

CHALLENGES AND THREATS POSED BY COVID-19 ON DEMOCRACY: THE EUROPEAN UNION CASE

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Abstract

Despite being an economic and public health challenge, COVID-19 poses a barrier to contemporary democracies. A lot of changes took place: from individual freedom restrictions to mandatory lockdowns, adding abuses of executive power, as Hungarian example shows us after approving rule-by-decree legislation that allows Viktor Orbán to rule this way for an undetermined period. The new crisis leads the rethinking of the ongoing debate about the crisis of democracy and the raise of authoritarianism. In the book “How Democracies Die”, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt present us four indicators to identify authoritarian behaviour: “Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game”; “Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents”; “Toleration or encouragement of violence”; and “Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media”. Based on these criteria, and looking at the European Union case, I will analyse how democracy is being challenged by COVID-19 and how dangerous it can be.

Keywords

Democracy, COVID-19, European Union

Introduction

The on-going COVID-19 pandemic has imposed different challenges not only for public health, but also for democracy. The crisis of democracy is not a new political science subject, neither it is from this century. However, recently we are witnessing an increase in the speed of democracy weakening and it is likely to continue after the pandemic because most measures that are being taken will be hard to reverse (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020). Furthermore, as the same study, “The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom” by Freedom House (2020), states, 64 percent of the experts who participated on the research

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agree that the consequences of COVID-19 on democracy and human rights will be negative for the following three to five years.

In this essay, I will analyse how democracy is being challenged by COVID-19 and how dangerous it can be. In order to do this, I will start by describing the definition that better fits the purpose of this work: the “minimalist” and “electoralist” definition; at the same time, I will review some literature about the crises of democracy. Secondly, I will briefly examine the recent literature on COVID-19 and the main challenges and threats for democracy. Following the four behaviours warning signs made by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, that will help to identify an authoritarian leader that could lead to a break of a democracy, I will analyse some European Union government’s responses to the pandemic crisis.

1. Definition of democracy and its crisis

The most common way to define democracy is focus on elections as “the primary mechanism through which political leaders are chosen and held to account and through which individuals participate in the governance of their country (see Dahl 1971; Lijphart 1999; Lindberg 2006; Landman 2013; Webler and Tuler 2018; Przeworski 2019)” (Landman and Splendore, 2020). In this essay, I will use this definition.

According to Adam Przeworski (2019), “democracy is a political arrangement in which people select governments through elections and have a reasonable possibility of removing incumbent governments they do not like”, which he refers to as the definitional feature of democracy. The author considers this “minimalist” and “electoralist” definition as the best one to analyse the crisis of democracy because “the more features – electoral, liberal, constitutional, representative, social – we add to the definition of democracy, the longer the checklist, and the more crises we will discover”.

As Przeworski (2019) alerts us, studying the crisis of democracy using this definition means studying the ways in which elections can become non-competitive or inconsequential for those who stay in power. These include threats to the regime of human rights protection, such as freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of speech (Dahl, cited in Landman and Splendore 2020). For Dahl (1998), democracy needs to fill five criteria to make sure that everyone has the same treatment (under the constitution) as if they were equally qualified to participate in the decision making process. Firstly, effective participation meaning the right for everyone to make their views known; secondly, equality in voting regarding the effective opportunity

to vote and the counting of all votes; in third place, gaining enlightened understanding that means the right to learn about the important decisions they need to make; in fourth place, exercising final control over the agenda by deciding what issues they want to have in the agenda; and finally, the inclusion of all adults.

Juan Linz (1978) also uses a minimalist definition of democracy to describe what he calls “competitive democracies”. He establishes a criteria for a democracy that can be summarized as “the freedom to create political parties and to conduct free and honest elections at regular intervals without excluding any effective political office from direct or indirect electoral accountability”. Linz excludes from his definition any aspect related with democratic values, social relations or equality of opportunities because he believes that adding non-political aspects of a society could lead him to reduce the number of cases in the analysis. Moreover, he believes that the majority of the literature on the breakdown of democratic regimes focus on “the emergence of nondemocratic political forces or the underlying structural strains that lead to the collapse of democratic institutions” and that focus only answers the question “why” and not “how” the breakdown happens. He argues that the analysis should follow the political process of the breakdown which means a focus on the behaviour of those committed to democracy.

Przeworski (2019) describes a crisis as a “decision”: “crises are situations that cannot last, in which something must be decided”. In order to investigate democracy crises from the past, he constructs an analysis based on a schematic model. Firstly, he looks for the “disaster(s)” that exposed democracy to a threat; secondly, he analyses the “signals” that proves the weakness of democracy; and in the end, he depicts the outcomes of that crisis. Przeworski (2019) focus on three different signs: (1) “the rapid erosion of traditional party systems”; (2) “the rise of xenophobic, racist and nationalistic parties and attitudes reflected on the rise of the right wing populism”; and (3) “the decline in support for democracy in public opinion surveys”. Generally speaking, democracy will fail when representative institutions aren’t able to structure, absorb and regulate conflicts by following the democratic rules. Raised by the definition of democracy, one can state that this happens when elections fail as a mechanism for processing conflicts.

According to this author, from the past we should focus on the signs that show that democracy is in crisis and on the events that can lead to its breakdown. In this case, we should analyse economic conditions, particularly, income, economic growth and its distribution. Regarding this issue, Linz (1978) points out the fact that the different regimes aren’t an expression or a defence of a specific socioeconomic, cultural, or religious order. Hence, democracy is a type of regime that gives space for the changing of those orders without immediate changes in

political sphere; moreover, under democracy, political leadership has considerable independent influence on different sectors of the society.

Przeworski (2019) also talks about the need to look at the specific democratic history, “how entrenched democracy is in terms of the habit of changing governments through elections”, and the intensity of divisions in society, regarding political polarizations and the hostility between followers of different political solutions. Furthermore, we should consider particular forms of democratic institutions, particularly if the government is able to rule under a majority and act decisively if a disaster happens.

A shared point of view between Linz (1978) and Przeworski (2019) is the idea that what determines the outcomes, and in the end the breakdown of the regimes, aren't the conditions but the actions that people undertake under that specific conditions. Linz points out that “extremist politics are the result of structural strains, and in certain societies, (...) they engage large segments of the population. However, their capacity to do so is generally a reflection of a failure of the democratic leadership”. Following this idea, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2017) consider political parties and party leaders as the “democracy's gatekeepers”. In their book “How Democracies Die”, they state the idea that the fate of the government resides on their people's hands is wrong. The breakdown can be explained through political process rather than people's will.

In the book “How Democracies Die”, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2017) focus the analysis on the break of democracy by elected leaders: “presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power”, in contrast with “military coups and other violent seizures of power”. For them, this is how democracies die nowadays. In an almost imperceptible way, the elected leaders subvert democracy by “packing and weaponizing the courts and other neutral agencies, buying off the media and the private sector (or bullying them into silence), and rewriting the rules of politics to tilt the playing field against opponents”. Since there's no exclusive and dramatic moment, such as a coup, a declaration of martial law, or a suspension of the constitution, based on Linz's approach, the authors created a set of four behavioural warning signs to help us identify an authoritarian politician. According to them, the four signals are: (1) “Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game”; (2) “Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents”; (3) “Toleration or encouragement of violence”; and (4) “Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media”. We should worry when a politician meets at least one of those criteria.

2. Challenges posed by COVID-19 on democracy

It is early to draw conclusions about the impact on democracy from the on-going COVID-19 pandemic; however, there are already some points that worth to be highlighted. As Cooper and Aitchison (2020) point out, “prior to the crisis a powerful global tendency towards authoritarian governance already existed”. According to Repucci and Slipowitz (2020), in a global context, 80 countries of the 105 analysed have decreased their democratic conditions since the beginning of the pandemic, particularly by engaging in abuses of power, silencing the criticism and weakening or shuttering different institutions.

Studying this issue, Bar-Siman-Tov (2020) focus his analysis on the legislatures, arguing that COVID-19 posed complex challenges for them. As he points out, the pandemic makes it difficult and even dangerous for the parliaments to operate because the nature of the legislatures itself is based on the assembly of many people together. Moreover, legislatures can easily overestimate the risk “responding by taking unjustified and irrational decisions”, facilitated by the uncertainties and missing information that characterize the virus. Finally, under the national emergency status that a lot of countries have adopted, there’s a high and dangerous accumulation of power and centralisation of the authority, leading to the circumvention of legislative process and the creation of barriers to the legislative scrutiny, undermining the balance of power.

Regarding this idea, Cooper and Aitchison (2020) talk about a threat of less democratic participation and more centralisation posed by COVID-19. For instance, in order to fight the pandemic, China “has mobilized resources centrally and planned their allocation with a high level of centralization” which, in global trends, is reflected in the increasing of the number of decisions that are taken out far away from the citizens. The populist and authoritarian nationalists are taking advantage of this feeling of “not being listened to”. Nonetheless, instead of trying to decentralise the decision-making process, they mobilise the identity politics.

On the other hand, what Bar-Siman-Tov (2020) describes as an underestimation of the risk can be related with the idea of Cooper and Aitchison (2020) about the surveillance state, where the internet and telecommunications allow the monitoring of human behaviour by the states. These take part of the securitization process that has already been normalized in states and accelerated by COVID-19. Particularly, the pandemic poses risks of protection of basic liberties, including freedom of association, speech and privacy. Amat et al. (2020), based on a survey fielded in Spain, depict the initial switch in mass public preferences towards technocratic and authoritarian government, where there’s an increasing demand for strong leadership and willingness to give up individual freedom. This poses some democratic dilemmas, for instance, between globalism and nationalism and between public health and civil liberties.

Elections are also a common concern among scholars. On the article “Democracy after Coronavirus: Five Challenges for the 2020s” (2020), Belin and De Maio state that “protecting the safety and integrity of elections” is one of the main challenges posed by the pandemic that needs to be addressed as soon as possible. As we can observe, due to COVID-19 and its health concerns, various elections were modified, postponed or cancelled and those who actually run the elections faced criticism. In this regard, Repucci and Slipowitz (2020) argue that some of the elections that took place during the pandemic failed to meet democratic criteria, “either because new elections were not scheduled promptly or because officials set new dates without making adequate preparations for safe and secure voting”.

Other important question raised by the pandemic crisis and that needs further research is whether democracies are better at containing pandemics. A recent analysis, published in the Economist (2020), depicts epidemics from 1960 to 2019 and concludes that, in countries with similar wealth, “the lowest death rates tend to be in places where most people can vote in free and fair elections”. In the current context, it is important to refer that some democracies, such as Australia, Germany, Greece, New Zealand, and South Korea and others, were successful in containing COVID-19 and deaths (Belin and De Maio, 2020).

Another issue that has gained special attention during COVID-19 crisis has to do with fake news and the spread of misinformation; it became “part of the political battle” (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020). The accusations go both sides: mainstream parties accuse far-right parties of spreading fake news and vice versa. For instance, Salvini was responsible for spreading Chinese biolab conspiracy theory and Thierry Baudet, leader of the Dutch Forum for Democracy, claimed that the virus would disappear “when the weather becomes nicer”. But the problem doesn’t apply only to politicians, other actors “multiplied the production of fake news, conspiracy theories, and manipulated information”, enjoying the fact that people are confined and searching for information (Belin and De Maio, 2020). According to Belin and De Maio (2020), “Countering Homegrown and Foreign Disinformation” is one of their five challenges after COVID-19.

3. The impact of COVID-19 on democracy

To analyse the impact and the challenges imposed by COVID-19 on democracy, I will apply the four behaviour’s warning signs made by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt to the European Union countries: (1) “Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game”; (2) “Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents”; (3) “Toleration or encouragement of violence”; and (4)

“Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media”. We should worry when a politician meets at least one of those criteria. In addition, I will be looking at one sign identified by Przeworski: “the rise of xenophobic, racist and nationalistic parties and attitudes reflected on the rise of the right-wing populism”.

3.1. “Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game”

The four questions that Levitsky and Ziblatt (2017) ask for this criteria are: (1) “Do they reject the Constitution or express a willingness to violate it?”; (2) “Do they suggest a need for antidemocratic measures, such as cancelling elections, violating or suspending the Constitution, banning certain organizations, or restricting basic civil or political rights?”; (3) Do they seek to use (or endorse the use of) extraconstitutional means to change the government, such as military coups, violent insurrections, or mass protests aimed at forcing a change in the government?; (4) “Do they attempt to undermine the legitimacy of elections, for example, by refusing to accept credible electoral results?”.

In the European Union context, I will be looking at the second question that, on the one hand, talks about the cancelation of elections and, on the other hand, about the restriction of basic civil or political rights. During COVID-19, this is particularly important because states, under emergency powers, have the opportunity to cancel elections and restrict individual rights, as it has been happening (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020). Furthermore, they can manage to interfere in the justice system and undermine legislative functions.

Regarding the elections issue, according to Landman and Splendore (2020), COVID-19 and its responses from the government can have consequences for the “electoral cycle”: “the set of steps and processes involved in the conduct of elections”. The electoral cycle involves three phases: (1) pre-electoral period (training, information, and voter registration); (2) electoral period (nominations, campaigns, voting, and results); and (3) the post-electoral period (review, reform, and strategies). COVID-19 and the government response can have different consequences on every stage. For instance, it can affect the levels of turnout, given the fact that the virus could discourage citizens to go voting; the voting operations on the Election Day and campaigns; or the training and voter registration.

For instance, in the European Union, all the elections cancelled due to the virus, were postponed and took place in the following months or will take place in 2021. This happened in 12 countries: Austria; Cyprus; Czech Republic; France; Germany; Italy; Latvia; Poland; Romania; Slovakia; Spain; and Sweden (IDEA, 2020). In France, Italy or Poland the postponement of elections and the debate

around alternative voting methods led to partisan political dispute and the intensification of polemics. Particularly in France, the second round of local elections to take place on 29th March were cancelled and the first round on 22nd March had a much lower turnout comparing with the previous election. In Hungary, an elected authoritarian regime that put in place authoritarian measures, shows how the postponement of elections “can create a power vacuum, abuse of power, and the abuse of state of emergency measures, which further consolidate authoritarian rule, undermine the rule of law, and further threaten the protection of human rights” (Landman and Splendore, 2020).

It will be important to consider election as a challenge for the post-COVID world since questions on new voting procedures, such as postal ballot voting, were raised (Belin and De Maio, 2020). Considering the centrality of elections to democracy and the great number of elections scheduled during this time, countries need to focus on solutions to assure genuine and transparent processes (Landman and Splendore, 2020). If governments were unable to take the risk into account, the health of democracy and the fundamental human rights to vote and participate in the governance can be undermined. Landman and Splendore (2020) suggest some solutions such as, for the pre-electoral, online planning, training, information and registration processes; for the electoral period, they also suggest online voting, as well as postal and hybrid solutions; and for the post-electoral, they propose “virtual parliament” solutions for reviews, stakeholder engagement, and the promulgation of electoral reform legislation.

Regarding the restriction of political rights, it is important to look at the endurance of protest movements that takes place by new restrictions on demonstrations. As reported by Repucci and Slipowitz (2020), in a global perspective, 158 from the countries studied have had new restrictions on public demonstrations; nonetheless, in at least 90 countries, a significant protest has taken place. For instance, during the protests against the new abortion law, the Polish government limited the possibility of public demonstrations; the regional prosecutors were sent instructions to prosecute organizers of the protests on the charge of bringing danger to the life or health for people by causing an epidemiological threat, which could lead to a penalty up to eight years in prison. In addition, the police were fining people for breaking COVID-19 restrictions (IDEA, 2020). In Spain, the populist party Vox, declared that the demonstrations on the International Women’s Day “had triggered the pandemic in Spain” (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020).

3.2. “Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents”

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2017) point out four questions to identify this behaviour: (1) “Do they describe their rivals as subversive, or opposed to the existing constitutional order?”; (2) “Do they claim that their rivals constitute an existential threat, either to national security or to the prevailing way of life?”; (3) “Do they baselessly describe their partisan rivals as criminals, whose supposed violation of the law (or potential to do so) disqualifies them from full participation in the political arena?”; (4) “Do they baselessly suggest that their rivals are foreign agents, in that they are secretly working in alliance with (or the employ of) a foreign government – usually an enemy one?”

In the European Union, this is particularly visible if we talk about the “Anti-Establishment” and “Cultural” populist parties (Meyer, 2020), either they are part of the government or if they are part of the opposition (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020). In COVID-19 reality, I will be looking at which government or opposition accuses either the government or the opposition for being responsible for aggravating the pandemic situation. Of course, a democratic regime cannot exist without a healthy opposition ready to criticise the government management of the situation but this shouldn't be taken as a political opportunity to win supporters and deepen the populist polarization between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004).

For instance, Orban's government blamed the mayor of Budapest “for mismanaging the situation” and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated that the opposition “instead of taking care of peace and helping, threw sand in the modes”. In Estonia, the situation was even worse with the Conservative People's Party, when it declared that “the opposition Reform Party had intentionally helped the outbreak of the virus in an attempt to overthrow the government” (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020).

The far-right parties in opposition in the beginning of the pandemic implicated the government for responding too slowly, but when the lockdowns started, they became the greater critics of “anti-democratic” and “unconstitutional” government policies. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is an example, when they argued that freedom of speech was “the clearest victim of corona”. In Spain, the Vox party blamed the Spanish government for an “euthanasia” policy and threatened to take legal action against its members for “criminal malfeasance”. In France, Marine Le Pen claimed that the French government was the “biggest purveyor of fake news since the beginning of the crisis” (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020).

3.3. “Toleration or encouragement of violence”

For Levitsky and Ziblatt (2017), four questions need to be addressed to identify this criteria: (1) “Do they have any ties to armed gangs, paramilitary forces, militias, guerrillas, or other organizations that engage in illicit violence?”; (2) “Have they or their partisan allies sponsored or encouraged mob attacks on opponents?”; (3) “Have they tacitly endorsed violence by their supporters by refusing to unambiguously condemn it and punish it?”; (4) “Have they praised (or refused to condemn) other significant acts of political violence, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?”.

In a global perspective, according to the surveys conducted by Freedom House (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020), 27 percent of the governments have abused of their power, due to the violence perpetrated against people by officials and security services, unjustified detentions and exceed of their legal authority.

In the European Union context, such cases of violence took place in Poland, where police violence was used to curb public demonstrations against the new abortion law. The new law states that abortion of malformed fetuses was unconstitutional; with this law, the only cases that abortion will be acceptable are rape, incest or a threat to the mother’s health and life, only 2% of legal terminations conducted in recent years. Protesters marched in different polish cities and, in Warsaw, outside the home of the deputy prime minister and PiS ideologue, Jarosław Kaczyński, pepper spray was used by the police and 15 people were detained (The Guardian, 2020). Another example is the Bulgarian Parliament, which approved the military surveillance on the streets and allowed them to use force if necessary.

3.4. “Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media”

According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2017), we can identify this behaviour by following three questions: (1) “Have they supported laws or policies that restrict civil liberties, such as expanded libel or defamation laws, or laws restricting protest, criticism of the government, or certain civic or political organizations?”; (2) Have they threatened to take legal or other punitive action against critics in rival parties, civil society, or the media?”; (3) “Have they praised repressive measures taken by other governments, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?”.

In the COVID-19 reality, this is especially important because all the European Union countries had imposed mandatory lockdowns in the beginning of the crisis, in order to contain the spread of the disease, and some of them returned to that

recently during the “second wave” of the virus, which restricts civil liberties (BBC News, 2020). In Belgium, for instance, the government has created police checkpoints on streets to check if people are obeying stay-at-home orders and they have set up cell phone location tracking (Kavanagh and Singh, 2020). For example, in Bulgaria, in March, the “Law on Measures and Actions” on a State of Emergency prohibits non-essential travel in the country and abroad and it allows the access to citizens’ mobile phone if they break quarantine rules. In this country, “VirusSafe”, a public-private contact tracing app, was launched and an amendment to the “Law on Electronic Communication” allows authorities to ask telecommunications companies for “immediate access” to the traffic data of users, without asking for a warrant (IDEA, 2020).

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2020) analyses the global state of democracy during COVID-19, dividing the results in “concerning developments”, if COVID-19 related measures or developments violate human rights or democratic benchmarks because they are considered either disproportionate, unnecessary, illegal or indefinite; and “developments to watch”, if COVID-19 measures may lead to a violation of human rights or democratic benchmarks and are considered disproportionate, unnecessary, illegal or indefinite if enforced or maintained over time. They also consider three levels of performances: low, mid-range and high performance. According to them, there are “concerning developments” regarding civil liberties in three European Union countries: Hungary, Slovenia and Bulgaria. In Croatia, Poland and Romania there are “developments to watch” in a mid-range performance. All the other countries are assessed as high performance despite having “developments to watch” as well.

Regarding media restrictions, at least 91 of the 192 countries analysed by Repucci and Slipowitz (2020) experienced restrictions on the news media. In the European Union, as Mudde states (2020), “Hungary and Poland have full control of the state media, which boast about the low level of infections, without telling their audience about the low level of tests in the country”. For instance, in Poland, political campaign was highly affected by the virus and the media space deepened the restrictions that had faced prior to the outbreak. In a report by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2020), the analysis concludes that the public broadcaster “failed to ensure balanced and impartial coverage and rather served as campaign tool for the incumbent”. In addition, during a public demonstration on 11th November, journalists were attacked by the police (The Guardian, 2020). In Hungary, in March, new legislation gives Viktor Orbán power to rule by decree indefinitely and imprison for up to five years any journalist or other person who disseminates false or distorted facts (Roth, 2020), which “could be used to censor or self-censor criticism of the government response” (Walker and Rankin, 2020). The Hungarian parliament rescinded

these rules on 16th June but experts still believe that the government has more power than before the crisis (Meyer, 2020).

3.5. “The rise of xenophobic, racist and nationalistic parties and attitudes”

One of the three signs stated by Przeworski to identify a democracy in crisis is “the rise of xenophobic, racist and nationalistic parties and attitudes” that he depicts as “the rise of right-wing populism”. This sign is linked with the four behavioral signs stated by Levitsky and Ziblatt; however, in the COVID-19 context, where some populist leaders can use the crisis to stoke cultural divides and expand their powers (Meyer, 2020), it is important to highlight how and where this behavior can be observed and its consequences for democracy.

Repucci and Slipowitz (2020) points out that 25 percent of the experts surveyed by Freedom House state that new or greater restrictions on ethnic and religious minorities have been taken due to the pandemic. For instance, in Bulgaria, Romany neighbourhoods had different movement restrictions from the areas where Roma aren’t the majority, such as mandatory quarantines imposed by the government (IDEA, 2020). Following the same idea, in Portugal, the recent deputy in the parliament, from a populist and extreme-right wing, claimed for different lockdown policies for Roma communities (Expresso, 2020).

Those attitudes were also visible when different parties highlighted the Chinese origins of the virus. For instance, in Italy, the League party governor of Veneto, Luca Zaia, claimed the superiority of the Italians over the Chinese regarding personal hygiene and cleanliness. In Spain, the VOX general secretary Ortega Smith, when he contracted COVID-19, tweeted “my ‘Spanish antibodies’ fight against the damn Chinese viruses.” (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020).

In addition, several parties had linked the COVID-19 to immigrants, especially “illegal” immigrants (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020). In Hungary, György Bakondi, Orbán’s chief security advisor, stated that “illegal migration has been a health problem so far, but it has reached a new level with the coronavirus epidemic”. The same claims were made by Jean-Paul Garraud, Member of the European Parliament of the National Rally, when he told, on 20th June, that “the intentions of the EU to reopen the borders will lead to a second wave of infections”.

Conclusion

Following the four behaviour's warning signs made by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, we can conclude that COVID-19 crisis threatens democracy because of its consequences on the specific points they aware us about.

Firstly, it is being problematic for the electoral process. Even though the elections were rescheduled, it causes polemics around the topic which aggravates the political polarization. In addition, it affects the level of turnout that is already decreasing for years (Przeworski, 2019), as it happened in France. In following years will be important to address the challenge posed by new voting procedures, such as postal ballot voting. Having restrictions on public demonstrations, also affects the political rights.

Secondly, COVID-19 provokes a favourable environment to criticise disproportionately political opponents. This opportunity is mainly being taken by far-right parties, in the government or in the opposition, which easily change their discourse to either blame the government for being too late acting or to criticise the policies to curb the pandemic, as it happens in Germany or Spain.

The next criteria that looks upon violence is also possible to find as a consequence of COVID-19 because it was either applied by the police on public demonstrations, as it was in Poland, or because it was legitimized by the government in order to have people following lockdown measures.

Civil liberties were also highly affected by mandatory lockdowns, cell phone tracking apps and other policies that were implemented in order to restrain the pandemic. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2020), Hungary, Slovenia and Bulgaria are the three European Union countries where measures or developments on civil liberties that violate human rights and democracy were putted in place. Furthermore, the media is also being threatened; the examples are Hungary and Poland where the full control of the state media led to a low level of infections, without telling people about the low level of tests in the country.

Finally, it is also important to report on the rise of xenophobic, racist and nationalistic parties and attitudes, as Przeworski states. During the pandemic, we are witnessing movement restrictions that target differently ethnic and religious minorities, either they really take place, as it happens in Romany neighbourhoods in Bulgaria, or they are being presented as policies in the parliament, such as in Portugal. In addition, the racist, xenophobic and nationalistic discourse on the idea of the "Chinese virus" or the immigration as the cause for the increasing of pandemic cases is also being used by far-right parties.

There are still a lot of uncertainty around the virus and its consequences on democracy, however, as shown throughout this essay, some important challenges and threats can already be highlighted. In following years, it will be essential to politically address some issues, such as the electoral process, the spread of fake news and the xenophobic, racist and nationalistic discourse. Other key question that is being raised by this pandemic and that needs further research in the future is either populist governance will take more advantages or disadvantages on the crisis.

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