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Article

The Changes in Liberalist Ideology Visible in Internet Use

Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to look at the ways the Liberalist ideology undergoes various changes, due to the changes occurring in the world at a geopolitical level. These changes are due to the destabilization brought about by various events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, then by the war between Russia and Ukraine. The advantages promised by the Liberal democracies lose various aspects due to current restrictions. One of the advantages of the liberal democracy was freedom of expression, which was visible all over the Internet. However, with the war going on, various Internet sites can be placed under interdiction in certain countries, so as not to influence public opinion. The role of the Internet in politics is beyond dispute. However, many alternative channels can promote alternative opinions, opposed to the mainstream trends. At the same time, information can become distorted due to this and biased, since it is presented only from certain perspectives. The paper will present the context of today's world from a political point of view and analyse its consequences over the use of the Internet, until not so long ago a medium of pure freedom of action and expression. The ethics of freedom of expression on the Internet is a subject of current concern, and it can be analysed in strong connection with the practice of politics. The changing ideological features of liberalism will also be analysed.*

Keywords: *democracy; fake news; free speech; freedom; manipulation*

1. Introduction

First of all, a definition of the liberal democracy should be considered. It could be understood as “a liberal political ideology and a form of

government in which representative democracy operates under the principles of classical liberalism.” Among its features we can find the following: “*elections* between multiple distinct political parties, *a separation of powers* into different branches of government, *the rule of law* in everyday life as part of an open society, *a market economy* with private property and the *equal protection of human rights, civil rights, civil liberties and political freedoms*

for all people.” As part of the way they are practised, we can mention the fact that these types of democracies “draw upon a constitution to

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delineate the powers of government and enshrine the *social contract*" (European Center for Populism Studies, 2023).

Second, we should have in view that freedom of action and speech, which are promised by democratic regimes, had been a wish of people since ancient times, since the time of the Athenian democracy. The problems that were around with the democracy in Athens resemble the issues that have been encountered today: "During its glorious period it produced stable governments, brought out the best in its citizens and fostered great developments in all areas of life. Towards the end it lost its vitality and lacked stability, creative imagination and political moderation" (Parekh, 1992: 160). Nowadays as well, we need from the part of citizens "civic sense, based on the respect of rights and duties and tolerance of diversity," together with the awareness that "all citizens have to 'control the controller'" (Geri, 2020: 97). A democracy can function by effort of collective values: "in the case of the current crisis, to fight against common threats: there is no collective solution in democracy if people doesn't take individual responsibility of their own behaviors" (Geri, 2020: 97).

The wish for freedom is a wish that nowadays is associated with an opposition of liberal democracy against authoritarian and repressive political regimes.

After the communist regimes which were considered the norm during the time of the Soviet Union disappeared, the liberal democracy as practiced in the West was considered to be the best choice in order to keep the pace with the changing times and mentalities: "In the aftermath of the collapse of communism in the erstwhile Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, many in the west have begun to argue that western liberal democracy is the best form of government discovered so far and ideally suited to the modern age" (Parekh, 1992: 160). We should also keep in mind the relationship between democracy and liberalism: "Although democracy preceded liberalism in western history, in the modern age liberalism preceded democracy by nearly two centuries and created a world to which the latter had to adjust" (Parekh, 1992: 161). Therefore, the democracy is understood, in our times, as being based on liberalist values.

Nowadays, it can be considered the most suitable form due to the rise in the individualist cultural dimension across the world (Santos et al., 2017; Hamamura, 2012). The individualist cultural dimension was developed by Hofstede as part of his theory of cultural dimension (2011), and it refers to societies that focus on the benefits of the individual, not of the entire group, the latter being specific to collectivist societies. Thus, in individualist cultures, individuals are expected to express their own, personal opinions, and there is the belief that "Speaking one's mind is healthy" (Hofstede, 2011: 11). We can see how, on the internet, everyone feels the need to share their opinions on every subject that is relevant at a certain point. We wish to hear honest opinions about anything, from the benefits from voting for a certain party or candidate to whether or not some products we buy are useful, from other customers. Product reviews and opinions regarding estimations of what the future holds in store for citizens and even for the world from various political decisions are the norm to be found everywhere. Yet, is our online world as free as it seems? Public forums can be moderated and content posted on social media can be, if necessary, censored. All social media groups have a set of rules by which they function, and to which the users should comply.

The topic of the present paper can be considered of actuality, since, on the one hand, liberal democracies are among the most frequently encountered political system at world level, since the second half of the twentieth century (Maerz et al., 2020), and, on the other hand,

since there are currently discussions regarding the freedom of speech on the Internet, as alternative channels are being sought to express opinions counter to the mainstream, and as the issue of fake news is also being under debate. Yet, how is the freedom of expression, which is one of the features of the liberal democracies, to be exercised? Should some opinions be censored in order to protect the citizens from receiving harmful, and even fake, information? To what extent, or how can this be achieved?

Events such as the pandemic period and the war in Ukraine could be regarded as leading to period when the liberal democracy is threatened. One way in which the liberal democracy can be under threat is through issues regarding the way the freedom of speech is exercised.

Apparently, during the pandemic period, freedom of expression could be found at every step on social media. The boundaries of mainstream opinions and personal opinions seemed to be blurred. Those for and those against the vaccine were allowed to express themselves equally. We would hear various opinions voiced, from the ones praising the vaccines, to the ones claiming it was very dangerous and only experimental, with proofs under the form of personal photographs published on social media groups where people from all over the world announced how family members or even themselves got various health issues, to the point where we were told there was not even a COVID-19 pandemic, and finally reaching the claim that there were more victims of the COVID-19 pandemic than made public in order not to bring panic to the population. Herd immunity was another frequently discussed topic, either sustained or rejected in the case of COVID-19. We could notice how, on the Ministry of Health Facebook page in Romania, there were comments against their campaign coming from users who were against the vaccine, expressing their clear opposition or doubts.

In the end, the question is whether they sought to understand what was going on, seeking hope for being protected against the vaccine, or simply expressing their opposition to the mainstream opinions for various reasons. We could claim that they simply argued for or against due to fear, since not much certain information seemed to be owned about the COVID-19 virus, and it could be considered a normal reaction to be afraid and reticent to the proposed solutions.

What is more, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the people were allowed to gather for protests, at least as we could notice in Bucharest, in Victoriei Square, to protest against the use of the mask, which was considered an imposition of rules and a defy brought to personal freedom.

Eventually, the topic was left in the background as the war in Ukraine took over centre stage, but also as some segments of the population could become too difficult to control in their rebellious attitude against the restrictions. With the war in Ukraine, there were, mainly two sides, either supporting Ukraine or Russia, yet the truth is unknown. The truth depends on the interests or sides various countries may take or on the sympathies of the members of the population. Some countries could also feel threatened by the war and fear they could also be involved at some point and that bad consequences could follow.

As a general observation, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, in an article focusing on the Philippines, but which could be applied to any other country, “curtailing free speech might be needed to avoid unnecessary panic” (Joaquin and Biana, 2021: 38).

The issue with having everyone express themselves comes with a risk: fake news. Fake news can be defined as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent” (Lazer et al., 2018: 1094). This news can come in the form of various conspiracy theories which can worry or even make some members of the population panic.

Therefore, one downside of allowing all opinions to be expressed can lead to the spread of unproven and unreal statements. People can organize themselves based on various sets of beliefs, yet all of this can only lead to disinformation and mistrust when the doubts are not even founded. We could, at most, speak of various hypotheses or questions, when nothing is known for sure.

Manipulation of opinion is also the danger of such freedom of expression. Depending on how charismatic and convincing the speech of anyone on the Internet, in written or video materials, is, as well as function of the personal fears and perspectives on life of the reading and watching public, a false image of current events may be created. Later on, false beliefs can impact negatively the audience, so that they can end up taking wrong decisions, for instance regarding whether or not they wear masks against COVID-19 in public places, getting the vaccine or not, or helping Ukrainian refugees or not, or even going as far so as to put away Russian cultural products and ignore them altogether. Regarding the latter example, in some universities, such as a university in Italy (Rahman, 2022), has decided to no longer teach Dostoevsky since he is Russian. However, such events can happen due to political ideology and manipulation regardless of the existence of the means used to promote such ideas, through the Internet or through the spoken or written word. Therefore, subjective viewpoint can be taken at personal or at public level.

2. Materials and Methods

One of the issues related to the freedom of speech is related to the idea of confession. The culture of confession has recently known some changes, since the personal experience is made public, and “there seems to be a dissolution of the boundaries between the private and the public spheres, enabled by the new media,” such as the Internet. Nowadays, “in the mass media there is a growing number of acts of self-disclosure and self-exposure, of publicizing private matters” (Burkart, 2010: 23). This phenomenon is visible in the personal accounts of various events that are made public, including experiences with the COVID-19 diagnosis, vaccines, as well as the way the lives of Ukrainian or Russian soldiers go on, out of which various fragments of video clips are posted on social media such as Twitter and TikTok.

The mainstream opinions can be perceived as feeling imposed on someone, and citizens may feel that the mainstream opinion is not the real one. To this perception, we may claim that there are various books of fiction or diaries related to the personal understanding of historical events, e.g. related to the Holocaust. The diary of Anne Frank has been republished, and many fictional novels create the feeling of confession and authenticity through the personal description of incidents, which is different from the mainstream one, present in history books. Perhaps this has been started with the advent of Modernism and Postmodernism, as literary and cultural trends, since they claim that there is no longer one single truth, and that everything is subject to questioning. Indeed, Postmodernism rejects the idea of “a single uniform mode of explanation and description of the world” (Holtzhausen, 2000: 101).

As a result, the Romanian party AUR seems to have included itself in the trend, by questioning mainstream opinions. Yet, this action did not have positive consequences, as trust was lost in the parties and the issue of manipulation was brought up: “The pandemic crisis certainly played a significant role in reducing popular trust in the governing parties. The crisis affected these parties’ image and created new opportunities for populist manipulation” (Demianenco, 2021).

The consequences of false information about the topic of COVID-19 came both from the inside and from the outside. The party AUR was completely anti-mainstream and anti-favourable opinion on vaccine and mask wearing during COVID-19. This is why they appealed to those members of the population that were against the COVID-19 itself, not believing there was even a pandemic:

“Romania has been affected by both internal and external disinformation regarding COVID-19, which has only facilitated the discourse and agenda of populist and nationalist parties. Several public figures from the AUR built their discourse on anti-vaccination and anti-mask messages during the electoral campaign. These quickly became popular among COVID deniers and sceptics. Even after the elections, one of the senators from the AUR declared in the first parliamentary session that ‘the vaccine destroys the DNA of Romanians’”. (Demianenco, 2021).

Such opinions are not only biased, but also manipulative. The denial of the pandemic and of the virus itself shows a mindset that is based on conspiracy theories and mistrust in the political elite and other authorities of the state, together with mainstream opinions. At the same time, denying something could be done out of fear. It could simply be a defence mechanism that is activated during such times in order to cope with the perceived danger.

Such opinions could be harmful to the general population, since the safety measures taken against the spread of COVID-19, once ignored, could lead to its further spreading.

We could claim that, in such cases, free speech could be harmful. Yet, in turn, the precautions taken in order to protect the citizens against the dangers of free speech and of everyone’s expressing their opinions can also lead to harmful effects, regarding the restrictions to democratic life, as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic:

“The public policies made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have complicated social life and democratic processes (Kortum et al., 2020). In fact, these political actions are considered a serious threat to democracy, as governments may try to limit democratic rules under the cover of pandemic management” (Lewkowicz et al., 2022).

Managing the pandemic fake news can lead to an apparent lack of the right to freedom of speech. Since everyone is convinced of the truth and of the relevance of their own experience, with hospitals, with the course of the illness and with the experience of symptoms after the vaccine, they feel the need to express themselves and to warn the others. Not being allowed to speak is perceived as the equivalent of being silenced, and urged to hide the truth that they believe is relevant to the others as well.

In this sense, there can be lack of trust in regards to those in power politically speaking due to the silencing of certain opinions which are believed to be going against the mainstream opinion.

Trust in the government comes from the efficient management of lockdowns in situations such as those of the pandemic: “On the other hand, well-managed lockdowns and other means of government interventionism may lead to increased satisfaction with democracy or trust in the government (Bol et al., 2020)” (Lewkowicz et al., 2022).

Democratic governments can manage in a more efficient way that authoritarian ones situations such as the crisis, pandemic ones, even though they do not help against the mortality rates; instead, they can help against the economic problems:

“Politicians are under high pressure to make rapid and high-stakes decisions, and the literature suggests that democratic governments are more effective in managing catastrophic sit-

uations, such as pandemics or famines, than authoritarian regimes (Petersen, 2020). However, it should be noted that the role of governmental lockdowns in many countries is not significant, and their existence has a little effect on virus transmission rates (Atkeson et al., 2020). Moreover, a strict lockdown policy is usually not associated with lower mortality, but it does cause economic havoc (Bjørnskov, 2021). Nevertheless, the literature suggests that less stringent lockdowns can bring similar epidemiological effects with fewer negative economic effects (Bendavid et al., 2021)” (Lewkowicz et al., 2022).

Problems caused by the rate of infections and economic issues, therefore, are a usual part of situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic and can be seldom kept in control by the politicians, realistically speaking. It all amounts to the degree of trust that the politicians and their governments can gain from the populations, as to how well the crisis is managed. If the population trusts the politicians and their government, then they can, likely, be cooperative, and not rebel against the decisions. Social order can help during such phases in the leadership of the country or city during a pandemic.

Institutions are those in control of the democratic regimes, as well as those that can allow the political elites to be in control of the regimes. Yet, the political actors can change the institutions. Meanwhile, the institutions are the ones that can control the political elites, so that the regimes are still liberal:

“The literature suggests that democracy backsliding is deeply rooted in the institutional environment. Institutions enable political elites to control regime changes and consolidate their democratic privileges (Gandhi, 2019). Even if democratic institutions appear to be well established, it is important to remember that political actors can, to some extent, shape institutions. The literature also indicates that countries which have undergone democratic transition relatively recently are in danger of reverting to illiberalism if the elites are not restrained by institutions (Dawson and Hanley, 2019)” (Lewkowicz et al., 2022).

Thus, a certain equilibrium between state and society is important in order for the democracy to be maintained. It is all a process of negotiation of power, as well as a process of mutual support and protection. If there is stability, then democracy can be understood as having a solid foundation. Yet, crises situations like the pandemic can pose threats to the stability of the democracy:

“In fact, core democratic virtues are not given once and for all – a proper balance between the state and society has to be maintained to avoid backsliding (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2019). Thus, both institutions and political elites can play a key role in the context of democracy. Strong, stable and respected institutions may prevent societies from democracy erosion (Reenock et al., 2013; Bugaric, 2019). It is also argued that political and social polarization may lead to democracy erosion (Enyedi, 2016; McCoy et al., 2018). Nevertheless, attempts to explain the phenomenon of democracy backsliding remain inchoate (Waldner and Lust, 2018). Global negative shocks, such as the pandemic, still constitute an underexploited niche in the context of democratization or erosion of democracy” (Lewkowicz et al., 2022).

The stability of a democracy can be questioned once a situation of crisis such as the pandemic occurs, due to the restriction of personal liberties, first and foremost. Citizens will need to be part of the collective effort to keep a mask on and to not go travelling as before, freely, due to taking care not to spread the virus around. At the same time, measures of care regard-

ing group meetings can be seen as going against the life they had all been used to previously. Staying indoors and only going during certain hours during the day for necessary shopping can be understood as a disruption in their usual life routine, which is something controlled by the state and which is also a cause of concern. Once the routine is disrupted, people will ask themselves all sorts of questions, and will go through various feelings of anxiety. It will depend on the way that they can be reassured by the political elites and institutions as to how they will continue to trust or distrust them. Once the people does not feel safe within a state during such situations, they may resort to various actions, such as street protests, where they will voice their opinion regarding rights they had taken for granted and which they no longer have with the present situation.

Yet, it is not only about rights during everyday life. Some people, during the COVID-19 pandemic, could not transfer their jobs to working remotely, from home, and, in some cases, they had to either give up their jobs, or they could no longer practice them. Therefore, they found themselves unable to work in the domain they had been prepared and had to look for something different to do. Such a situation could, all the more, generate even more anxiety and uncertainty, next to what could happen to their own and their family's health if they caught the virus of COVID-19.

The scenarios regarding conspiracy theories and fake news about COVID-19 could be regarded as negative, or worst-case scenarios, created simply out of fear and uncertainty regarding the current situation in the case of many members of various affected countries' populations. Other consequences, such as the economics and resources available related ones, would also be under consideration, and also generators of anxiety.

Authority could be regarded not in a negative way, as far as political regimes are concerned. It could also be associated with protection and efficient means of control and of taking action in order to benefit the people. Instability in society can create the feeling that authority in political regimes could help solve the issues, and bring about stability, due to drastic and firm measures. At the same time, the corruption of the elite could be dealt away by an authoritative regime, as well as by the trust of the population. The issue of trust can be regarded as working at the level of the population, as well as at the level of the relationship between population and political leaders. We could speak about an effort of the population in order to maintain a democratic system, by keeping united and sticking together in a collectivity:

“The point is that the human attraction towards authority and with it towards authoritarianism is directly proportional to the level of political instability and economic crisis that democracy is unable to solve. Democracy needs strong and inclusive institutions that can reform themselves in time, and this unfortunately is not always the case. But it needs also a constant nurture by an educated population, in order to avoid elite's corruption and an inefficient party system. And again, unfortunately this is not always the case. As Benjamin Franklin answered to the lady outside the Constitutional Convention who asked him if they had chosen a Monarchy or a Republic: ‘We gave you a Republic, if you can keep it’”. (Geri 2020: 97)

Why do issues with the democracy, or the Republic, in the past, happen? One of the reasons is that the population is not united and does not have a sense of responsibility and duty towards the community, as well as a sense of respect for the other citizens' rights. In the case where citizens cannot negotiate among themselves, and cannot show respect for their rights

among themselves, a democracy is not the best form of leadership; instead, a more authoritative regime works better:

“This because when a population keep growing in numbers (both demographics and economics) but not in their citizenship self-consciousness, the Republic goes in crisis, as it did two millennia ago in Rome and today in the US and Western Europe. Self-consciousness of citizens means first civic sense, based on the respect of rights and duties and tolerance of diversity, but also awareness of the power that all citizens have to “control the controller”. And also, individual responsibility to participate to the “Res-Publica” the “Public thing”, which include, in the case of the current crisis, to fight against common threats: there is no collective solution in democracy if people doesn’t take individual responsibility of their own behaviors. In a dictatorship is the authority that force a behavior on the population instead, that’s why in emergencies the dictatorships seem to work better. And that’s the battle of ideas we have in the world right now between democracies and autocracies” (Geri, 2020: 97)

We can say that the lack of civic sense nowadays can be correlated to less trust in the old institutions: “Today the citizens of the Western democratic world, have less and less civic sense, helped in this by the crisis of old social institutions (family, church and state) that in the past guided them” (Geri, 2020: 97).

The state can help with the well-being of the citizens, since the citizens cannot take care of themselves as the state can. We could refer back to Rousseau and his Social Contract, which claimed that the state could take over from the freedom of citizens to help protect them. At the same time, the Internet, with its fake news, can bring about new issues, and also raise the topic of how people can need a new type of social contract:

“The purpose of a legitimate state is to provide for the fundamental needs of the people: security, order, economic well-being, and justice as individuals cannot secure these things on their own. But a democratic state should have the power given to a government “of the people, by the people and for the people”. [...] We will need a new social contract. Rousseau theorized the best way to establish a political community few centuries ago through a Social Contract, that is the agreement through which people surrender some of their freedom to the authority in exchange for protection and social order. His work helped inspire political reforms and revolutions in Europe, but in his time there was only the press for communication and information, while today there is Internet. So, with internet, fighting fake news, hate speech and mass hysteria, we need to find a way to share better information and empower citizens to become more participatory actors to the “Res-Publica”, with a new social contract” (Geri, 2020: 98).

The way the individuals need more protection should be raised through the existence of the phenomenon of fake news and the way it is spread through the Internet.

With the war in Ukraine, which could be considered another example of crisis, we witness a huge problem on free speech: “all major independent media shut down and Western media apps switched off” (France 24 English, 2022).

Alternative social media has appeared, such as Bitchute, where content is not censored or moderated:

“BitChute says it is committed to freedom of expression and is against censorship, but it still moderates content at least to some extent. BitChute also says it opposes ‘platform bias’, ‘oppression or incitement’ and ‘mob rule’” (Tomasik and Stocking, 2023).

Bitchute is, therefore, a platform that allows anyone to speak freely, expressing their own opinions on various issues, including the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Yet, the freedom of speech also has a few downsides: “only a handful of channels receive any engagement, and almost all of those channels contain conspiracies or hate speech” (Trujillo et al., 2004).

It depends on our own perspective on which side we sympathize with in the Russian-Ukraine war, as well as whether or not we are on the side of the authorities in the COVID-19 pandemic or whether we are against them, and, therefore, against the vaccine, as to what side we decide to take. If we feel safe within the state, we will choose the mainstream take on the pandemic, with accepting the masks and the vaccine, as well as the measures for protection. If we believe that Russia is bad and Ukraine is good, as in the case of Romania, and that Ukraine needs our help, then we’ll be cooperating with the state with no problems.

3. Results

An opinion that is shared between citizens and the state makes everything easier. Once an agreement and shared viewpoint are present, then no conflicts or hostilities will be present. Thus, cooperation between citizens and state will be possible.

Freedom of speech is, in the end, dependent on whether or not the opinions are shared between citizens and the state. While there is the impression that we can always say anything we want, because opposite opinions coexist, this could be regarded as an effect and as a consequence of the parties’ manipulation strategies.

4. Discussion

Since political parties such as AUR have promoted a clear opinion against the COVID-19 vaccine and have, thus, attracted the votes of those citizens which were against the mainstream opinion, we could argue that going against the mainstream opinion is not an issue and that it is even encouraged. At the same time, we could simply understand this as a strategy of manipulation. Channels such as Youtube can lead to censorship of some opinions, while channels such as Bitchute promote free speech, without censorship. Whether or not this is true is arguable. Even if there is so much freedom of expression on Bitchute, we do not know for sure what the reality is behind this phenomenon, whether or not we are manipulated. Can we really be free in society? is an age-old question which cannot find a clear answer too easily.

5. Conclusion

The reason why freedom in society cannot be anything certain is due to various constraints, related to political institutions, the state, as well as to political elites. At the same time, circumstances of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine also influence the freedom of citizens, especially the freedom of speech. While the freedom of speech can be understood as a right taken for granted, it is influenced by the ways in which various Internet sites can work. Some sites can be censored or moderated to fit in with the mainstream opinions, while others, claiming to be free, in fact promote opinions contrary to the mainstream one, reaching the point of promoting a viewpoint hostile to the mainstream one. Alternative sites can be dangerous since we deal with the influence of individual users that promote their own

point of view, especially influenced by an understanding relying on conspiracy theories. While every viewpoint is biased, it is difficult to get an objective one, or one that represents the truth. There can be no objective truth in political matters. There can, in this sense, only be individual opinions, classified by right or wrong in the understanding of various mindsets, for or against, a certain understanding. Ideologies can always bring about various perspectives, which can be understood as correct or false, right or wrong, according to the values that every citizen has.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the author

Irina-Ana Drobot, lecturer, PhD, was born in 1983 in Bucharest, Romania, and graduated from the University of Bucharest in 2006. She was awarded a PhD from the University of Bucharest in 2014 with a thesis titled *Virginia Woolf and Graham Swift: The Lyrical Novel*. She has been teaching English language seminars at the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages, Department of Foreign Languages and Communication, since October 2007. This academic year she teaches a Culture and Civilization seminars for engineering students and a course in the EU and its Institutions for the students of the Translation and Interpretation section. In 2016-2018 she followed the courses of the MA programme in Political Sciences at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration. In 2022, she was awarded the IKSAD 13th Science Award, by IKSAD INSTITUTE in Turkey.

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