



Old and New Democracy

Abstract: The paper examines the change in the meaning and practice of democratic values in interstate and domestic political relations. The main ideas of democracy focus on the state order which is understood as a general good with three branches of power, laws on citizens' rights and the free market. Foreign policy characteristics of the new democracy reality are the prevalence of globalization over national interests, the new role of the media, wars between democratic countries, growing hatred and phobias. Internal changes in democracy are also prominent: the political role of money, non-procedural decision-making, the relationship between the minority and the majority, and the power of the media. Serbian democracy is burdened by external as well as by domestic pressures: the legacy of Yugoslavism, the struggle for Kosovo and Metohija, the absence of the desired national consensus. The conclusion underlines the increasing criticism of these processes in foreign and domestic democracy which bring its values and institutions into question and point to a tendency of self-contradiction of democracy in the new reality.

Keywords: democracy, foreign and domestic characteristics, Serbia

Introduction

The idea of democracy is conceptualized in the middle of the 19th century, while it was practically formed during the 20th century as an opposite to dictatorships, fascism and forms of personal power. Its cognitive foundation was in equal rights of citizens, freely expressed opinion, and authority that gains legitimacy in general elections. However, the classical meaning of democracy has been under-

mined by new opinions, behaviours and political actions. Within its auspices, there are widespread manifestations of anarchist behaviour, hate speech, lies, the practice of violent struggle for power, and interference by foreign Western states in the sovereignty of other, smaller states (including the attacks by armed forces), the rise of nationalism in multinational states, the increasingly prominent role of domestic and foreign money in politics. These and other factors have caused a problem to the essential

[1] zoran.a@sezampro.rs

meaning of democracy – non-violent establishment of the general interest in society and the state.

At the end of 2025, the agency “Ipsos” published the survey about the state of democracy in several West European countries. The results show that the majority of citizens (86% in France) is concerned for the future of democracy. A threat to democracy is seen in the distribution of disinformation, corruption, absence of politicians’ responsibility, the rise of extremism (*Politika*, 17th November 2025). Unprecedented violence occurred in France after the local election because of the increasing lack of security and worsening living conditions (*Novosti*, 28th March 2026).

of institutions achieving individual and general freedoms and interests, (c) non-violent competition and opposition of political and non-political groups in the struggle for power, (d) an individual’s right to fulfil his/her intellectual, moral, aesthetic and hedonistic needs. On that basic idea, many theories of democracy have been built, which differently define the relations between citizens and the state. From the perspective of the sovereignty of power, it is possible to distinguish national and civil democracy. According to the manner of decision-making, there are majority democracy and consociative democracy, while from the perspective of political history we can distinguish between classical (protective, developmental, direct) and modern (competitive, pluralist, participatory, consensual) understanding of democracy (Avramović, 2000).

Old reality of democracy

Democracy is one of the leading concepts in modern West Europe. Its basic meanings appeared in the 19th century as the criticism of non-democratic forms of power guided by the idea of the state and society of general freedoms, equality and justice for everyone. The main idea – “inalienable rights to freedom, life and the pursuit of happiness” – expressed in the 1776 Declaration of Independence and the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. It was believed that those inalienable rights were provided by the state’s democratic order.

Despite the conceptual, normative and socio-historical differences in understanding democracy, it is possible to distinguish *a common core of the meaning* in all theoretical traditions of thought about democracy. Democracy is: (a) a form of government and social order, (b) a system

New reality of democracy

There is no decisive institutional and political gap between the old and the new meaning of democracy. In the new reality of democracy, *old anthropology* (human nature with intersections of good and evil, lies and truth, selfishness and altruism) and *the institutions of power division* have been retained. In other words, the struggle for acquisition, the will to power, and a potentially anti-democratic personality have been retained. An anti-democratic (non-democratic) personality is recognized by an obsessive idea of believing in a just cause, a mission in society. *The messianic idea* can also appear in the guise of democracy and not only in totalitarian systems: it is the political idea that should rescue

the world from its evils and uncertain future (for example, America's self-perception as the leader of the whole world).

What is new in relation to the old meaning and practice? The new reality of democracy is characterized by a transition from *procedural* democracy, in which the most important rules of the game in the power struggle of the minority and the majority, to *substantial* democracy, which is dominated by will, interests, need for rhetoric about human rights, open society, and free market. This new practice should be supplemented by innovation that was not perceived by the founders of the opinions about democracy. They primarily considered the national, state concept of democracy and not the expansion of the Western system at the expense of other countries with the aid of the globalist ideology. In old democracy, main medias were newspapers, while in new democracy those are powerful expansive electronic media. The thinkers of old democracy were under the illusion that democratic countries did not wage wars against one another. The new reality of democratic states is manifested at two levels: in foreign and domestic policies.

Interstate (external) aspects of the new reality of democracy

1. *National democracy grows into global democracy.* Since 1989, the political speech of the modern Western world has been dominated by the word *democracy*. Theoretical thinkers and political elites send a single political message to the "international community" (community? – an inadequate sociological concept, added by the author): the world will be democratic since democracy has no political alternative. The concept

of global democratization is understood as: a) expansion of the Euro-American model of democracy (the EU) to other parts of the European and world territories, b) this process is taking place under a strong political-pragmatic American influence. Under the impact of globalism, national identity spills over into standards and typification or uniformization of economic, political, cultural and entertainment life. These identity meanings that have been built for centuries, such as history, freedom, male-female relations, customs, mythology and understanding good and evil – all these are now exposed to a great pressure of the new reality of democracy that builds its construct of identity on postmodernist "freely wandering individual". (The slogan that is frequently sent to small nations is: "Let us forget the past, let us turn to the future".)

2. *The new role of media in democracy.* New media play a huge role in the new reality of democracy. While in old media (newspapers, telephone, television) the valid rule was "one-to-many", in new media there is the rule "many-to-many", i.e., every individual on the internet (web) is potentially in the domestic and world game of representation and participation. A private opinion becomes general for one part of the public on the web. The internet (mobile telephone) is a means of communication through which the fragmented subject (man) transfers his experience and opinion into the hyperreal (virtual) communication environment. The democratic media public is more a product of "freely wandering individuals" on the web rather than an institution of a democratic order. In other words, non-democratic media public may also form in a democratic sys-



Photo: Freepik

tem. On the scene, there is an ongoing struggle of these two forms of media public in a democratic order (Jevtović, 2003).

In new democracy, a struggle is waged between media anarchism and “digital totalitarianism”. However, the means of this struggle are in the hands of private digital media companies (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram etc.), which are more powerful than the state. The owners and anonymous employees of these companies close the accounts of the head of the

state (Donald Trump) and have access to the users’ private data. A number of other consequences – intellectual, social, emotional, physical – are not the subject of this paper.

3. *Democracies wage wars against one another.* The most recent European experience denies the basic claim of classical democracy thinkers that the states with a democratic order do not wage wars against one another. Where there is democracy, there are no wars (Popper, 1993). In fact, a) in former Socialist Federal Republic of Yu-

goslavia, wars broke out after the 1990 democratic elections; b) the democratic member-states of the NATO bombed the democratic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999; c) Russia and Ukraine, both with democratic governments, entered the war conflict in 2022.

The attack of the NATO member-states against the Serbs was nothing in comparison to the NATO's arrival at the border of Russia and its help to Ukraine in the war against Russia in 2022. As a matter of fact, with the EU and European countries (except for Serbia), the total war was declared against Russia, the war that does not imply an armed conflict, but includes all other kinds of war. Europe has started speaking in a single political voice, in collective hatred towards Russians and Russia. How should this democratic one-mindedness of Europe be understood?

The NATO defends Western democracies, but it attacks or threatens other states. The greatest threat to democracy comes from those actors acting in its name and not from open opponents of this order of government. There is no state without military power, but the EU has joined forces with the USA at the head of the alliance called NATO. Now in Europe we have got an armed democracy that is spreading (Avramović, 2012; 2014).

4. *Democracy does not guarantee state sovereignty and independence.* The governments and intellectual circles of Western countries (the West and America) *openly interfere in the democratic life* of certain countries. The forms of interference are different: mild messages are sent, sometimes even warnings about what should be done; anti-regime NGOs are invited or visited; scientific conferences with selected guests are organized and, in particu-

lar, "positive politicians" are promoted, thus openly discriminating legally elected representatives of citizens. Part of this game is also the policy of "double standards". Principles and charters created by the West are thrown away while pragmatic standard are applied to small nations and states: seizing the Province of Kosovo and Metohija, the refusal to recognize the referendums in Crimea, Donbas and Catalonia.

5. A growing problem in the new reality of democracy refers to *ethnic prejudice, hatred and phobia*. How is it possible to explain the ethnic racism of a democratic government (and a large part of the public) against another democratic state and nation? It is not the same when such prejudice is spread by smaller groups of racists and when such attitudes come from the ranks of political representation or government. The Western man is also able to hate. He hated in the monarchy, he hated in the republic, and he also hates in democracy. The racist statements of Western politicians about Serbs will never be forgotten: "Let the Serbs drown in their own stench" (Helmut Kohl); "The Serbs are a nation without laws and faith, the nation of bandits and terrorists" (Jacques Chirac), "The war against the Serbs is the war of good against evil, the war of civilization against barbarianism" (Tony Blair). Even John Paul II, the Roman pope (famous Wojtyła) voiced his opinion: "You should bomb the Serbs" (in the same vein, the US President Biden said that the Russian president was a "butcher"). Hatred is a reaction to being thwarted from achieving a certain goal or desire. In other words, it is a response to frustration. And it was caused by the refusal of non-Western governments to follow the will of the

Western ones. Specifically, of Serbia to renounce Kosovo and Metohija. Every unfulfilled wish of the Western governments after 2012 found the culprit in Moscow: the Russian child being expelled from school in Norway, the works of Dostoyevsky and Tchaikovsky being prohibited in Italy and Zagreb. Who knows? But a book of evidence has been written about outpours of hatred towards the Russian man in Western democracies. The Russian has replaced the Serb.

38 |

Domestic, internal aspects of the new reality of democracy. Apart from the foreign policy level, the new reality of democratic states is also manifested at the domestic policy level.

1. What is the basic lever that drives individuals and social groups, political parties in the new reality of democracy? *Money power* in modern democratic societies is no longer a secret. Serbia is no exception. Modern civil societies (West Europe and America) have placed money in the centre of their existence and the entire life of society takes places around the profit orientation. According to an American saying, “money is the mother’s milk of politics”. There is no power of politics without the power of money.

2. Has the new reality of democracy solved the problem of decision-making about public matters? The concept of *procedure* can be so normed that it provides (does not provide) adequate political representation. On the other hand, citizens elect but do not rule. Decisions are made on their behalf and despite formal power division, the prime minister or the president has the keys of war and peace. In his memoir (*The Journey*, 2010), Tony Blair recalls Kosovo, i.e., the bombing of Serbia in 1999.

By his own admission, he was the main architect and performer of war works. This is what he says: “From the very beginning I have been completely ready for a military solution... I was unwavering in my determination not to pacify the matter, but to bring it to an end” (Avramović, 2012; 2014).

3. The new reality of democracy has not resolved *the majority/minority relationship* in a political struggle either. The classical idea of a public, free discussion that practically resolves the majority/minority relationship in power is less and less observed. Elections in democratic countries (from America to Serbia) show that the minority does not want to respect the will of the majority of citizens. The conflict of Trump and Biden in the USA in 2021 announced something that had not existed in the past – the legality and legitimacy of elections are being challenged.

4. Domestic political *lies* are “justified” by the struggle for power. The opposition has a new means – new media. Print media are being displaced while the electronic ones are advancing. Social media have become the main communication channel. Every voice about political matters goes independently on the social media. The democracy of media anarchism has been entered. Disinformation and extremism in democracy are its inevitable product. Everyday insults, accusations, threats: “Tying the tongues of slanderers is like building a gate in a field”, as a character of a novel says.

Serbia and old-new democracy

During the 20th century Serbia lived through two states (Yugoslavia and Serbia), three political

orders (monarchy, dictatorship, democracy) and two social systems (capitalism, socialism). As for the democratic order, Serbia had democracy (1903–1914), defective Yugoslav democracy within monarchy (1919–1941) and the new democracy after the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (as of 1990).

Those periods witnessed the combination of the concepts and practice of peaceful and violent forms of public and political life. The Serbian political mosaic is filled with the intertwining of reason and passion, Serbian political figures, leaders and followers, power and opposition – in the irreconcilable struggle for power; problems of political knowledge and language, the struggle for Kosovo and Metohija in new circumstances, troubles with the European Union, the legacy of Yugoslavism.

Some problems of modern Serbian democracy have been *inherited from Yugoslavism*. From one unfinished job, Serbia entered another, as history has shown, unfruitful state enterprise. Plenty of energy, knowledge, establishment of institutions, and political careers was thrown into an abyss. How is it possible these far-reaching political and social mistakes in the history of the Serbian people? After 1914, the Serbian state immersed its name and institutions in the state which was torn by national egoisms and the struggle against the alleged “Great Serbian nationalism” as a pretext for own national extremism. This also continued in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Seventy-two years of the Yugoslav state were an involution for Serbian democracy, as well as for the disintegration of the Serbian people which, paradoxically, made the greatest

sacrifice for the South Slavic brotherhood and life in a single country.

Another inherited problem of Serbian democracy is definitely *Kosovo and Metohija*. As of 1945, Serbia has fully helped the development of this province: economically, institutionally, culturally and politically. When democracy was institutionalized in 1990, Kosovo Albanians understood and applied democracy in a separatist way. For a whole decade they refused to participate in the democratic politics of the Republic of Serbia before the NATO bombing of Serbia because of the “humanitarian catastrophe”, but in fact because of the plan to seize this province, and from the states with a democratic order.

The main question is posed to Serbian political parties and figures from a democratic standpoint: Is the Serbian consensus about Kosovo and Metohija possible? Furthermore, how to wage a struggle in democracy against those forces that renounce Kosovo and Metohija? In the struggle for defending the Province, Serbian democracy relies on six institutions: the Serbian state, the Serbian Orthodox Church, opposition political parties, intellectuals, media, and educational institutions.

New problems of Serbian democracy are caused by fierce party and personal political struggles for power. They are stronger than general interests and they cause the crisis of democracy that affects social, family and personal life. In the absence of *minimal national consensus*, democracy is equally in the hands of hidden and authentic democrats.

The difficulties in achieving a minimum consensus within democracy derive from *Serbian mentality*. Serbian politicians carry in themselves

a surplus of emotions, lack of the sense of reality, and problematic political plans. Slobodan Jovanovic correctly observed that the inter-party struggle for power revealed “our impetuousness and exclusivity... Hence the inclination towards one-sided and exaggerated decisions”. In recent Serbian history, if we compare politics with other spheres – economy, science, army, art, sport – we will easily conclude that it is the weakest in poorest in quality, results and figures, both in non-democratic and in democratic systems.

In Serbian democracy, there is an ongoing struggle between *procedural* and *substantial democracy* (no democracy means dictatorship). Intellectuals, politicians and scientists are still arguing about how to answer the question.: What is true democracy? In public, it can be heard that “we are living in a dictatorship”, that “there is neither justice nor freedom”. Such criticism of Serbian democracy could be heard particularly during the student blockades of 2024/2025. Here is an unusual example of the negation of procedural democracy. The Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade made a public announcement (Decision of the Teaching Scientific Council of 9th December 2024) that plenums were a real road to democracy. “Plenums are the students’ democratic space and way of decision-making and so far, they have enabled all students to participate in them”. The democratic space without a procedure, against the law, the prohibition of studying! The democratic space filled with violence! And something like this has been signed by the university professors convinced that they “defend freedom”! How is it possible to explain the fact that knowledge retreats before student voluntarism (Avramović, 2025).

The problems in Serbian democracy are also created by those governments, media and intellectual circles of the Western countries (America) that openly *interfere* in the democratic life of Serbia. Such external discrimination of political institutions of the elected representatives of one country is definitely a way of producing and maintaining the crisis of democracy. One of the means of interference is the failure to observe the electoral results in case they do not appeal to the Western rulers.

Final considerations

Ideals are destined not to come true. Interests, needs and values with more or less passion also pace democratic systems of governance. Tolerance, reason and freedom were put aside when capitalist interests and needs had to be protected by military force.

Democracy is a *problem* at the end of the second and the beginning of the third millennium, just as it was in the era of Plato and Aristotle. Its problems derive from the decisions that are legitimized by democratic institutions, from political natures and passions, knowledge and beliefs, virtues and faults of those serving it, but also from its most profound values – freedom and equality.

Negative emotions also thrive in democracy. Numerous thinkers point to the impossibility to remove envy from democracy (everyone envies everyone in different spheres of life). Furthermore, there is a tendency of weakening the authority of those in power, the virtue of discipline and obedience is becoming weaker because the individualist view of life is ever stronger.

The question is whether the states with democratic institutions are deprived of encouragement and development of non-democratic orientations in society. The analyses of modern capitalist societies warn that these societies are not immune to non-democratic behaviours, attitudes and ideas. Potentials of non-democratic behaviours and opinions exist in every society, including democratic society.

Another type of criticism is theoretical. John Keane's research shows that in every "democratic order a germ of despotism is hiding" which is manifested in certain spheres and activities. We could apply the following criticism of American democracy by Noam Chomsky: "We always oppose democracy where we cannot control its results". Academic action in Serbia might be defined in a similar manner: "We always oppose Serbian democracy where we cannot control our requests".

Democracy cannot remove struggle for power and governance from the national and international

social and political game. What will be democracy? What is the future of democracy? Domestic conflicts and wars. Today's question is: What will democracies do when the whole world becomes democratic? Does democracy have future without the military balance in the world, without the reform of the NATO alliance?

Where can we find hope and optimism in the modern world, in which we witness the crisis of democracy? The criticism of the new democratic reality often encounters the following objection – is there a better order? That is wrong. First of all, the democratic system cannot remove criticism from the public opinion and speech. Second, this system is not deprived of internal conceptual and practical problems. Third, at what point do non-democratic or anti-democratic phenomena become a threat to democracy? Fourth, pessimism is not negation. The question is at what point of political life *self-contradiction* of democracy begins.

References

Antonić, S. (2025). *Neocolonialism and inversive nationalism: The case of Serbia*. Beograd: Filozofski fakultet. [In Serbian]

Avramović, Z. (1998). *The other face of democracy*. Beograd: Filip Višnjić. [In Serbian]

Avramović, Z. (2000). *Democracy in school textbooks*. Beograd: Institut za pedagoška istraživanja. [In Serbian]

Avramović, Z. (2002). *The troubles of democracy in Serbia*. Novi Sad: Old Commerce. [In Serbian]

Avramović, Z. (2007). *Serbs in the ghetto of democracy*. Novi Sad: Orfeus. [In Serbian]

Avramović, Z. (2014). *Democracy and the bombing*. Beograd: Catena mundi. [In Serbian]

Avramović, Z. (2024). *Serbs in the spider web of the West*. Novi Sad: Prometej. [In Serbian]

42 | Avramović, Z. (2025a). *Intellectuals and Serbian public*. Pančevo: Mali Nemo. [In Serbian]

Avramović, Z. (2025b). *University under the auspices of blockaders*. Beograd: Kulturno-prosvetna zajednica Srbije. [In Serbian]

Jevtović, Z. (2003). *Public opinion and politics*. Beograd: Centar za savremenu žurnalistiku. [In Serbian]

Keane, J. (1995). *The media and democracy*. Beograd: Filip Višnjić. [In Serbian]

Popper, K. (1993). *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Beograd: BIGZ. [In Serbian]