

DEMOCRACY, CRISIS AND DESTABILIZATION

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades, democracies have been in decline. They have suffered for a long time from the rise of populism and nationalism and are lately struggling with the consequences of the global pandemic, COVID-19. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of defending and preserving democracies under the threat of both external and internal destabilizing factors that can lead to regime changes. It has had a significant impact on democratic freedoms and rights. Moreover, it has also raised concerns in terms of countries' abilities to face the challenges that come as a result of the pandemic and which threaten the existence of liberal democracies. In this paper, we argue that when individual liberties are threatened and negatively impacted by a crisis, consolidated democracies which embody such liberties, may experience a shift back to semi-consolidated, autocratic regimes and so on. In addition to that, the presence of a crisis in the equation between individual liberties and collective good, will result in the latter outweighing the former, with the potential to trigger regime change.

Keywords: Democracy, COVID-19, Crisis, Individual Freedom, Regime Change.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, democracy has been threatened and destabilized by external factors varying from nationalism, populism, to poverty, economic insecurity, distrust in institutions and lack of global cooperation in the face of global challenges. Democracy has proven to be a vulnerable system of governance, which in 2020 was faced, among others, with the challenge of a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic poses an unprecedented challenge for liberal and modern democracies and raises questions concerning the health and survival of democratic systems. In tackling the COVID-19 crisis and managing emergency situations and responses, governments were faced with critical choices and democratic dilemmas to be resolved, most importantly with the one of choosing over individual rights (freedoms) and collective good (health).

COVID- 19 has had a significant impact on democratic freedoms and rights. Moreover, it has also raised concerns in terms of countries' abilities to face the challenges that come as a

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result of the pandemic and which threaten the existence of liberal democracies. In this context, and in times when global indexes and data^[2] show that democracy is consistently backsliding in the last fourteen years (Freedom House 2020), then COVID-19 can act both as an added factor and a crisis that can hinder democratic progress globally.

Recent developments reflected also in data provided by Freedom House show a downgrade in democratic liberties and principles which has resulted in consolidated democracies experiencing a backslide. When democracy's basic freedoms are under siege, consolidated democracies can go steps backward and such is the case in some of the European countries. Poland, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Latvia have shown a decline in their democracy's scores, which has then impacted and changed their status from consolidated to semi-consolidated democracies, even within a short time frame between 2019-2020.

Furthermore, the report of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA on *The Global State of Democracy 2019*, brought to the attention of scholars on the field that even older and well-built democracies have been and are struggling to preserve their democratic progress and development. The report also highlights that despite the highest and strongest cluster of democracies that can be found in Europe, the democratic performance in the region has experienced a critical decline in the last ten years, where more than 65 % of European democracies suffer from democratic erosion. (International IDEA 2019)

Did the COVID-19 pandemic weaken modern democracies? This question raises many concerns on the perseverance and stability of democracies as vulnerable systems of government. The pandemic revealed, in one way or another, the importance and demand for democratic solutions and responses when faced with external threats to collective goods and needs. This paper discusses particularly the democratic dilemma of individual rights over collective goods, focusing on how the choices made under such dilemma and crisis, can trigger democratic backsliding and regime change.

Among the aspects measured and explored that reveal the decline in democratic scores and status all over the world, key ones are those related to civil rights, liberties, and freedoms. These findings lead us to reflecting on how the controversial relation between individual liberties and the collective good in times of crisis. Furthermore, this paper will also build its theoretical implications upon the exploration of real and actual cases where the above mentioned threats to liberal democracies and their values have been and are resulting to be critically enhanced during the recent COVID- 19 crisis.

We argue that when individual liberties are threatened and negatively impacted by a crisis, consolidated democracies which embody such liberties, experience a shift back to semi-consolidated, autocratic regimes and so on. In addition to that, the presence of a crisis in the equation between individual liberties and collective good, will result in the latter outweighing the former, with the potential to trigger regime change.

Key Concepts in Democracy

Democracy is a social model produced historically and culturally to explain current problems in very different contexts. As a concept, it just reflects the evolution of a system for the organization of the exercise of political power in society, yet with diverse and contradictory meanings. What we know as democracy today is grounded in the development of two main concepts, *liberty* and *equality* (Dahl 1986; Dawood 2013; Kuehnelt-Leddihn 2007).

Liberty has evolved from the idea of no dependence and autonomy to the attainment of the social status and the exercise of collective power (Sartori 2016). On one hand, a proper conceptualization of liberty is possible only if it is based on equality among citizens. On the other hand, equality, itself, has never been absolute. For the leading philosophers of ancient democracy, equality would be achieved only when all men have equal right to demand political participation in common affairs. Noting the existing structural difference between rich and poor in society, democracy would be attained only when it reaches to distribute equality among both equals and unequals (Aristotle 1998).

If for the classicals, all men must be equal to participate in politics, modern democratic systems entailed the need of a political community that would represent all citizens equally. In light of the impossibility of direct democracy, representative democracy introduced a series of mechanisms and institutions that try to achieve a balance between the exercise and control of power. In democratic societies with multiple divisions of governance (e.g., among a legislative, executive, and judicial branch), an equal separation of powers sustains a system of checks and balances upon each branch of government, and, therefore, equality among those branches (O'Toole 1987).

What remained constant in both direct and representative democracies, is the need to ensure the connection of the citizen to the political community (Mouffe, 1992). Thus today, participation continues to be a point of polarization over the understanding of democracy. For some democratic participation meant direct public involvement as the Athenian ideal, today reflected in the form of E-democracy, while for others it is based on further strengthening of

the representative system. Participation then took two forms: 1) as an individual right and liberty to participate in politics not necessarily related to knowledge and property (Bollen, 1986) and 2) expression of political equality that went beyond participation in elections and trusting social and economic interests to delegates (Verba 1967).

A balanced relationship of liberty and equality has also served as indicators to analyze the quality of democracy which requires a shift from the minimum conditions of democracy (such as free, fair and meaningful elections, competitiveness and a diverse source of information) to deeper empirical analysis that detect the degree to which states meet the two main objectives of an ideal democracy: freedom and political equality (Morlino 2004).

In this way, under liberalism, a complete understanding of the conception of liberty and equality fundamentally preserves individual liberty and natural rights in relation to the state.

Challenges to Democracy

The relationship between liberty and equality construct the principal issues that build democracy regardless of different social, economic, political and institutional characteristics of each historical period. This shows that the central question for democracy today remains the same for direct democracy, representative democracy and for those that seek a wider democratic participation.

However, this relationship has not always been matured. One would easily recall the deviation of liberty and equality in the early historical stages of democratization such as the example of the French revolution when the understanding of equality overcomes that of liberty (Read 2015) and it is usually expected that a still unbalanced relationship of liberty and equality characterizes states while struggling to democratize .i.e during the transition phase. To avoid this, for many years, scholars of democracy researched and explained factors, contexts and structures that determine successful democratic transitions (Rustow 1970).

Moreover, the overwhelming expectation was that all transitioning countries will once consolidate, depending on many intervening variables such as incentives, economy, education, internal pressures or even globalization (Adler and Webster 1995).

However, Collier and Levitsky (1997) produced a very interesting model emphasizing that democratization is not a process that advances only, instead it may also deteriorate. According to them, liberal democracies may also experience a shift back to electoral democracy and electoral democracies can also go backward to authoritarianism. They are called

democracy's slow and quick deaths respectively. In these conditions, the research that inquires potential dangers to democracy, remains highly relevant.

Several standard explanations such as rising economic inequality, political polarization, globalization etc. offer a plausible account, yet they can hardly account for the surprising speed with which democratic decline has happened for many consolidated regimes (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019). Literature reveals that in the midst of long standing economic, political and social problems, crises act as strong catalysts with the potential to trigger regime changes (Gasiorowski 1995).

One first line of inquiry that emerges is whether voters simply let off steam, or do we see genuine threats to key democratic principles and practices? There is certainly a supporting literature to the argument that the success of democracy highly depends on its capability to deliver high quality public services (Fukuyama 2013:6). That would lead us to think that support for democracy would increase as long as democratic governments perform well in terms of citizens' needs and expectations. While these arguments remain highly relevant in the support to the process of democratic deepening or consolidation, they are incomplete in explaining the so-called process of "deconsolidation". Further evidence shows that problems in times of crisis can go deeper and may touch the foundations of a democratic political culture (Howe 2017).

We will focus particularly on how crises can destabilize the core relationships between the individual liberty and collective good that found the democratic political culture in liberal democracies.

Democracy in Times of The COVID-19 Pandemic

At the very beginning of the analysis stands the COVID-19 crisis management context where data produced from the Centre for Civic and Political Rights (2020) show that 79/134 tracked states across the world declared states of emergencies. Many other states have not declared states of emergencies, but have a *de facto* one in place.

On a theoretical basis, the concept of a state of emergency follows a rule of law logic: democracies can be under a state of emergency if duly justified. It is even more preferable to introducing a *de facto* state of emergency, simply taking measures that significantly restrict human rights, democracy and the rule of law without calling it officially a state of emergency. However, Lazar 2009 questions the possibility of a democratic regime to survive, when its rights and obligations are suspended under a state of emergency. As she would argue 'Given

that liberal democracy is essentially bound up with the division of powers and the preservation of rights and freedoms, how could emergency powers, which impose order through constraint of these features, ever be justly constituted and exercised?’ (ibid 2009: 2).

To emphasize her claim, Lazar notes that during times of emergency, as at all other times, the rule of law is never itself a sufficient democratic safeguard. Scholars urge the need of the democratic theory to produce new sites of power even in emergency settings (Honig 2009). Focus on the law, morality or politics to the exclusion of all other countervailing measures is dangerous and makes states of emergency perilous for democracy and its citizens (Lazar 2009: 161).

Following this line, this article argues that COVID 19 crisis can trigger a deviation of the dichotomy between individual freedom and collective interest in three forms if individual freedom is sacrificed for the sake of collective interest .

Table 1: Consolidated versus Destabilized Democratic Regimes

	Consolidated Societies	Destabilized Societies
Direct Democracy	E- democracy	Misinformation and biased information
Representative Democracy	Check and Balances	State of Emergency and Power Capture
Democratic Participation	Decentralization and Civic Society Integration	Centralization

1) Technological innovations have enabled the integration of direct democracy forms into modern representative systems. In consolidated societies, E- democracy, known otherwise as digital democracy or Internet democracy functions to engage a wide citizen involvement in political and governance processes. This mechanism ensures a balanced approach of liberty and equality concepts whereby each individual has an equal opportunity to freely engage and participate in the political public sphere.

2) In a scenario where E- democracy deviates, the use of technological tools during the COVID-19 situation in itself may stimulate an environment that would depict potential risks for democracy (Lindner and Aichholzer 2020). Digital tools would speed up discussion to a

superficial level; increase misinformation or information inequality instead of ensuring participation in decision making and accountability for the response to the pandemic.

3) The sound argument to representative democracy is that individuals can renounce their inherent equality and liberty to some representatives, only with the condition that there is a system of powers that check each other and avoid power capture (Montesquieu 1989). If the system of check and balance is destabilized, the de- facto state of emergency context under which COVID 19 is being managed, may cause a deviation of the representative system that results in power capture.

4) Democracy participation acts a positive sum game where institutions of direct democracy do not have to substitute representative democracy but gives space to institution building where citizens can and are free to add new issues or initiative to the political arena (Peters, 2016). In a consolidated society, democratic participation is ensured through decentralization and an active civil society involvement. In the context of COVID -19, the dimension of the pandemic and the time urgency may stimulate a top- down approach and pave the way to more centralized decision making processes.

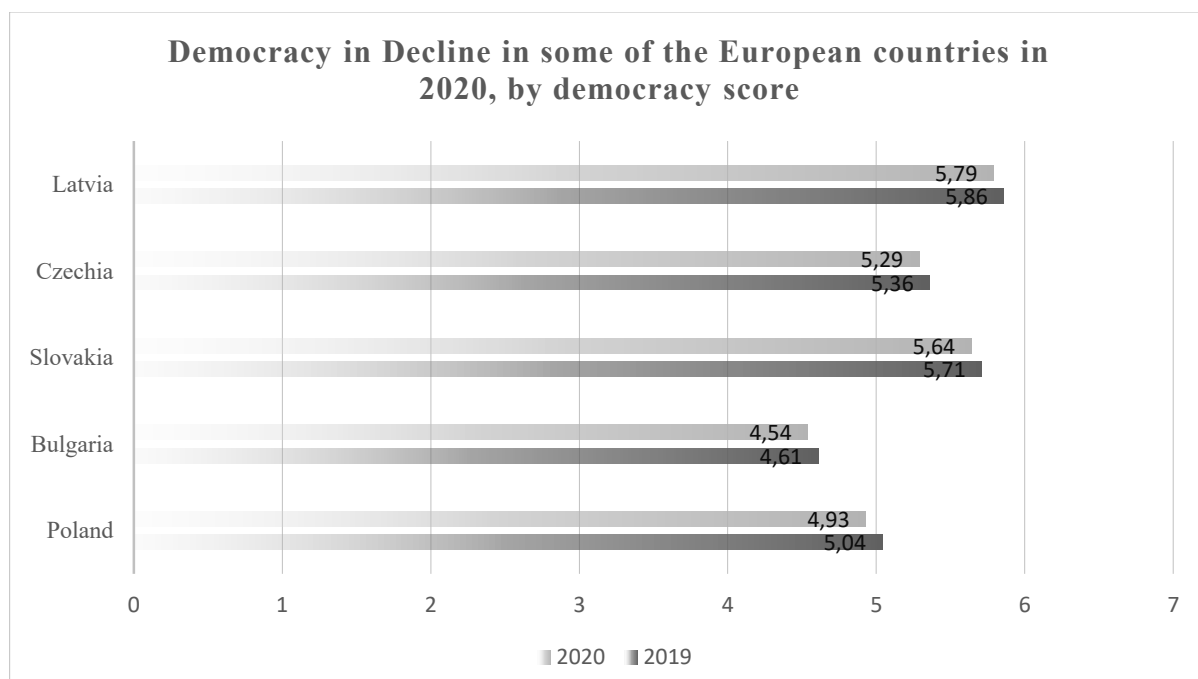
Analysis

The motivation to explore these key dimensions of liberal democracies stems first and foremost from the fact that most often quoted and debated criteria for liberal democracies to exist and preserve themselves are human freedoms and liberties. Governments that are known as liberal democracies are first and foremost made up of institutions that represent the citizens that elected them, are subject to the rule of law, emphasize the protection of individual rights and freedoms and place an importance on democratic participation of the citizens as well as on the limitations of the political power exercised by the leaders.

Therefore, a key concern is that in the recent developments of the COVID-19 pandemic, as an emerging global crisis, democracies might experience not simply a slight decline, but more of a regime change. We analyze this hypothesis by evaluating the implications of COVID-19 to liberal democracies in consolidated democratic societies through the exploration of destabilization of direct democracy, representative democracy and democratic participation. Due to the fact that this article focuses on liberal democracies, the selected countries that are used as a reference and example throughout the article are those that fall under the category of “consolidated democracies” and “free countries” by definition and indicators of Freedom House.

Data from Freedom House, suggest that overall, even open societies have undergone restrictions that have a negative effect on human rights and liberty. Even though most of these violations have occurred in governments with authoritarian and illiberal regimes, liberal democracies have also faced the consequences of these restrictions and limits to the democratic life (Freedom House 2020).

Table 2: Democracy in Decline in some of the European Countries, 2020



Source: Freedom House, 2020 (maximum democracy score = 7).

The table above shows the democratic backsliding of the listed European countries. Among countries recognized as free and with consolidated democratic regimes, the above-mentioned had experienced destabilization in their democratic governances. Thus, their democracies appear in decline and their democratic scores are lower than what they were a year ago. In 2019, most of the countries listed above had a democracy score above 5, whereas in 2020 their scores have fallen below 5 in a significant way. Such findings indicate that when democracies are in crisis, destabilizing factors such as those that can threaten individual rights and freedoms in liberal societies can have a huge impact in democratic backsliding and regime change.

While exploring more on the reasons that led to a democratic decline in Poland, Bulgaria, Czechia, Slovakia and Latvia, violations on medica freedom, lack of openness and transparency in electoral processes and judicial failures were among the key reasons.

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Table 3: Reasons for Democracies in Decline in 2020, according to data gathered from Freedom House

Country	Democracy Score in 2020	Reasons for Democracy in Decline
Poland	4.93	Civil society, lack of strengthening of local democracy, and judicial framework failures.
Bulgaria	4.54	Violations on media freedom and independence, and lack of openness and transparency in electoral processes.
Czechia	5.64	Violations on media freedom and judicial framework failures.
Slovakia	5.29	Lack of openness and transparency on electoral processes and judicial framework failures.
Latvia	5.79	Judicial framework failures and corruption.

All of the above are important factors and part of the umbrella of individual rights and freedoms in a liberal democracy that when evaluated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic can act as destabilizers with both short-term and long-term impacts on the decline of democracies.

On Direct Democracy and Misinformation

Under direct democracy where open and transparent information is key, misinformation and biased information can undermine basic individual rights and freedoms and destabilize liberal democracy in this way. Restrictions under media freedom have been among key types of events that have caused a democratic backsliding in the recent months of the pandemic.

Additional data from International Press Institute (IPI) indicates that over four hundred media freedom violations have occurred during the ongoing pandemic, with violations varying from the spread of fake news, misinformation, censorship, attack on media, restrictions on access to information. Out of 473 violations recorded from IPI, around 107 of them have occurred in well-established and consolidated democracies in Europe.

As table 3 showed, key reasons why some countries underscored and experienced a democratic backsliding during 2020 were found in violations of media freedom and independence.

Moreover, in the Freedom's House report on "Freedom on the Net 2020" key findings indicate that:

- Governments gained new ways to control information and even with most of the processes and procedures moving on the online space few or no consideration of human freedoms and liberties were taken into consideration.
- Over 50 countries have introduced online applications for tracing quarantine compliance with few or no protections against human rights abuse and violations.
- Internet freedom worsened in one of the most technologically advanced and libertarian societies in the world, United States of America (USA). Freedom House concluded that in the USA, the federal and local law enforcements produced during the pandemic, threatened constitutional freedoms, led to the punishment of several people who got criminally charged for their online activity related to demonstrations, particularly during the Black Lives Matter movement. Moreover, the online discourse in the USA, was flooded with inflammatory language and hate speech, biased information, polarized content and dangerous misinformation. All of the above findings, shake the well-established position of the USA as a leader on individual liberty, internet freedom and open societies.

COVID-19 pandemic, destabilized the USA, and challenged the presidential election which was also highly dominated by polarized discourse and misinformation, with little physical and online spaces for citizens to ensure the democratic use of their speech and vote. Whereas in Europe, key violations occurred due to limitations on protesting, police violence exercised during upheavals and citizens' protests and due to misinformation and limitations on media freedoms.

Direct democracy thrives when citizens are well-informed and have access to open, fair and safe information on the media. With the COVID-19 pandemic enabling the governments with the possibility to control information, its content and its flow, democracy is undermined when it is needed the most. Often, the United Nations (UN) addressed the situation as an infodemic. The UN urged countries to take action and tackle misinformation and stop spreading divisive content which polarized the discourse. In addition to that, despite polarization and divisions of thoughts and attitudes throughout the world, misinformation during the pandemic brought also the risk of individuals not being able to act collectively and preserve democracy in front of these divisions.

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In this context, the USA was one of those countries that faced deep polarization and a divided political environment (Dimock and Wike, 2020). The 2020 USA presidential elections was faced with the struggle of maintaining democratic elections in the age of a pandemic and “infodemic”.

A report from Pew Research found out that this election was faced with social unrest, misinformation and divergent point of views that fueled uncertainty. The report concluded that voters’ attitudes were even more divided than when compared to 2016.

The lack of including citizens during election and other democratic processes, the challenge to acquire high-quality information and everything else in between which falls short under democratic ideals, proves that disinformation erodes democracy, and besides, in times of a pandemic which acts as a catalyst for democratic backslide, the dangers of democracy being under attack become more prominent and urgent.

On the other side, the European continent and most of its well-established democracies were being faced with the challenges of disinformation and lack of democratic participation. Governments of France and Germany tried to combat the spread of disinformation and divisions in their societies by adopting new laws against fake news (Iglhaut 2020; Boring 2019).

Meanwhile, democracy in Poland was suffering from governmental control of media’s freedom and independence. Election campaigns and political discourse was centered upon a single dominant political party and democratic participation and involvement from the citizens both online and offline was becoming a challenge (Beniuszys 2020).

In an article on the Center for a New American Security, Nina Jankowicz (2020) writes that the changes that the political and media climate in Poland, especially during 2020, represented a trend, now evident across several Western democracies, that governments are willing to employ tactics of disinformation for political purposes and advancement.

Disabling democratic deliberation and participation, even in times when security issues call for more focus on collective goods, is a threat in the long time to democratic values and individual liberty which at the end are part of the overall collective good for democracy to survive.

On Representative Democracy and Power Capture

To preserve liberal democratic processes, it is vital that the legislature and judicial continue their work representing citizens' interests, even in times where large gatherings, engagement and representation are harmful. Alternative solutions should always be sought.

For example, recently, the postponement of the elections became a necessity in order to safeguard the health and security of the citizens and to prevent the risk of weakened democracies due to the lack of several processes and procedures required for a well-functioning of electoral campaigns, voting, public discussions, and so on. Several European countries postponed their national or local elections, including here Spain, United Kingdom, and Italy.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that despite the choice over collective goods and individual liberties, the healthiest responses of a nation are built upon values of democracy and justice over which the nation operates (Jennifer Rygen and Amartya Sen, 2020).

Countries with stronger democratic and governance systems exhibited better responses to the management of the situation in coping with the pandemic through healthcare measures, however, in coping with the implications of the pandemic on the life and health of their citizens, these systems failed to maintain their democratic features and shifted towards state capture. Political and economic elites formulated new policies and exercised control over the new rules of the "game". The emergent situations throughout the pandemic undermined democratic freedoms and liberties.

In the Western Balkan countries and Hungary, levels of corruption and state capture rose and led to abuses of power and higher citizens' dissatisfaction with the political elites. (Freedom House 2020) Lack of the possibility from citizens to exercise power and to be represented in decision making deemphasized these countries commitment to democracy.

On the other hand, in Poland, and in a period of national elections, the leading government was dominating the discourse and control over the emergent situation, thus limiting also the possibility of citizens' participation and representation (Freedom House 2020).

In their COVID-19 Briefing Series The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) wrote that undermining democratic liberties and freedom during emergencies and immediate policies undertaken during the pandemic drives distrust in democratic institutions including both legislative and executive ones (IFES 2020).

One of the ways in which governments reacted in terms of emergency responses to the pandemic was imposing travel restrictions, lockdowns and prohibiting the freedom of

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movement. Most of the liberal and consolidated democracies in Europe, imposed restrictions which prohibited individuals from moving freely, and in case of violations of the new emergency rules, punishments followed.

In the United Kingdom (UK) a new rule was introduced by the government, imposing restrictions on individual liberty, and was enforced as such by the police. These new rules became part of a Regulation enforced by the state and the police, without clearly defining what would fall under the category of personal freedom to move in case of personal needs, and the rights to do so (Thomson and Ip, 2020). France followed a rigorous and strict policy too, by ensuring lockdowns with no possibilities of individuals to leave their homes, unless respecting the one-hour permission granted by the new regulations of the state. The emergency responses accelerated restrictions also in the USA, which led to many Americans protesting against their states' decisions (Cornfield 2020).

Despite the issuing of new regulations and prohibitions as such, governments also underwent strict surveillance applications and tools to keep track and control of the situation. Most extreme cases in security measures and surveillance in Europe include Poland and the UK. In Poland, the government made mobile tracking devices mandatory, whereas in the UK drones acted as technological devices observing the situation and warning citizens to not go outside (Aljazeera 2020).

The question to be asked here is; is there a tradeoff between privacy and individual rights and health? Technology can be helpful during emergent and critical situations, however, governments need to balance between individual rights and overall crisis, by incorporating proper security standards and individual rights in their security measures.

All of the above happenings, policies and restrictions taken during the emergency measures, state capture, and policy responses to the pandemic, limited the individual sphere. Democracy and democratic representation was not at its strongest even before the pandemic hit (Rapeli and Saikkonen, 2020) However, the impact that the pandemic is having on democratic representation will be a long-lasting one. The COVID-19 pandemic acts as an external threat to democracy, when governments are forced with a decision to suspend individual rights and destabilize the relation between checks and balances. In terms of the long-lasting effects, democracies which are still experiencing democratic backsliding even prior to the pandemic, will have to cope with more challenges in order to not risk a shift to authoritarian regimes or any regime change as such.

On Democratic Participation and Centralization

Throughout developments of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments undertook emergency measures that restricted individual freedoms and movements by putting weight on lowering the curve of virus infections and deaths in their societies. With strong emergency measures in place, democratic participation during the pandemic was weakened, as individuals cannot influence government's decisions, cannot participate in public consultations, campaigns, protests and movements. Democratic participation in liberal democracies means that individuals of a collective group can exercise power and control over policies and procedures adopted in their respective society (William R. Schonfeld 2011).

The already made observations and analysis, throughout the article, on democratic representation and information, are intertwined and highly dependent on democratic participation and decentralization per se. Democratic participation as we know it refers to the active contribution of informed citizens in political decisions and policies that affect their lives (William R. Schonfeld 2011).

One of the pillars of democratic participation in liberal societies is the existence and work of non-governmental organizations and civil society actors. With governments' emergent responses to the pandemic and restrictions at place, as much as the individual space was limited, so was the civic space. Despite top-down dominating responses and actions, bottom-up responsibility and accountability is important for a healthy democracy.

Data from Transparency International shows that civil society was not active enough during the pandemic due to the limited civic spaces available. They identify these spaces as mostly narrowed, closed and repressed, and argue that the pandemic did not create the problems that civil society actors are facing during the pandemic, instead it deepened and worsened them (Transparency International 2020).

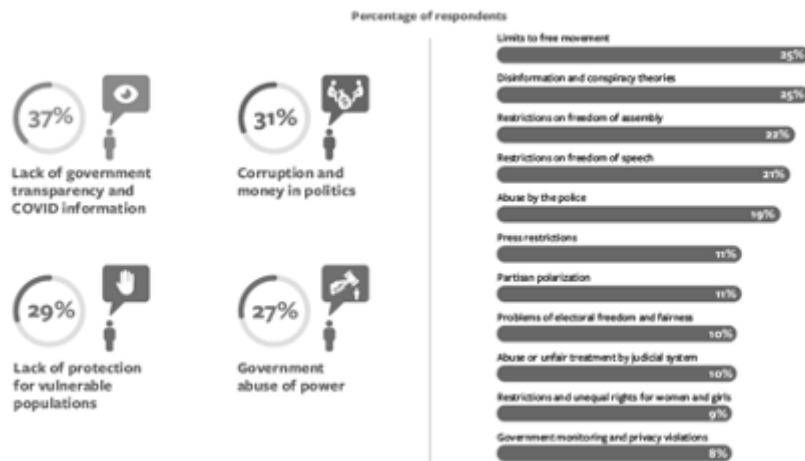
Moreover, experts from the European Economic and Social Committee argue that civil society was still active during the pandemic, despite the challenges faced, emphasizing that civil society actors are essential to COVID-19 recovery (European Economic and Social Committee 2020). Restrictions on movements, on public assemblies and on the freedom of expression and information influenced the civic space highly, by shrinking it down at three key levels: legal environment, political environment and practice (Spasovska 2020). These restrictions led also to the shrinking of the space for possible cooperation between the

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government and civil society actors. The challenge remains, if no measures are taken to ensure the necessary civic spaces for civil society in times of the pandemic, as they are key actors of participatory democracy.

On the individual level, democratic participation of citizens was negatively impacted too. Even though the happenings and policies affected every individual, their influence and control over decision-making was restricted on many levels. The global survey launched by Freedom House “Democracy under Lockdown” found out that citizens perceived restrictions as violations to their basic liberties and rights, and felt unable to react and push governments on decisions needed to be made with these liberties and rights into consideration.

Table 4: Democracy under Lockdown, Freedom House Data



Source: Freedom House Global Survey, Democracy under Lockdown, 2020.

Being asked by the Freedom House global survey on the question “Which of the following areas of your life do you think has been the most affected by COVID-19 in your country”, the respondents answered that lack of government transparency, corruption and abuse of power were key concerning issues for them. Table 4 below shows the respondents’ answers and concerns in what affected them mostly during the pandemic, among these three concerns.

Overall, the current pandemic worsened democratic participation by limiting citizens power and increasing governments’ control over decision-making, emergent responses and policies. Leaders all over the world assumed greater political and institutional roles which shranked the open spaces for citizens’ interaction and participation.

Recommendations For The Way Forward:

Preserving Liberal Democracies in Times of a Pandemic

- The recent year has proven that making use of technologies in providing citizens with information is key. However, this information should be also transparent, fair, secure and safe. Various possibilities of the online space can make up for the impossibility of civic and individual engagement during times of a pandemic, with governments investing in and making use of technologies, as well as in providing citizens with innovative solutions to e-participation, online protesting, online campaigning and so on.
- Providing open data and open digital democratic spaces will enable democracies to balance between security and liberty in a way that human rights and freedoms are not undermined.
- Governments should consider the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the democracy crisis alongside dealing with the health crisis.
- There should be a better and strengthened cooperation between governments and civil society organizations, in order to ensure unified solutions and approaches to complex crises.
- Ensure that the crisis response and recovery programs do not undermine the essentials of democratic freedom and individual liberties in a community.
- There is a need for solid individual and civic spaces to be provided for democratic processes and procedures that concern the citizens of a society.
- The pandemic can act both as a crisis but as an opportunity as well, an opportunity to create bigger and stronger communities and networks, to open up and share concrete information, to enable digital and online spaces for action and interaction and to explore new platforms for individual and collective engagement in a democracy.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have explored the democratic dilemma that countries in the world had to face over individual liberties and collective goods, during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exposed many of the flaws of democracies we live in, as well as the vulnerabilities of a system that if not well-prepared for an emergent crisis, might experience a deepening of flaws and backsliding into authoritarian forms of governance that hinder human rights, freedoms and liberties.

While the choice to protect and safeguard health and collective good amid the pandemic in the short-term seems the most rational and safe choice, has negative consequences and implications to democratic societies unless standards that can ensure open and accountable governments are not at place or properly applied so. As we have emphasized throughout the paper, COVID-19 and the crisis that follow from it can act as destabilizing factors of democratic regimes and impact negatively on democratic participation, representation and information.

However, as states struggle to maintain and preserve their democracy under crisis and lockdowns, we agree that the COVID-19 crisis can act also as an opportunity to reflect on the gaps of our democratic systems and to work on ensuring the necessary spaces where accountability representation and inclusion can thrive. We have argued that it is important to ensure a healthy balance over individual freedoms and collective goods by taking into account the importance of freedoms and liberties, of human rights, and of citizens' empowerment and inclusion in emergent situations where everyone's life is influenced and impacted both by the situation at hand and the decisions that follow. Democracy is needed the most even in times of crisis where restrictions and limitations dominate.

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