POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SELF-CONSTITUTION:

MEDIA, POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY

Proceedings of the VIII international scientific and practical seminar

December 7th, 2020, Belgrade, Serbia

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Edited by Irina Bondarevskaya, Bojan Todosijević

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NEW MODES OF ACCULTURATION AND DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE DURING COVID-19 CRISIS

Dijana Vukomanovic

Institute of Social Sciences

(Belgrade, Serbia)

Introduction. The Covid-19 crisis has brought swift and tremendous challenges and changes, and this experience is making us revisit the patterns of the contemporary political culture of citizens and explore the capability of basic democratic institutions to adapt, and to prove sustainable in the time of pandemic turmoil. The Covid-19 crisis management triggered new modes of social acculturation and the "health Enlightenment" of citizens. In parallel, new modes of institutional change and adaptation of democracy are invented. The analysis describes what new modes of acculturation can be observed among citizens, and finds out that parliaments are still preserving institutional capacities of performing their constitutional role in the decision-making process. Even with the lower turnout at the elections, that is held during the pandemic, elections are remaining the main realm and tool of citizens' participation in democracy.

Objectives. The objective of this analysis is to discuss how Covid-19 crisis management is changing our self-constructive patterns of the contemporary political world – our *Weltanschauung*. How we are changing our perception of citizen`s role in democracy, and our readiness to defend our basic human rights and fundamental democratic institutions? It is obvious that responses, triggered by the Covid-19 crises, both by governments and citizens are not the very same in nature. In a time of crisis, like this, politicians are in charge of making the choices first. Harari rightly observes that politicians didn`t have a "readymade blueprint for what to do, so they are therefore

singularly open to new ideas. Even to crazy ideas" (Harari, 2020). Or dangerous ones, to put it more preciously.

Results. Ordinary people were even more in doubt – they were aware that the pandemic will change something, but still hoping that it will not change everything in their life. The main symbol of this change became the most visible and obligatory – face-mask as the new symbol of a new pattern of the so-called "acculturation" phenomenon. The process of acculturation (originally described by Linton and Herskovits, 1938) occurs as a result of continuous and direct contact between the groups of individuals belonging to different cultures and leads to modification of the original cultural patterns of one, or of both of these groups. After the Covid-19 pandemic has been declared by the WHO – people started to learn, from a scratch, things that have already been invented and in massive practice, if not in their neighborhood, then on the other, distant part of the Globe – in Asia, starting from 2003, due to SARS epidemic, or a long time ago, during the Spanish flu epidemic, after the First World War.

New processes of adaptation and acculturation have been re-invented, and repeatedly popularized by mass media in all countries, around the world. New definitions of acceptable health and social behavior – social distancing, wearing of protective face-masks, limiting family and business contacts, online work from home, etc. resulted in the new gospel of "health Enlightenment". Governments started to expect from their entire population – nation to adopt and assimilate themselves to anti-Covid19 measures, and to integrate into "new normality". It should not be forgotten, that under "normal circumstances", the process of acculturation regularly occurs over a large span of time – throughout a few generations. Acculturation measures imposed by governments` strong hands – lockdowns, quarantines, even emergencies, occurred quite suddenly and rapidly – even with the use of physical force performed by army or police units on the streets. People were constantly exposed to the instructive but stressful state and media propaganda, which was intended to make them fear and obey. The new "health care order" has been legitimized through the legitimacy of the new

culture of fear and obedience (Keane, Podunavac, Sparks, 2008). Fear becomes the ultimate pattern of contemplating the future since we don`t know how and when exactly the Covid-19 pandemic will end.

What this process of compulsory health-oriented acculturation is telling us, is that the basic, traditional Rousseau's social contract between citizens and rulers, is in the process of serious challenge and redefinition. According to Rousseau's vision of democracy, individual citizen (*citoyen*) is the creator of political statehood, he/she is not an obedient servant, but n actor of people's sovereignty (Vukomanovic, 2011). During the current Covid-19 pandemic, the sovereignty of citizens – their democratic, human rights have been significantly reduced, under the excuse that the entire political community has been threatened, and that everyone should obey new rules if the majority of the population is intended to survive Covid-19.

Not all citizens could conform to these new rules – there were numerous cases of dissent, rebellion, and even massive protests erupted on the streets of many cities, mainly in Europe and the USA, people were chanting anti-Covid-19 and anti-vaccine slogans. But, these street protests and social media conspiracy "theories" have no adequate social energy to be articulated and integrated on the mainstream political agenda – their advocates remain marginalized as fake news propagators.

While new health measures have been interpreted as a new mode of "health Enlightenment", democracy and human rights have been eclipsed by the Covid-19 crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic challenged the parliament with the question of whether this fundamental institution of democracy is capable to reassure its constitutional role and facilitate democratic governance continuity in the time of pandemic crisis. In theory, parliament is strong when any emergency government powers were both limited in time and scope, and subject to parliamentary oversight. But, how this works in practice, during the Covid-19 crisis?

IDEA's global mapping of parliaments' different responses to the coronavirus pandemic, comparing data from 166 parliaments around the world, from February to June 15th, 2020, established that more than half of parliaments around the world have

adequately responded to the Covid-19 challenge – 82 legislatures blueprinted plenary measures that can be categorized as adopting a change in procedures, such as reduced quorum (22 countries); hybrid – special procedures to allow virtual meetings of MPs (17); social distancing (16); remote work/vote (10); normal procedure (8); proxy vote (4); virtual meetings in different rooms (3); remote vote (1), and one suspended parliament that was not able to fulfill its constitutional duties. Approximately twelve percentage of parliaments (20 out of 166) continued to work according to normal procedure, as before the pandemic.

Two major lessons were learned, according to another IDEA's comprehensive analysis, which explored parliaments' role in reviewing how effectively the government responded to the crisis and disaster planning. The conclusion was that effective parliamentary engagement in governance during a crisis is not only essential for preserving democratic practices and institutions but is also necessary to ensure the best possible outcome in crisis management (Murphy, 2020).

On the other hand, it was paradoxically, that many of incumbent politicians who were keen to suspend parliaments, and to silent opposition, were still advocating to preserve "business as usual" state of affair regarding the question to hold or not to hold elections – hoping that their hardline approach during the pandemic will result in their post-pandemic victory.

According to IDEA's Global overview of Covid-19 impact on elections (IDEA, 2020), from late February to mid-September, 2020, more than 90 countries and territories across all the continents had to decide whether to hold or postpone national and sub-national elections, or referendums. Initially, 71 of them have decided to postpone national and subnational elections. Finally, approx. 60 countries and territories have decided to hold national or subnational elections despite concerns related to Covid-19, of which at least 45 have held national elections or referendums.

These numbers are proving us with the conclusion that politicians across the world have gone through an intensively calculated process of judgment if it is better to organize elections, even in the time of the pandemic, providing that health safety

measures at polling stations are implemented than to postpone it. A positive conclusion from these data can be drawn that democracy matters, still! Elections are always the most trustworthy "litmus test" of how democracy is strong or weak – whether democracy is still "the only game in town" (Linz, Stepan, 1996). Nevertheless, many of the elections that were held during the spread of Covid-19 in 2020 saw turnout drops – data from a representative sample of 18 countries/territories, where parliamentary or presidential elections were held between January 1st and July 19th, 2020, show that the mean change in turnout was lower - 6.21 percentage points, comparing to previous elections (Toby, Alihodzic, 2020).

Conclusion. But, on the other hand, the readiness of ordinary people – citizens, and of many politicians also, to preserve and to invent new, or to modify existing democratic procedures, amidst the Covid-19 crisis, is more encouraging, than disappointing. As comparative data on parliaments and elections show, people are still able to put their health, even life, at risk to actively participate in parliamentary debates or elections, as well as in the street protests. And that is exactly how democratic order works and how democracy can survive this crisis. The most optimistic is the conclusion that during the Covid-19, all of us are becoming more passionate human rights activists and democracy defenders.