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Is the West Wobbling on its Democratic Pedestal?

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ABSTRACT

The West has been arguing for decades that the Developing World and Post-Soviet World should be democratic. It argues that democracy is the best form of government and that countries around the world should embrace democracy or face certain kinds of punishment such as a reduction in development aid. It is not the purpose of this paper to argue the benefits of democracy over other forms of government but instead to argue that, with democratic norms under attack in much of the West, that the West is no longer in a moral position to claim to be the promoters of democracy internationally. This paper will discuss events, laws, and actions by Western Countries that are inimical to democracy and argue that if the West wants to regain what it sees as the democratic moral high ground it must alter its policies to being more democratic itself.

Keywords: *Democracy, Laws, Government, Development, Western*

Introduction

The United States and Western Europe have for decades held themselves up to the rest of the world as beacons of light in a world beset by governments who are unresponsive to the needs of their people. The West has argued that it is critical for countries across the globe to be more like the West and embrace democracy. Democracy, after all, provides governments that at least in theory represent the will of the people of the countries in question.

To this end the West has attempted various means to enforce democratic “norms” on much of the rest of the world. It has done this through a variety of tactics. These include public information on how democracy helps societies, and on the success of Western sponsored democracies in places like post-World War II Germany and Japan, whose regimes flourished after rising from the ashes of that terrible conflict. The West points to more recent successes in Eastern Europe where formerly communist countries like Poland, Czechia, and Croatia have become free democracies and been accepted into membership of the European Union which holds itself up as a democratic model to be emulated by the rest of the world. Indeed, these countries have prospered peacefully after the overthrow of Fascism, Communism and after an end to some of the wars spawned by the collapse of the communist world.

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Other methods are more inductive. The West often ties development aid and assistance to the increase of democratic norms in much of the Developing World. Recently Uganda was threatened with loss of assistance if their parliament voted “wrong” on certain social policies. Other countries have also been treated with the loss of aid over actions taken by those states that are viewed as undemocratic. Democracy has been heavily tied to the idea of human rights with the belief that one helps ensure the other.

Still other methods have been much more coercive. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and overthrew its dictator Saddam Husein. The stated goal was to eliminate the threat of weapons of mass destruction that Iraq was accused of having. There was, however, and undercurrent in United States policy that wanted to remake Iraq into a Western style democracy. Similarly, French involvement in the collapse of Moamar Quaddafi’s regime in Libya was not only to remove a dictator but to bring democracy to Libya. Further assistance was given to rebels in Syria in an attempt to remove the Assad Regime and bring democracy to Syria.

In Europe much of the public discourse over aid to Ukraine boils down to the argument that Ukraine is a free democracy that has been invaded by its authoritarian neighbor Russia. There are other arguments as well, like an emphasis on state sovereignty, but the goal of protecting democracy in Ukraine is one of the major justifications for sending arms and money to the government in Kyiv.

Unfortunately, in recent years the West has been disassembling many of its core democratic principles and institutions. It does this while at the same time lecturing the rest of the world on the need for and the importance of democracy.

It is not the purpose of this paper to judge if democracy is a better form of government than others but instead to argue that if the West wishes to remain a legitimate force and voice for the expansion of democracy globally it must bring its policies and cultures back into line with long established democratic norms. If it is unwilling or unable to do this, it must cease pretending that it holds a morally superior high ground relative to much of the rest of the world and accept that its own systems of government are indeed becoming less democratic.

Literature Review and Placement

The literature used in this paper will consist of a combination of books and recent news stories. As this paper focuses on issues that are relatively new in the West a large part of the literature consulted will be from new websites that are widely known if not widely used in the West such as the Government of the United Kingdom’s Website and Al-Jazeera. This paper will also employ information from other important internet-based news sources as well as scholarly texts.

It fits into the literature that focuses on Comparative Politics and International Relations especially that which discusses international propaganda and differing cultural norms. It will also add to the literature that discusses state control of, or influence of, states by other states through attempts to reproduce one’s form of government globally.

Plan of Study

This paper will employ case studies to show that the West is failing at several key indicators of democracy. It will start with a review of several important indicators,

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discuss the important psychological concept of Cognitive Dissonance, and then move into the case studies.

The first case study will be lack of popular votes for leaders who make important decisions. In the United States this will focus on the reduction in secret balloting especially in several jurisdictions of the United States, through mail-in voting. This paper will not pass judgment on whether mail in balloting is good or bad, as it may very well be good policy or may very well not be, those questions are beyond the scope of this paper. It will instead focus on its not being democratic. In the European Union, the paper will focus on the unelected European Commission and the great deal of power it wields over policy in the European Union.

The second case study will focus on the lack of the ability of political actors to make their cases to the population at large, due to the censorship of important media outlets such as Meta and Twitter (now called X). It will point to these social media organizations.

The third case study will revolve around the suppression of free speech in Europe and Canada.

This paper will then conclude with an analysis of the information gathered in the case studies to demonstrate that the Collective West is no longer in a position to assume their stated moral high ground of being the protectors of and proponents of global democracy due the fact that democratic norms are increasingly lacking in many of the states of the West.

Democratic Indicators

For a democracy to be true democracy it must meet certain criteria. The website Our World Democracy which is a registered charity located in the United Kingdom ranks democracy based “on the extent to which citizens can choose their political leaders in free and fair elections, enjoy civil liberties, prefer democracy over other political systems, can and do participate in politics, and have a functioning government that acts on their behalf.” (Our World in Data Website) The United States of America and Europe are turning their backs on such factors as civil liberties especially freedom of speech and are turning away from free and fair elections in the choosing of leaders.

Cognitive Dissonance

People generally do not happily give support to obviously inconsistent beliefs. It happens, but psychologically people do not like the feelings it induces. In 1957, Dr. Leon Festinger, a Cognitive Psychologist, proposed a psychological theory called Cognitive Dissonance. He argued “that any perceived inconsistency among various aspects of knowledge, feelings, and behavior sets up an unpleasant internal state called *cognitive dissonance*, which people try to reduce whenever possible.” (Gleitman, 458) According to noted Psychiatrists Dr. Harold I. Kaplan and Dr. Benjamin J. Sadock “when dissonance becomes too great, the person changes ways of thinking or behaving so that there is less disharmony.” (Kaplan and Sadock, 114) This means that open contradictions are inherently uncomfortable for people and they, if they can, often challenge those contradictions. The importance this holds for this work is that if the Collective West argues in favor of global democracy, but is seen to instead actually have policies antithetical to democracy, people will be

more likely to challenge the Collective West's stated position on democracy as contradictory and, therefore, less valid. If the West wants to promote democracy and the moral high ground it claims by doing so then it will have to hold itself to the highest of democratic standards, something this work will demonstrate that the West is not currently doing.

First Case Study

Lack of Democracy in the European Union

Threat to Secret Ballot in the United States

The European Union as an intergovernmental organization representing twenty-seven countries. These countries have given up some of their internal sovereignty in order to be part of this large grouping. In order to become a European Union member state a country has to show that it has certain policies enacted, including democratic political institutions. The organization itself argues that it stands up for "European Values." "European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Monday vowed to defend democracy from those who sought to destroy it." (Rinke and Alkousaa) One of the most important of those values is the belief in a democratic system of government. Von der Leyen goes on to be quoted saying "The most important thing is democracy, the rule of law that we defend, and the peace that we have together," (Rinke and Alkousaa).

Ursula von der Leyen herself sits at the head of a bureaucratically controlled polity - a bureaucracy she manages and is in charge of. "The Commission is the EU institution that has the monopoly on legislative initiative and important executive powers in policies such as competition and external trade. It is the principal executive body of the European Union and is formed by a College of members composed of one Commissioner per Member State." (European Parliament Website) While there is an elected parliament in the European Union the executive (the European Commission) is selected by another organization the European Council in consultation with member states and then ratified by the parliament. (European Parliament Website). The European Council is composed of "the heads of state or government of the members of the European Union." (European Parliament Website 2) While the leaders of the Council have democratic mandates (usually) there seems to be a more than the desirable number of degrees of separation between the voters of the EU and the European Commission which is elected by the heads of state of the EU. One can argue that in a parliamentary system, which is the type most EU member states have, direct election of the executive is slightly removed from the people but in the case of the European Commission there is yet another degree of removal from the voting public.

The European Commission which is only vaguely elected has a great deal of power. It represents the EU abroad; it can sanction actors within the EU and its member states in order to enforce the laws of the EU. (Day) Further, it proposes new laws, and crafts the budgets of the EU, and manages the EU's internal policies. (Day) While new laws require the approval of parliament an only vaguely elected group sets the agenda of what will be voted on by the European Parliament. If one stretches the meaning of democracy, one might argue people elect parliaments, that then elect national leaders, who then sit on the European Council, which then selects the candidates for the European Commission. This author argues that the EU is

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stretching the degrees of separation from voter to those who make the decisions in the EU's "democracy" to absurdity.

In the United States there is another threat to democratic norms - that of the removal of or replacement of traditional voting to instead voting by mail in ballots. This way of running elections is becoming increasingly common in the United States of America. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, in eight states out of the fifty in the USA, all elections make use of mail in ballots, and ballots are sent to everyone who is a registered voter automatically. The voter is required to mark his or her selections, place the ballot in an envelope provided for secrecy, and mail it. (NCSL Website) The eight states that allow mail in balloting for all elections include California which is the biggest US state (NCSL Website).

This is problematic. The voter is no longer *guaranteed* a secret space in which to cast his or her vote. It can be obvious to anyone who is near the voter at the time he or she marks their ballot who he or she is voting for. Further, unscrupulous operatives can easily purchase the vote before it is mailed or influence in some other nefarious manner how a voter actually votes when marking their ballot.

Second Case Study

Inability to State One's Case

For democracy to be successful the political actors of a country must be free to state their case and their arguments without fear of being deplatformed or otherwise silenced. In the United States we have seen in recent time major political leaders including a former president deplatformed by major social media companies. In the wake of the January 6th controversy in the United States, and Trump's denunciation of the 2020 election as "stolen", major platforms banned Donald Trump from their platforms. These included important outlets of communication to and among the public, like Twitter (now known as X), Facebook, and Instagram also banned Trump. Further, other tech companies such as Pay Pal and Shopify stopped selling Trump merchandise. (Crichton) Much of the political left of the United States lauded the silencing of their political rival and the forced removal of someone from the levers of communication. In the modern world social media is how leaders communicate with people, both followers and opponents. For a traditionally well-regarded democracy like the United States doing such a thing is reminiscent of more authoritarian regimes who remove political opponents from newspapers and ban them from radio and television.

Deplatforming is relatively new to the world of politics and points to the power of a very few elite members of society who determine who gets to be heard and who does not. While it can be argued these are private firms that can do what they like, this author would argue that they are a side appendage to, or another de-facto, part of government. There are many countries in the world whose government is only partially in control of the country in question, and other powerful actors make major decisions. In a democracy the leaders must be elected but there is concern about real policy that affects the democracy when powerful elites control the means of communication in the democracy and do so in a way that stifles, rather than facilitates, the free flow of ideas. The question must be asked "who is actually in control, the elected leaders or other interests, or an amalgam of the two?"

Third Case-Study

Suppression of Free Speech

Freedom of speech - the right to argue one's own opinions even if unpopular - is critical for a democratic society. While free speech is not absolute, in that one cannot yell "fire" in a crowded theater when no such fire exists and insulting important religious figures or burning holy texts is hateful and does not add to any civil discourse, wide latitude must be given to a person's ability to state one's case for societal change or for society to stay the same.

The Collective West has strongly and with good reason argued that Russia is not democratic due to restrictions on speech among other reasons. The Russian Government effectively controls media in Russia. Putin and state actors have been able to get rid of independent news outlets in Russia. Twitter and Facebook have been blocked and META the parent company of Facebook has been labeled an extremist organization although WhatsApp is functioning. (Vinokour) Russian censorship has gone further, as it has sought to silence people who argue that its "Special Military Operation" is actually a war. The media have been told in no uncertain terms that they are not to refer to the conflict in Ukraine as a war (Al-Jazeera).

The West however has serious free speech concerns of its own that it must address before claiming the moral high ground. Recently legislation has been introduced in Western Countries that hold themselves up to be paragons of democratic virtue. Countries such as Canada, Ireland, and Scotland (part of the United Kingdom but under devolved government) have recently passed or introduced laws in their countries specifically targeting unpopular speech that governments do not want their people to hear or say.

In Canada, the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has introduced the Online Harms Act. This act threatens to seriously undermine Canada's democratic credentials by limiting and punishing speech that Trudeau and others find objectionable. The Justice Center for Constitutional Freedoms has stated that "the *Online Harms Act* will create a new Digital Safety Commission to enforce compliance with new regulations created by the federal cabinet. This Digital Safety Commission will have the power to regulate nearly any person or entity operating as a "social media service" in Canada." (JCFCF Website).

The predicted effect is that people will censor themselves in order to avoid punishment and that people can face punishment for activity they have not even done if someone suspects they will present censored material. (JCFCF Website) Section 810.012 will add to the Canadian Criminal Code language that will allow punishment if someone fears that someone will post language that violates the law. (JCFCF Website) Punishments for crimes when no crime has yet been committed can range from being forced to wear an ankle bracelet to submitting to a curfew among other punishments. (JCFCF Website) One of the potential definitions of crimes is the promotion of genocide which, while awful on its face, has many different interpretations. In the United States at this moment, groups of Pro-Palestinian activists and Pro-Israeli activists are facing off with both sides accusing the other of promoting genocide. In the Caucuses and Anatolia today, Turkey argues strongly that the Ottoman Empire never committed a genocide against the

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Armenians of Eastern Anatolia while Armenia strongly argues that the Ottoman Empire did commit genocide. This law would allow a new Digital Safety Commission to influence such decisions. (JCFCF Website) If a person does not agree to the provisions, he or she could face up to two years' incarceration (JCFCF Website).

For Canada to condemn Russia for its violations of democratic norms, while pushing such legislation as the Online Harms Act in their own country, shows a serious disconnect in Canada's ability to claim the democratic moral high ground.

Canada is not the only country of the Collective West to strongly violate freedom of speech. Scotland, in the United Kingdom, has a devolved government and a great deal of autonomy. Scotland has its own Scottish Parliament in its capital Edinburgh. "The Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act makes it an offense to stir up hatred with threatening or abusive behavior on the basis of characteristics including age, disability, religion, sexual orientation and transgender identity." (Lawless, Associated Press) Under the law a person found guilty of transgressing this act might receive a prison sentence of seven years' incarceration at the most (Lawless Associated Press).

In even more anti-democratic style Humza Yousaf the Scottish First Minister (roughly Prime Minister) stated that the comments of JK Rowling the world famous author of the *Harry Potter* series of books who has been an outspoken critic of transgender rights "did not meet the threshold described in the act" (Holyrood.com Website) leaving this author to wonder if Yousaf thinks he gets to decide, personally, that he can rule on who gets arrested and who does not instead of a court of law.

Scotland, while enjoying a measure of autonomy, is still part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The United Kingdom has strongly criticized other countries for not meeting democratic norms. In a statement put out by the United Kingdom's government after the Russian invasion of Ukraine the British said "The UK and our allies condemn the Russian government's unprovoked and premeditated invasion of Ukraine. Putin has isolated Russia from the rest of the world. The UK stands with Ukraine, its democratically-elected government, and its brave people at this awful time." (UK Government Website) In his own country, however, one can go to jail for seven years for saying the wrong thing. This does not benefit the UK's global authority to speak on democratic issues to other countries.

Ireland is another example of a Western country moving rapidly to restrict freedom of expression. "The Incitement to Hatred and Hate Offences Bill was introduced in the Oireachtas last year by Minister for Justice Helen McEntee" (Wilson) The law would "make it an offence to deny or trivialize genocide and expand protections to include gender identity and disability." (Askew) Categories covered by this proposed legislation include "race; colour; nationality; religion (including the absence of religion); national or ethnic origin; descent; gender; sex characteristics; sexual orientation; and disability" (McDermott). In other words, this law would criminalize people who state unpopular opinions that some view as hateful. Unfortunately, the law does not actually specify what is considered hate speech and this is very concerning for people who support freedom of expression (Wilson). This is concerning as freedom of expression is vital for a democratic state. According to

Irish senator Michael McDowell: "The draft legislation is effectively going to leave it to the judges to determine what the bar should be in terms of criminality," (Wilson) According to Senator O'Reilly of Ireland "We are restricting freedom, but we are doing it for the common good." (Wilson) Punishment for violating the law can be up to five years' incarceration for saying something that is highly unpopular (Wilson).

While the Irish Government is pushing for this legislation Fine Gael (the party of the Irish Prime Minister) TD Charlie Flanagan who chairs the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in the Dail (lower house of Irish Parliament where most power is located) stated that he is "pleased to join international colleagues in condemnation of sham Russian elections" (McLaughlin) While this condemnation specifically referenced elections being held in areas of Ukraine occupied by Russia it gives those in Russia a perfect opportunity to accuse the Irish Government of holding a double standard over Ireland's stated opposition to Russian anti-democratic activities.

It does not end with Ireland as the European Union is now openly discussing banning "hate speech". While hate speech is appalling, defining it in such a way that it does not become a commonly used weapon against political enemies is difficult. None of us want to see people attacked in a hateful way and insults to a person's religion or desecrations of a person's holy text do not further any kind of intelligent debate and have no place in public discourse but it is possible that such broad legislation merely serves the purpose of silencing dissent and causing people to fear speaking their mind. In that event, freedom of speech *is* suppressed, people cannot advocate for their political positions, and democracy is warped into authoritarianism, a system of government which the West claims to strongly oppose. If the West wishes to condemn other countries such as Russia for not being democratic then it must get its own house in order first, lest authoritarian regimes have a ready weapon to push back at the West's pretense of being special due to their democratic credentials. This author would remind the West that it has handed this weapon over to the countries it criticizes.

Conclusion

Given the evidence presented in this article; from the reduction of freedom of speech, the lack of democratic elections for its leaders especially in the European Union, and the deplatforming of important political leaders it is evident that the Collective West is beginning to become less democratic in spite of its claim to be the embodiment of democratic virtue. Powerful forces at work in the West are driving policy farther away from fair elections, the right to state one's case, and freedom of speech. The concern is that without such freedoms there will be a manufacture of consent (at least publicly) by political leaders both in official positions of leadership and entities that are not officially in government. Real democracy in the West will be on ever shakier ground as a result.

Countries lectured to by the West are noticing this and argue that it is unreasonable for the West to lecture them on needing real democratic institutions when, in the West itself, those institutions are being eroded. No leadership or people in any country likes being talked down to. Moreover, the annoyance of people and the annoyance of their governments will be greater if they are being talked down to by those who are no longer in a moral position to do so. As stated above, belief in contradictory messaging creates cognitive dissonance and people will reject that

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dissonance if at all possible, and it is possible. Therefore, if the West wants to spread democracy and argue the need for other countries to embrace democracy, and to do so from a position of moral strength it will need to reinvigorate its own democratic institutions. Reliance on tactics of threats, military or otherwise, instead of good arguments will have the exact opposite effects to the ones that the West is hoping to achieve globally. In fact, it will, in the end, harm the West instead of helping it in its relationship with, and ability to influence, much of the globe.

Future research on this topic will include analyzing arguments put forth by leaders and people of non-democratic countries about why they should be allowed to maintain their own government systems instead of being lectured by the polities that have double standards in the West. It will also focus on the education systems especially at the university level of the countries of the West.

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