comparisons with data from Western democracies, whose statistics, of course, are accurate and reliable. In other words, a comparison between democracy and dictatorship is impossible [11].

Sanitary crisis management

There are few situations that are so conducive to international comparison, such as the one that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic. The global character of the pandemic makes us pay special attention to its progress in other countries. We monitor the solutions of foreign governments and compare their efficiency with the success of our government in crisis management. Our gaze is focused either on what is very far away – foreign countries, or on what is very close – locally, but what lies between these two spaces, other political preoccupations, are completely forgotten and unprocessed by the media [12]. This interspace is filled by only one actor: the state, which, acting as a mother or as a stepmother, adopts emergency measures, controls their observance, advises and insults, daily changing its own discourse in general confusion that it seeks to cover up by invoking medical experts. However, in this frantic activity, the states of Western democracies were not able to provide the basic things for the protection of medical staff and the population in general – as banal as hand sanitizers and face masks.

In crisis management, there were no major differences in solutions between authoritarian and democratic regimes. One thing is certain: democracy has not proved to be more efficient and honest in communication than authoritarian countries. Strict confinement was applied not only by China, which was constantly pointed at as an authoritarian regime, but also by "proven" democracies, including France. It is true that the configuration was stricter in China than in France, but, progressively, with the use of drones and other surveillance measures, this difference narrowed [13]. In a sense, confinement in France was stricter and more massive than that applied in China: China closed only one of its provinces and a

few cities, while in France there was a national closure of 67 million inhabitants and a state of emergency was declared [14].

The United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom were indecisive and ineffective in fighting Covid-19. At a time when Donald Trump and Boris Johnson were obstinately closing eyes to the danger, preferring sacrificing their own population by minimizing the risk of virus in order to sustain economic activities, China has sent to help other countries, democratic and undemocratic, its experts, masks and respirators.

The countries of the European Union made their own decisions, implementing measures to regulate the crisis without waiting for the decisions of the EU bodies, which were without organized action and clear ideas. In addition to the general confusion and the lack of basic means to fight the infection, the most astonishing was the complete lack of solidarity between Western democracies, and even between the sister-countries, members of the European Union. Cases of hijacking deliveries of masks from China, diverting planes carrying them, competitions in offering prices to get the necessary product, have completely compromised the standard discourses and postulates of the European Union, as well as its traditional political friendship with the United States.

The first political, founding act of European integration, the Declaration of Robert Schuman of May 9th, 1950, states, among other things: "Europe will not be built all at once, nor in a complete construction: it will be built through concrete achievements, above all creating de facto solidarity" [15].

If the very postulate of European integration has been so rudely called into question in a situation where all its members are simultaneously facing a common enemy, and when solidarity was much needed, the question arises as to the very essence of this institution? In the absence of aid from expected sources, Italy, among the first in Europe to be hit hard by the epidemic, has sought help from China, Cuba and Venezuela [16]. Russia and Cuba were the first to send trained medical staff, while China sent masks and respirators to the unfortunate member of the European Union, which, for its part, criticized the lack of solidarity coming from the EU organization and its members [17].

Unlike France, where there were no masks for the population during the entire period of the first confinement, when the official discourse tended to deny the importance of masks to combat the epidemic, some countries, like Serbia, realizing that they could not expect help from the European Union, turned to China and received the necessary medical equipment from it. However, the actions that China presented as an expression of solidarity were soon interpreted by Western analysts as China's efforts to expand its political influence and improve its reputation as an eternal oppressor and autocrat, as generally presented in the Western media [18].

In an analysis of the causes of the shortage of protective masks during the first wave of the pandemic, the OECD concluded that the global shortage of this product was a result of a supply and demand problem that countries complicated by resorting to protectionism, and that they should not act in the same manner next time, if they have learned anything from this pandemic [19].

The lack of coherence in French government statements and a radical change in doctrine when it comes to the need to wear protective masks have significantly undermined French confidence in their government and its ability to manage the health crisis. Thus, the results of a survey of March 8 and April 9, 2020, in which about a thousand respondents participated, who answered the question: “How do you assess the government’s position regarding its recommendations on wearing masks?”, showed that 73% of respondents thought that the government did not do what was necessary to supply health staff and hospitals, 76% stated instability, 77% thought that the government was not clear, 77% thought that government statements were not coherent, 77% thought the government had not told the truth to the French [20].

Democracy and inequalities on the inner plane

In addition to the hesitation and incoherence of the World Health Organization, the medical corps and the governments in finding measures to combat the epidemic, the sanitary crisis has underlined the social inequalities. Class, racial and gender differences were illuminated by the spotlight of the crisis. The virus, by itself, does not differentiate between class, gender, and race, but the way it is chosen by the authorities to combat it, restores and multiplies existing latent or visible social differences.

And while companies were strongly supported by the state, while most staff were ordered to work from home, taking advantage of teleworking, while those who own holiday homes left the cities, the message to ordinary workers was that the economy must not stop and therefore health risks must be taken. The French Minister of Labour condemned construction companies for defeatism when they wanted to temporarily close non-priority construction sites [21]. Public transport in France continued to operate according to the usual program, without special protection measures. Thousands of workers – cashiers, cleaners, delivery men, continued to work and, of course, medical and nursing staff, in a direct exhausting fight with an insufficiently known enemy.

The only places that a priori provided equal treatment to all were public health services. Those same services that have been the subject of constant restrictions for decades, and whose employees are now required to be heroes in the fight against a mysterious enemy, without basic means of protection. The applause, the shouts, the pounding of pots and other manifestations of the closed population every night at eight, in support of the medical staff in most countries detained by the coronavirus, sounded like an empty tirade of third-callers escorting real fighters to the front lines.

Underlining social inequalities in France as elsewhere, were also seen in the way police had controlled compliance with prescribed governmental measures. In the neighbourhoods where the wealthy population lives, mostly vacated after large number of it had left the city, the presence of the police was almost imperceptible, while full supermarkets continued to operate despite poor attendance. Conversely, neighbourhoods inhabited by workers were subject to frequent police inspections, in conditions of supply

problems and a large presence of people on the streets, due to dense population, cramped apartments and a small percentage of those who work remotely and who could go to some accommodation out of the city. In those conditions, there were the most controls, there were fines, there were recordings of how the state enforces order in times of crisis. The highlight was the use of drones and street cameras to monitor, identify and punish the disobedient. Methods that in "out-of-crisis" times are so eagerly criticized as contrary to the freedoms and rights of citizens, so inappropriate for democracies, and typical of Chinese and other autocrats [22].

The second round in the fight against Covid-19: vaccines

After the democratic West failed in the first round, i.e. the supply of masks and other medical needs, the next move, which had to enable regain and re-establishing of its supremacy, was to find a vaccine against covid-19. The internal competition of Western democracies was interrupted by news from Russia that they found the vaccine against Covid-19. The fact that the Russians were the first to announce that they had found the vaccine (which they symbolically named Sputnik V) revived the wounds of the Cold War, and reinforced the usual distrust of the West, or democracy, towards countries they call autocratic.

The poor start of the EU vaccination campaign has given China and Russia room to pick up political points in the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe. The geographical division of zones of influence was reminiscent of the bloc division of East and West during the Cold War, with China entering as a new, powerful player in the old, already seen constellations. In the race for the vaccine, which replaced the former race to conquer space, the Russians, by launching the first vaccine against Covid-19 and giving it the symbolic name Sputnik V, almost jokingly reminded the West and the world in general that they were remaining an important factor in the fight for global supremacy. The Chinese, continuing their 17 + 1 program in Europe, expanded and strengthened their field of influence on the old continent. China and Russia seemed to be giving the EU a lesson in soft power on its own ground. Several EU member-states as well as neighbouring countries have turned to Moscow and Beijing for additional procurement of vaccines, facing a lack of timely information, delays and insufficient deliveries of vaccines by the EU.

Regarding the skipping of centralized procurement of vaccines across the EU by its members, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, stated: "We should not let ourselves be misled by China and Russia, both **regimes with less desirable values than ours**, as they organise highly limited but widely publicised operations to supply vaccines to others" [23]. In her report published in The Economist Intelligence Unit on April 28, 2021, entitled "Western Powers Have Lost Vaccine Diplomacy Battle," Agatha Demarais, director of global forecasting, says: "With vaccine diplomacy, Russia and China seek to leverage resentment against Western countries which have pre-booked more than half of the global supply of vaccines this year and are prioritising immunising their own populations"

[24]. Regarding Chinese and Russian vaccines, Western countries have expressed great suspicion and criticism, but have not offered any alternative. The United States and the United Kingdom accepted the distribution of their vaccines only after their domestic needs were met, forcing even European Union countries to turn to China and Russia for help [25].

In response to accusations coming from the West, the Kremlin has argued that Moscow and Beijing do not use vaccines as a means of influencing the international scene. Vladimir Putin responded to the claims of one European Commissioner that the European Union does not need the Sputnik V vaccine (at a time when the supply of vaccines to its population was extremely slow): “We are not forcing anyone to do anything (...) but we wonder whose interests those persons are defending, whether the interests of pharmaceutical companies or the interests of European citizens?”

It should be said that the vaccines against Covid-19 produced nine new billionaires. The independent government organization Oxfam said the new fortunes came about thanks to the fantastic profits of pharmaceutical companies that have a monopoly on the production of the Covid-19 vaccine. The first two riches, which stand out from the rest, are held by the CEO of Moderna, Stéphane Bancel (\$ 4.3 billion) and the CEO and co-founder of BioNTech, Ugur Sahin (\$ 4 billion). Other billionaires, owners of shares in pharmaceutical companies, earned 32.2 billion dollars, which, according to Oxfam, is enough to vaccinate the entire population of India [26].

Vaccination campaigns in some European countries outside the EU

In the general confusion, unrealistic promises of the governments and the real shortage of vaccines against Covid-19 in the countries of the European Union, a very successfully organized campaign of vaccination by some European countries outside the large EU family appeared as a sharp contrast. Representatives of the UK, a European dissident, implicitly, or explicitly, explained their success as a happy outcome of their departure from the European mastodon [27].

Serbia, for years on the margins of the EU, not expecting more massive assistance for its population from this organization, turned in time to its Far Eastern and Eastern partner – China and Russia. In an article in the daily newspaper Le Figaro of March 4, 2021, the following comment was given: “On the old continent, the champions of vaccination are Great Britain and Serbia. Is it incidentally that they are outside the European Union? Unfortunately, we have to ask ourselves that question. London has developed its own vaccines and is now relying on India to multiply their production. From the very beginning, Belgrade counted only on China and Russia, sure that it would be left behind by its friends from the West. It is also no wonder that the EU member state that follows it closely – Hungary – was the first to violate common rules on the issue. ... The European Union’s ambitious vaccination strategy was supposed to ensure cohesion, equality and solidarity – at the best price. That was missed” [28].

Conclusion. The fact that states with democratic regimes have not been more effective than authoritarian regimes in fighting the epidemic, calls into question the very foundation of the democratic idea. The fact that the American president is neglecting the health and lives of his nation, at a time when the Chinese are sending their experts and medical supplies around the world, represents a historical change. Democracy, not in its technical sense, but in its essence, as a government exercised by the people and for the people, has long since become just a fan of technocrats in power. Democracy means that people participate in it, that they adhere to it, that they believe in it. And that is why it is necessary to have an essence, and not just a technically repetitive ritual of the election. If one virus succeeds in eliminating all the specifics of democratic regimes, there is no reason for people to attach importance to such a regime, especially in a situation where authoritarian regimes have proven to be much more effective in protecting the health of their population [12].

Authoritarian regimes have long been studied in the West exclusively from the point of view of repression and most often in a stereotypical way. Over the last years, social science specialists have sought to analyse the authoritarian model of the “social contract” and how it produces the consent of the people. They concluded that the obtained legitimacy derives not from the democratic process, but from the obtained results, primarily economic. This agrees with the broad support that the Chinese give to their president, stemming from the rapid improvement of life and economic growth [11].

All the good practices that came from the East were greeted with suspicion and rejection. Western democracies have not properly weighed the danger of the virus, due to their self-representation of China as fundamentally different. The saddest thing in this context is the inability of leaders to collectively combat this common evil, instead of seeking to derive an ideological or tactical advantage from it.

Dominique Moisi from Institut Montaigne Paris writes: “A century from now, will historians see the coronavirus crisis as another step in the decline of the West? Asians, from China to South Korea, via Singapore, regardless of their political systems, are they not better “culturally” armed to face the pandemic? Are we not, faced with the rise of perils, victims of blindness, which reflects our frenzied individualism? Rationally, it should be obvious that one cannot save oneself. Viruses know no borders. ... The health crisis occurs at a time when we must find a new balance, between the all-market and the all-state. And in this phase of transition between two worlds, the coronavirus adds fear to fear” [29].

Preserving the dichotomy of democratic/autocratic social regimes is one-sided and outdated, but the West still insists on it, as if those traditional divisions, which date back to Montesquieu’s Orientalism [30], are a familiar ground conducive to maintaining self-representation of democratic superiorities and Western regimes versus “others”.

So, for NATO, **China is now a "systemic challenge" for the world order.** G7 press release, after the last summit in United Kingdom of June 2021, mentions China three times: to call for a transparent investigation into the origins of Covid-19 "including in China", for to call on it to "respect human rights and fundamental freedoms", and to "emphasize the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait" [30]. In an editorial, the *China Daily* judges that the **G7 may still live in "the illusion that the world is run by its diktats."** The G7 would do better to focus its attention on solving the real problems facing the world which are: containing the pandemic by ensuring an equitable distribution of vaccines, combating global warming and removing global economic uncertainties instead of attacking China [31].

Pierre Haski said, during the first wave of coronavirus: "At the time of the assessment, when the promises of "never again" emerge, as after every disaster, it would be good not to rewrite history. This pandemic will leave traces in every society and in international relations" [1].

Unfortunately, the same old stories seem to be written over and over again, although the dichotomy East / West, as well as other dichotomies, have significantly less room in the modern, interconnecting world. Instead of desperately trying to send China back to a totalitarian horizon and to free democracies from all authoritarian tendencies on principle, we had better try to think of democratic management of the crisis [13].

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