THE CHALLENGES OF MODERN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract. *Modern democracy is going through a period of adaptation and redefinition, facing several challenges that test its resilience. These challenges include decreasing levels of political participation, declining citizen trust in institutions and the integration of digital technologies into the electoral process. Studies highlight that declining political participation affects the legitimacy of the democratic process and the adoption of solutions such as e-voting raises questions of security and privacy. This article explores the multiple dimensions of these challenges and analyses how trust, participation and technology intersect to define the future of democracy. Drawing on recent examples and the literature, it proposes a deeper understanding of how democracy can evolve in the context of an increasingly digitised society.*

Keywords: *democracy, legitimacy, legitimacy, political participation, digital technologies, legality*

The evolution of the concept of democracy and its multiple forms

Democracy, as a form of government of a people, is one of the most widespread political regimes in the world. However, its functioning depends crucially on the degree of participation of citizens in the process of governance. The active involvement of citizens legitimises the democratic regime and defines the political character of a country (Lijphart, 1997: p. 1-14).

The concept of democracy has evolved significantly over time, adopting various forms and models that reflect the complexity of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. This diversity of forms of democracy illustrates its adaptability to different social, economic and political contexts. At the centre of democracy is the fundamental idea of popular sovereignty, manifested both in the active participation of citizens in decision-making and in the control, they exercise over the institutions of government (Dahl, 1998).

The main ways in which democracy is organised and operates include direct democracy, which allows citizens to participate directly in the decision-making process, and representative democracy, in which the will of the people is expressed through elected representatives. Elections are an essential mechanism of representative democracy, allowing citizens to choose their representatives and express their preferences about how they want to be governed (Lijphart, 1997: p. 1-14). Direct

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democracy, on the other hand, increases the active involvement of citizens in the process of governance by providing the opportunity to decide through referendums, citizens' initiatives or popular vetoes (Qvortrup, 2014). Citizens should decide whether these tools of direct democracy should be used extensively or whether the rules of representation should prevail, which remains a controversial issue in many democratic states.

Direct democracy provides not only the right to elect leaders, but also to express opinions on important issues, thus contributing to a higher quality of civic participation. However, it should be noted that it is not the rule, but rather the exception, and is often only introduced when the mechanisms of representative democracy encounter major difficulties. In the context of the European Union, there has been a significant increase in the use of referendums, which play an important role in the integration and legitimacy of supranational institutions. Thus, while direct democracy can complement representativeness and increase citizen participation, it is more often used as a solution to democratic crises than as a regular model of governance.

In the modern era, pluralist and polyarchic democracies emphasize the diversity of centers of power and competition between interest groups, stressing the importance of compromise and diversity. Participatory democracy extends citizen involvement through consultation and deliberation, while consociational democracy ensures balance between ethnic, religious or linguistic groups in a divided society (Lijphart, 1999).

E-democracy is a recent innovation that uses digital technologies to facilitate citizen engagement and transparency in political processes (Chadwick, 2003: pp. 443-455). On the other hand, models such as elitist and social-elite democracy emphasize the influence of small groups or the elite in decision-making. In addition, informational democracy reflects the importance of access to information as a foundation for informed decision-making. Other forms, such as formal or 'window-dressing' democracy, draw attention to regimes that only formally adhere to democratic norms without implementing real principles. This diversity underlines that democracy is not a monolithic concept, but a dynamic one that adapts to social and technological change (Held, 2006).

The principles of political democracy in modern society

The development of political democracy is closely linked to the emergence of modern capitalist society and is identified with the principle of popular sovereignty. This principle guarantees the right of citizens to determine and control the governance of the nation and forms the basis of legitimate and participatory governance (Dahl, 1998). The functioning of a real democracy depends on the observance of certain fundamental principles. The state must function as a constitutional state, in which all actions are governed by law and abuses of power are prevented by clear legal mechanisms (Rawls, 1993). The constitution is the foundation of any democratic regime, providing the legal framework for fundamental rights and freedoms and for the functioning of political institutions.

Democracy requires the wide and active participation of citizens at both the macro and micro levels of society, involving them in the decision-making process and in all spheres of social life. Democratic institutions must reflect the collective will, represent

citizens' interests and promote their aspirations. Genuine representation is essential to strengthen citizens' trust in democratic institutions (Lijphart, 1999).

The mass- media play a crucial role in shaping civic and political consciousness and are an indispensable tool of modern democracy. The independence and objectivity of the media are essential to ensure accurate information and to prevent undue influence by political power or other interest groups (McQuail, 2010).

These principles ensure the stability and functioning of democracy, helping to protect citizens' rights and strengthen the rule of law.

The challenges and adaptability of contemporary democracy

Contemporary democracy has proved capable of providing effective solutions in many contexts, but it is not without its limitations, especially in times of crisis, such as the financial and banking crisis, the euro crisis or the economic crisis in the European Union. These situations have revealed the inefficiency of certain democratic mechanisms, but they have also demonstrated the adaptability of democracy in the face of new challenges. Through its flexibility, modern democracy seeks to overcome the limits of its effectiveness, find solutions to complex problems and respond to emerging crises (Dahl, 1998). However, democracy faces significant challenges that generate social and political tensions. According to D. Fisichella and R. Dahrendorf, these include unequal political representation in democratic societies, conflicts of interest between technocratic and political structures, institutional bottlenecks, and oligarchic and institutional challenges (Dahrendorf, 2003). These phenomena highlight the fragility of the democratic equilibrium, especially in the context of rapid economic, social and cultural change.

Democracy is also subject to global pressures such as the increasing influence of international organizations, the growing role of non-formal leaders in social and political life, and the diminishing power of traditional political leaders at national and international levels. These pressures reflect the complexity of contemporary global problems that require coordinated and innovative responses (Held, 2006), such as those caused by the economic, social and technological interdependence of states, but also by the impact of human activities on the environment and society. These problems include climate change, social and economic inequalities, migration, security threats and the crisis of democracy, all of which have profound global implications.

The crisis of democracy and democratic regress have become major current concerns. Declining voter turnout, rising populism and the manipulation of information by online technologies are undermining trust in democratic institutions (Freedom House, 2023). These issues require innovative approaches and international cooperation to ensure sustainable and equitable global development.

As mentioned above, democracy today faces a major challenge: low voter turnout, both in elections and referendums. Citizen participation in elections is essential for the legitimacy of democratic decisions and is one of the most important forms of political activity (Lijphart, 1997: p. 1-14). Low voter turnout raises questions about the representativeness of the democratic process and citizens' trust in political institutions. Among the main factors influencing voter apathy are a lack of interest in politics, a sense of the wastefulness of voting, excessive polarization of political discourse and a lack of

adequate civic education (Franklin, 2004). A key factor in increasing voter turnout is civic education, which provides citizens with the knowledge to understand the workings of the political system and the direct impact of voting on public decisions. At the same time, the use of modern technologies, such as digital political information platforms or e-voting, helps to reduce access barriers and encourages citizens to participate in the democratic process (Alvarez & Hall, 2004). However, the implementation of e-voting needs to be accompanied by cybersecurity and transparency measures in order to gain public trust and avoid potential manipulation.

Increasing participation also depends on reducing the socio-economic inequalities that limit access to political processes. People from disadvantaged backgrounds are often less involved, leading to persistent gaps in political representation. In this context, political inclusion programas and information campaigns targeting under-represented groups can play a crucial role.

Another modern solution for contemporary democracy is the introduction of electronic voting (e-voting), which is seen by many as an innovative idea to increase citizen participation in the electoral process. E-voting encompasses a variety of methods, including the transmission and counting of votes via digital networks such as mobile phones, private networks or the Internet. Proponents of e-voting argue that it can widen access to democratic processes for disadvantaged groups, such as people with disabilities or those living across national borders (Norris, 2001). There are two main forms of e-voting: Internet voting at the polling station and remote voting. The benefits of e-voting include increased voter mobility, reduced election costs and rapid publication of results (Alvarez & Hall, 2004). e-voting can also overcome traditional barriers, such as limited access to polling stations or travel difficulties, by providing equal opportunities for all citizens to participate (Krimmer, 2010).

Information and communication technologies (ICT) play a central role in e-democracy. By reducing the distance between citizens and political representatives, ICTs enable more direct participation and facilitate the exchange of information and political dialogue (Chadwick, 2003: p. 443-455). E-Democratization thus has the potential to revitalize representative democracy by offering new forms of participation and reducing inequalities in representation.

However, the introduction of e-voting poses challenges in terms of cybersecurity, voter confidentiality and transparency of the electoral process. The introduction of e-voting must be accompanied by measures to protect against manipulation of the results and to ensure public confidence (Trechsel et al., 2005). Despite these challenges, e-voting is an important way of adapting democracy to the needs of contemporary society, promoting civic engagement and strengthening democratic society.

The role of the European Union in promoting democracy

In the European Union (EU), democracy is undergoing a continuous process of adaptation, based on reforms and institutional innovations aimed at strengthening democratic mechanisms. Recent crises have accelerated these transformations, prompting the EU to diversify its strategies for political participation and strengthen the democratic resilience of member states. European democracy is thus constantly evolving, reflecting the need to respond to the challenges of an interconnected and fast

changing world. The European Union complements its human rights commitments with an active engagement in promoting and strengthening democracy. This approach is based on the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international and regional standards on the functioning of democratic institutions and the conduct of electoral processes (UN, 1948). Since 2015, EU support for democracy has been aligned with the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, focusing in particular on Goal 16 on accountable institutions and inclusive governance and Goal 10 on reducing inequality (UN, 2015).

On 17 November 2009, the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions on democracy support in the EU's external relations, which set out a tailored, country-specific strategy that promotes coherence and active stakeholder involvement (Council of the EU, 2009). The Agenda for Change, adopted by the European Commission in 2011, emphasizes the centrality of human rights, democracy and good governance in EU development policy (European Commission, 2011).

In 2012, the EU agreed a strategic framework on human rights and democracy and has since implemented three action plans to translate these principles into rules. Following the Arab Spring in 2011, the European Neighborhood Policy was updated to reflect the principle of "more for more", linking EU assistance to progress in democratic transition. Countries that have undertaken political reforms have benefited from incentives such as economic integration, extended financial assistance, increased mobility of citizens and wider access to the EU's internal market (Council of the EU, 2012).

In October 2019, the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions reaffirming the principles established in 2009 and identifying new challenges to democracy. These include the undermining of democratic processes and institutions, declining public trust in institutions and politicians, shrinking democratic space for civil society, violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and manipulation through various online technologies (Council of the EU, 2019). These issues have been identified as urgent priorities for EU external action.

In November 2020, the Council reaffirmed the Union's commitment to accelerate efforts to promote democracy by adopting the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for 2020-2024. The plan has five main strands, including "Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies" (Council of the EU, 2020). It should also be recalled that the crucial role of civil society was underlined by the EU Council in its 2012 Conclusions "Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development": Europe's engagement with civil society in external relations". These were reaffirmed in the conclusions of 19 June 2017, which underline support for an accountable and resilient civil society as an important tool for good governance and the rule of law in global democracies (Council of the EU, 2017). In the longer term, the EU has developed policies that integrate human rights and democratic principles, including country-specific strategies to prioritize actions and objectives. Human rights and democracy clauses in international agreements allow for the suspension of cooperation in cases of serious violations. In addition, the EU has financial instruments to support civil society organizations working to promote human rights and democracy (European Commission, 20/21), which I will discuss later.

Election observation is an essential tool of the European Union (EU) to support democratic transitions in partner countries, to promote human rights and the rule of law,

and to contribute to conflict prevention and peace building. EU Election Observation Missions (EOMs) analyze electoral processes over the long term, from the start of the campaign to the announcement of final results and the handling of disputes. EOMs are deployed at the invitation of the host country and include both long-term observers (who monitor all stages of the electoral process) and short-term observers (STOs) who focus on polling day and vote counting (European Union, 2016).

The final report of the EOM provides both conclusions and key recommendations for electoral reform, and is a benchmark for future EU assistance initiatives. In addition to observation activities, the EU provides technical and material support to partner countries in the electoral field with the aim of strengthening institutional capacity and promoting reforms throughout the electoral cycle (European Commission, 2021).

In November 2021, the EU and its Member States launched the Team Europe for Democracy (TED) initiative to coordinate support for democratization worldwide. TED is based on three pillars: researching best practices in democracy support, creating a global TED network, and providing national expertise in supporting democratization (European External Action Service, 2021). The EU also actively participates in multilateral fora such as the UN, the Council of Europe and the OSCE, promoting democracy as a fundamental principle. In addition, EU leaders participate in the US-led Summit for Democracy, a forum to promote collective responses to global democratic backsliding and support the renewal of democratic values (Summit for Democracy, 2021). The European Union uses several financial instruments to promote democracy and human rights beyond its borders, providing financial and technical assistance to strengthen democratic values and the rule of law. The main instruments include the Instrument for Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation (IVDCI) - Global Europe and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) for the period 2021-2027. IPA III aims to support candidate and potential candidate countries in their efforts to meet the necessary criteria for EU membership, such as democratic reforms, strengthening the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights (European Commission, 2021). An example of a project funded under IPA III is the Interreg IPA Romania-Serbia Programme 2021-2027, which promotes cross-border cooperation between the two countries. This programme supports initiatives aimed at strengthening institutional capacities and promoting democratic values in the region (Musat & Partners, 2024).

On the other hand, IVCDCI - Global Europe is the European Union's main financial mechanism for external actions for the period 2021-2027. It finances programas supporting sustainable development, stability and international cooperation, with a total budget of €79.5 billion. The promotion of EU values and interests at global level is supported through programas to promote democracy, human rights, gender equality and the rule of law, to support institution building and governance in partner countries, and to fight disinformation and promote public diplomacy. It also supports civil society and local organizations by funding NGOs and local actors for community development and other projects aimed at increasing citizens' participation in decision-making. The IVCDCI is a flexible instrument that allows the EU to respond quickly to new global challenges, to provide long-term support as well as solutions to emergency situations and, importantly, to operate independently of agreements with partner country governments, funding Election Observation Missions (EOMs) and other complementary

initiatives related to electoral processes (European External Action Service, 2022). One example is the Active Citizens Fund programme, funded by the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021, which has invested €48 million in 325 projects focused on promoting democracy, human rights and social inclusion. These initiatives have actively engaged more than 380,000 citizens across the country, contributing to the strengthening of civil society and active citizenship, as well as increasing the capacity of vulnerable groups (Structural Funds, 2023). In addition, the European Commission's CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme provides funding to civil society organisations working to promote respect for the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. This programme supports organisations in their efforts to protect, promote and inform the public about fundamental rights and democratic values, and to promote dialogue, transparency and good governance (European Commission Representation in Romania, 2024).

Another important instrument is the European Endowment for Democracy (EDF), established in 2013. This fund, which operates autonomously as a foundation under private law, provides rapid and flexible support to political and civil society actors involved in democratic transitions, with a particular focus on the EU's eastern and southern neighbourhood. The lack of complex bureaucratic formalities makes the EDF particularly efficient and allows it to respond quickly to the needs of its partners (European Endowment for Democracy, 2023). An example of an EDF-funded project is the Civil Society and Non-State Actors Strengthening Programme (European Commission). This programme aims to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations in ACP countries to participate actively in democratic processes and promote human rights at local and national levels. The EDF has also funded initiatives such as the Support Programme for Elections and Democratic Processes, which provides technical and financial assistance for the organisation of free and fair elections and the strengthening of democratic institutions in partner countries (European Commission). Through these instruments, the European Union maintains its leading role in the promotion of democratic values worldwide, contributing to political stability and sustainable development in partner regions.

Challenges to democracy in Romania

Romania has been criticised by European policymakers and some Member States for the persistence of institutionalised corruption and the slow pace of democratisation compared to other post-communist countries. This situation can be explained by the way in which the new political class was formed after 1989, characterised by limited access to intellectual personalities and the promotion of individuals who lacked the qualities of elite political leaders, such as dedication, responsibility or political insight (Gallagher, 2005). The failure to build a credible and competent political class have had a negative impact both on the functioning of the public administration and on Romania's position in the European Union. Instead of competence and meritocracy, people were promoted according to patronage criteria, which reduced the country's administrative capacity and damaged Romania's image in European decision-making forums. Internal political conflicts, often without dialogue and compromise, were also exported to the European arena, contributing to the erosion of the country's prestige (Stan, 2013). In recent years, Romania has experienced political instability, with short-lived governments and a lack

of coherence in public policy. Examples such as the liberalization of energy prices at an inopportune moment or the abandonment of coal-fired power generation have demonstrated the lack of effective strategic planning, while other countries are reconsidering these energy capacities (European Commission, 2022). Populism has become a prominent feature of the Romanian political landscape, reinforced by the decreasing accountability of politicians and the lack of morality of some candidates put forward for public office. Election campaigns often reflect these weaknesses, focusing on populist promises rather than real solutions to citizens' problems (Gherghina, 2014).

Although Romania has made significant progress by joining the EU and NATO, differences with Western European states remain, mainly due to the lack of political accountability and the distance between the parties and the electorate. Parties not only disregard voters' interests, but also contribute to a crisis of confidence in democracy, which affects both the domestic scene and the country's international positioning (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020). The electoral process in Romania reflects a number of shortcomings that affect public confidence in democracy and the political class. Exaggerated and unfulfilled electoral promises, deliberately made, generate an "inflation of demands" and turn political competition into a demagogic unfolding. The electorate, often insufficiently informed, is misleading, leading to a decline in trust in politicians and lower voter turnout (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). The recent election campaigns in Bucharest and the 2024 presidential elections have highlighted the lack of responsibility and morality of some candidates. According to the decision of the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR), the electoral process was seriously flawed by aggressive disinformation campaigns, algorithmic manipulation of social media and non-compliance with electoral legislation. The CCR annulled the first round of the presidential election, invoking Article 246(f) of the Constitution, which requires it to supervise compliance with the electoral process (CCR, 2024). Although the CCR's decision was justified by the seriousness of the violations, it raised serious questions about the involvement of state institutions such as the SRI, the SIE, the Permanent Electoral Council and the Ministry of the Interior, which were passive rather than proactive. According to the Attorney General's Office, the subsequent investigations targeted crimes of electoral corruption, money laundering and digital manipulation, demonstrating the systemic dimension of the problems in the electoral process (Attorney General's Office, 2024). The post-cancellation context is tense, with civil society calling for transparency, clear rules for the online environment and a level playing field for all candidates. Digital campaigns, while effective, need to be well-regulated to avoid excessive manipulation and algorithmic exploitation, thus ensuring a level playing field for electoral debates (Howard, 2018). Romania needs to learn from these systemic failures and prioritize the correction of electoral processes through effective cooperation between authorities, political parties and civil society. Without concrete measures, the risk of an ongoing crisis of confidence in democracy remains significant.

Conclusions

For a democracy to function for the benefit of its citizens, it is essential that democratic institutions act 'according to the law', respecting legal norms and democratic legitimacy acquired through free and fair elections. However, the legitimacy that

generates social trust and institutional order can become vulnerable in the face of economic, social or political crises. Such vulnerabilities, exacerbated by globalisation and economic recessions, fuel, public discontent, often expressed through civil disobedience or mass protests, which undermine trust in politicians and state institutions (Lefort, 1988).

While globalisation has brought significant benefits, it has also increased the challenges to democracy. The intervention of corporations and capital markets in policymaking often undermines the authority of states and fuels perceptions that they have become more powerful than national governments (Stiglitz, 2002). In addition, the gap between the demands of society and the responsiveness of the political system - limited by the competence and resources of ruling parties - contributes to what is perceived as a 'democratic deficit' (Dahl, 1998). The weaknesses of democracy are also reflected in complex bureaucratic decision-making procedures and the difficulty of managing social conflicts. These weaknesses can only be overcome through the effective functioning of the rule of law, a redefinition of politics by associating the political class with morality and law, and a clear separation of powers in the state (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020). Major changes in contemporary society - including economic and social crises, ideological crises and waves of civil disobedience - require the continuous adaptation of democracy. Building an effective democratic society does not mean building an ideal society, but a functioning society that guarantees the rule of law, fundamental rights and the separation of powers. The ultimate goal of democracy must be its effectiveness as a system of governance capable of responding to global challenges (Held, 2006).

Contemporary democracy is a dynamic system that can only respond to complex challenges by constantly adapting and strengthening its institutional mechanisms. However, this adaptability depends on respect for the rule of law, the promotion of meritocracy and the proper regulation of external influences such as corporations or global markets. In the face of economic and social crises, democracy must demonstrate efficiency, transparency and the ability to protect citizens' interests. Romania, for example, needs reforms that will restore confidence in institutions and reduce the democratic deficit, thus providing a sustainable model in the context of an increasingly integrated European Union.

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