DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 22.06.2023 | Filip Milačić

Undemocratic, but still successful with voters

How autocrats convince voters to sacrifice abstract interests like democracy

Imagine a country, in which a great majority of the population values democracy as a system of government, but whose ruler has been steadily subverting democracy by purging the judiciary and imprisoning journalists and oppositional politicians. At the same time, living standards are deteriorating, most vividly manifested in an annual inflation rate of 72.3 per cent (a 24-year high). Bearing these facts in mind, one would think that in the next election, the government will most surely be voted out of office. Yet, reality can look different. In Turkey, the incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan managed to secure his re-election. And Turkey is no isolated case. Many politicians across the world who subverted democracy still enjoy the support of a significant part of the electorate. This, in turn, means that many democratically-minded voters vote for politicians in spite of their authoritarian tendencies. Why would they do that?

When voters decide which party or candidate to support in an election, they engage in trade-offs: getting all of their preferences covered by one candidate is highly unlikely, so preferences need to be ranked. What the new autocrats around the world understood very well is this: many voters choose concrete interests over abstract ones.

Concrete vs. abstract interests

Economic hardship is surely not a good precondition for re-election, but there are no guarantees that an authoritarian incumbent will be blamed for it – particularly if he or she controls key media outlets and can thus employ a scapegoating narrative, which is usually the case. As a matter of fact, even in countries with a free press, the perception of the economic situation often follows partisan lines: voters tend to assess it more positively if their favourite party is in power. For many voters, the general state of the economy is simply too abstract.

What, however, voters concretely feel are economic policies that improve their living standards and that incumbents often intentionally implement ahead of the election in order to associate these policies with their rule and them personally — be it minimum-wage increase and pay raises for government employees in Turkey, pension increase in Serbia, child allowance increase in Poland, or tax breaks for the rich in the US. In addition, autocrats also misuse state resources by handing out cash and providing jobs and other state benefits for their loyalists in exchange for their votes.

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Yet, clientelism is only one side of autocrats' success. The subversion of democracy by forcing judges into early retirement, replacing the management of public broadcasters, or suffocating the debate in parliament is too abstract for many voters to perceive it as a direct attack on their personal interests. Those who do recognise how subverting democracy damages their interest, too, can be swayed. If they are told that this has been done in the name of protecting the 'endangered nation', even democratically conscious voters become more tolerant to such behaviour.

Using fear and resentment as tools

Indeed, such a successful activation of fear and resentment within the population is a further, important pillar of autocrats' successes. First, a clear-cut enemy of the nation is created. Then, autocrats portray themselves as the ones to take care of people's interests in this regard – be it in relation to external enemies like Brussels, the West, or immigrants from Muslim countries, or in relation to domestic enemies in the shape of liberal elites, and ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. To successfully deal with these challenges, autocrats present democratic norms and principles as obstacles that need to be eliminated. And in the face of an alleged threat to the nation, many voters ignore this subversion of democracy.

The protection of the 'endangered nation' thus becomes a primary goal that everything else is subordinated to – even in established democracies. This explains, for example, the decision of many Americans to ignore Trump undermining the rule of law, including the latest criminal charges related to the hush-money payment and classified documents: Americans who are concerned about national identity trade abstract interests related to the rule of law for a concrete one. To them, Trump is the one who

secured the conservative majority in the Supreme Court that will safeguard the allegedly endangered national identity, for instance by curtailing the right to abortion. Unfortunately, in countries like Hungary, Turkey, Serbia and Poland, many voters followed this same logic. Just think of the recent 'Lex Tusk' example and its justification.

How should progressive actors react to autocrats' strategy of satisfying specific, concrete interests, in order to have a free pass at subverting democracy in a subtle and abstract way? By recognising the power of emotions such as fear and resentment in politics on the one hand, and by focusing on concrete improvements of citizens' living standards on the other. If you ignore the former and equate the latter with GDP growth, you are making it far too easy for the autocrats.



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