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# POWER OF THE DEMOS OR POWER OVER THE DEMOS – CONDITION, CONSOLIDATION, LEADERSHIP AND THREATS OF MODERN DEMOCRACY IN POLITICAL SCIENCE DISCOURSE<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This publication attempts to analyze the condition of contemporary democracy and the processes of its consolidation from the perspective of political science. The key issue is the question of whether modern democratic systems truly uphold the principle of rule by the people (the power of the demos), or whether they are increasingly transforming into systems in which real power is drifting away from the citizens (power over the demos). During the research, a detailed analysis of political and social discourse was conducted, with particular attention paid to the evolution of the language of public debate, the semantic shifts of concepts fundamental to democracy (e.g., freedom, representation, sovereignty, consensus), and the ways in which these concepts are employed by various political and media actors. The study identifies patterns and differences that occur in various social contexts, allowing for the formulation of conclusions relevant to

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shaping a more conscious, responsible, and inclusive public debate. Attention is also given to the growing phenomena of polarization, populism, the erosion of trust in institutions, and the media-driven fragmentation of the public discourse space. The work concludes with a reflection on possible directions for strengthening democratic legitimacy through civic education, transparent communication, and the accountability of political and media elites.

Keywords: democracy, populism, control of power, political system

## INTRODUCTION

Although contemporary democratic systems are founded on the premise of engaged deliberation and the capacity for consensual resolution, they are increasingly being transformed into arenas of symbolic, identity-based confrontation. The dominant factor driving this transformation is the systematic displacement of political dialogue by the opposing logic of the polarized dichotomy – ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ It is worth noting, however, that the origins of such narratives are not exclusively a modern phenomenon. Already Carl Schmitt, in his classic theory of the political, has pointed out that the distinction between friend and enemy lies at the heart of every political practice core of every political practice.

The aim of this article is therefore not to provide an answer to the question of what contemporary democracy is, but rather to understand what is happening within it and why, despite the preservation of formal institutional structures, we are witnessing its erosion. Shifting the analytical perspective from the ontological to the processual level requires focusing on phenomena that increasingly undermine the fundamental mechanisms of democratic order: dialogue, participation, and shared responsibility. Identifying some of these phenomena may constitute a first step toward diagnosing a democratic order that, despite maintaining institutional appearances and formal procedures, is undergoing a profound axiological deformation.<sup>2</sup> Such a system functions as a simulacrum, in which the external framework of the representative order is preserved, yet its substance undergoes a gradual hollowing out, depriving the *demos* of a real opportunity to exercise power.<sup>3</sup> The attempt to identify and analyze instruments and best practices that could serve as a remedy for a weakened democracy includes, among others, innovative institutional solutions, mechanisms enhancing decision-making transparency, and initiatives that strengthen social capital and foster the development of civil society.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> W. Buchner, “Demokratyczna dewaluacja polityczności,” *Horyzonty Polityki*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2011), pp. 72-74, 79.

<sup>3</sup> See A. Danek, “Czy suweren prowadzi politykę? Przywództwo państwowe wobec suwerenności,” *Horyzonty Polityki*, vol. 7, no. 18 (2016), pp. 111-113.

<sup>4</sup> M. Stachurski, “Niesprawiedliwość w relacji obywatel-państwo jako przykład sytuacji granicznej. Refleksja prawno-etyczna,” in D. Kobylański (ed.), *Człowiek w sytuacji granicznej. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Łódź 2023, pp. 239-240.

Crucial to this analysis are both empirical data and socio-political processes, together with the narratives accompanying them, which despite ongoing tensions may create the conditions for a future consolidation of the democratic order. The following subsections therefore address four fundamental areas of this analysis.

The first section will examine the condition of democracy in Poland on the basis of selected statistical data, which will serve as a numerical diagnosis of key political and social phenomena. The second part will focus on the impact of technological discourse on the understanding and practice of democracy, particularly in the context of transformations in political communication and the functioning of the public sphere. Within this perspective, the metamorphosis of leadership will also be analyzed: changes in management styles, societal expectations toward leaders, and new forms of legitimizing power in the digital age. The final part of the chapter will attempt a synthesis: on the one hand pointing to the greatest threats to the persistence of the democratic system, and on the other, to the possible spaces of its renewal and reconfiguration.

Accordingly, the article poses three fundamental research questions. First: what social and communicative processes are most responsible for the progressive erosion of contemporary democracy, despite the preservation of its institutional framework? Second, how does the Polish political context, measured both by empirical data and qualitative transformations in public discourse, fit within the broader global trends of the democratic crisis? Third, what institutional, technological, and social mechanisms could serve as potential tools for rebuilding democratic order? To answer these questions, the study employs a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis. The first part draws on an analysis of statistical indicators such as the level of social trust, quality of governance, and measures (degrees) of polarization. The subsequent sections employ discourse analysis, literature reviews, and selected case studies to capture the dynamics of transformations in the public sphere and changes in models of political leadership (the evolving models of political leadership).

The expected outcome of this analysis is to develop a comprehensive diagnosis of the current state of democracy. A further objective is to identify areas of potential renewal in which institutional innovations, technological tools, and participatory initiatives may contribute to rebuilding trust, improving the quality of deliberation, and strengthening civil society. This research thus approaches democracy not merely as a set of formal institutions but, above all, as a living social process, susceptible to both disintegration and renewal.

## BETWEEN FORMALISM AND AGENCY

At first glance, it might seem that, in light of previous findings, the concept of democracy is so well-established that it requires neither broader interpretation nor further analyses, having over the years become one of the foundations of the social and political sciences. Yet the relationship between *demos* and *kratos* remains vital and continues to inspire deeper reflection. In the classical approach, rooted in the thought of the ancient

Greeks and the tradition of constitutional liberalism, democracy was identified with the rule of the people, the protection of individual freedom, and the functioning of the rule of law. Its fundamental features included specific electoral procedures, limited veto controlled power, as well as pluralism of views and institutional guarantees of respect for human rights. This model of governance known as liberal or procedural democracy has consistently long served as the constitutional paradigm for most Western states.<sup>5</sup> However, contemporary socio-political discourse regardless of the country or the political formation in power contradicts the commonly accepted claim challenges to common assumption that discussions about the idea originating in ancient Athens have come to an end. Events in recent years, both in Poland and globally, demonstrate that democracy, despite being widely debated, still requires continuous ongoing reflection and attention. Without this, it is easy to stray from a rigorous assessment of the state of democracy, falling instead into superficial slogans and uncritical labeling.

In this context, research centers that monitor the state of are particularly valuable – for example, the American think tank Freedom House, active since the 1940s.<sup>6</sup> In practice, however, an increasing number of questions arise regarding the functioning of democratic systems. Whereas authoritarian systems are characterized by a relative predictability of actions in terms of societal control, the democratic ones operate within highly dynamic social environments. Today, the main threat to democracy lies not in external coercion or over violations of law, but in the gradual erosion of trust in its institutions and symbols. This raises a crucial question: to what extent do citizens truly understand the mechanisms of democracy and are they willing to defend them? A real danger may emerge in the form of an individual who, influenced by their environment, becomes a victim of anomie and seeks at all costs alternative means to consolidate their views and impose their own sense of justice on the world.

The above question, although not new, remains justified and highly relevant. Democracy has always been a complex regime, full of contradictions and tensions, requiring compromises and constant negotiation in the public debate.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it is precisely these factors that have defined democracy's value as an idea and the extent to which it can be realized. Today, democracy appears both ubiquitous and elusive, its meaning increasingly ambiguous. Although invoked by nearly all political parties, this very overuse renders it almost imperceptible. It is also worth noting that democracy is not subject to a rigid temporal embargo, as it remains open to other, related or even entirely foreign variants (such as democratures or dictablands), which may potentially

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<sup>5</sup> A. Heywood, *Ideologie polityczne. Wprowadzenie*, ed. T. Żyro, trans. M. Habura, N. Orłowska, D. Stasiak, Warszawa 2007, pp. 56-60, B. Szlachta, *Demokracja liberalna. Źródła, ustanowienie(?) i kres(?)*, Warszawa 2022.

<sup>6</sup> This organization is engaged in the regular publication of reports aimed at verifying and subsequently assessing the level of political freedom, human rights, and the rule of law in various countries. These reports rely largely on fairly universal indicators, such as the electoral process, freedom of speech, judicial independence, and the transparency of public institutions.

<sup>7</sup> Y. Simon, *Filozofia rządu demokratycznego*, trans. R. Legutko, Kraków 1993, pp. 70-73.

merge with it or influence its development.<sup>8</sup> This raises the question of whether the agency of the *demos*, or perhaps, more aptly, the power over the *demos* still possesses the practical capacity to create political space, for instance, for constructive debate.

This regime undoubtedly remains a strategic abuse, leading to generating significant tensions in the public sphere. Put plainly: democratic mechanisms continue to function formally, yet democracy, in its social, ethical, and deliberative construct, appears to be weakening.<sup>9</sup> What, then, is the diagnosis regarding the 'health' of the patient-democracy? A return to classical definitions together with an examination of the transformations of recent decades suggest several observations. Democracy has become a victim of itself, or rather of how it is portrayed and, consequently, understood.<sup>10</sup> Can we clearly determine today where citizen protest ends and civil disobedience begins? At what point can we say that the opposition is being denied a voice in parliament, despite legally guaranteed provisions for its functioning? And finally, why do those in power increasingly treat the media narrative as the only permissible version of reality, failing to provide space, leaving no room for critique and verification of the dogmas they themselves propagate?

The growing importance of factors such as elite rotation, oversight by independent institutions (e.g., the media and the judiciary), and the development of civil society, encourages a broader understanding of democracy – one that includes genuine participation. Democracy is no longer confined to cyclical elections; it now incorporates the participation of social representatives in shaping public life, with the aim of correcting and preventing abuses of power. An example of participation is the redefinition of concepts like the rule of law, freedom of speech, and sovereignty. All of these elements constitute a set of actions that constrain institutional independence, and the democratization process itself, contrary to its original assumptions, has led to the erosion of a common deliberative language and, consequently, to an intensification of social polarization to increased social polarization.

This dichotomy is clearly reflected in populism, which Cas Mudde defines as a 'thin-centered ideology' dividing society into a 'pure people' and 'corrupt elite'.<sup>11</sup> Rooted in anti-elitism and faith in popular sovereignty, populism is often seen as a threat to democracy, since its hermetic nature closes the essential space for negotiation and compromise on which democratic order depends.

The rediscovery of Aristotle's 'golden mean' may no longer suffice given the diversity of both the architects and the structures of public life, which in turn can lead to a lack of unequivocal materialization of the original construction of the established democratic regime. For every theorist of the aforementioned concept, there exist as

<sup>8</sup> P. Schmitter, "Demokracja – zagrożenia i problemy," in P. Śpiewak (selected and introd.) *Przyszłość demokracji*, Warszawa 2005, pp. 14-19.

<sup>9</sup> M.P. Markowski, *Wojny nowoczesnych plemion. Spór o rzeczywistość w epoce populizmu*, Kraków 2019, pp. 66-67.

<sup>10</sup> L. Nowak, "Demokracja i mizantropia. Przemiany wyobrażeń na temat ludu a problem intelektualnego uprawomocnienia demokracji," *Horyzonty Polityki*, vol. 11, no. 34 (2020), p. 13, 21.

<sup>11</sup> C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge 2007, p. 23.

many models of its application among living entities – namely, the institutions and individuals who create the society – who often struggle to define the political system within which they operate. Ultimately, any diagnosis of the ‘patient’ must take into account a dual tension. First, the evolution of the idea of democracy itself and the institutions proper to its functioning. Second, the attempt to appropriate these two aspects through their subjective interpretations imposed on society by those in power. Democracy, therefore, is not a closed project but a contemporary arena of competition over meanings, symbols, and the rules of participation.

## CONDITION AND CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY

Reflections on contemporary conceptions of democracy outline a broad and multidimensional context of the current challenges faced by this system, as well as the ongoing erosion of public trust in democratic institutions. This analysis exposes the tensions between the formal persistence of institutional frameworks and the logic of their actual functioning, as well as the discrepancy between the original values of democracy and their present-day interpretations. At this point, it becomes appropriate to move from the diagnosis of the ‘patient’ to an analysis of the specific mechanisms that shape its condition while also defining the limits and possibilities prospects of consolidation processes.

A crucial transformation concerns the reconfiguration of political space where deliberation is displaced by identity-based conflict, consistently exploited by political actors as a tool for mobilization.<sup>12</sup> Under conditions of structural polarization, dialogue loses its significance, as its function is replaced by confrontation. The resulting oppositional dynamic leads to the delegitimization of opponents, who are no longer perceived as equal partner in debate but as an ideological or even moral enemy.

Populism plays a central role in this process, redefining key concepts in democratic discourse. Categories such as ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ are stripped of semantic neutrality and acquire an exclusionary function. ‘The people’ no longer denotes the community of citizens but is identified with a selected segment of society deemed the only authentic and legitimate representative but instead a chosen segment of society deemed the sole authentic representative. This construction allows other groups to be assigned the role of ‘others’, perceived as hostile, anti-national, or acting against the interests of the community.<sup>13</sup>

The result of this symbolic transformation is also a growing abandonment of responsibility in favor of expectations directed at the state as a caretaker entity. This symbolic transformation also fuels a growing withdrawal of civic responsibility, replaced

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<sup>12</sup> D. Bar-Tal, T. Magal, “Socio-Psychological Analysis of the Deterioration of Democracy and the Rise of Authoritarianism. The Role of Needs, Values and Context,” in J.P. Forgas, W.D. Crano, K. Fiedler (eds), *The Psychology of Populism. The Tribal Challenge to Liberal Democracy*, New York, 2021, pp. 46-47.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. T. Pappas, “Populists in Power,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2019), pp. 71-74.

by expectations directed toward the state as a caretaker. A political culture that shifts toward a mass society leads to the replacement of active engagement with passive consumption of messages and symbolic participation.<sup>14</sup> In such a context, the potential for compromise, genuine engagement, and co-creation of the public order is significantly weakened. Opposition participation becomes purely procedural, and parliamentary debate loses its executive and decision-making character. In classical democratic theory, leadership performs a dual mediating function connecting social interests with institutions, and aligning values with collective expectations. Contemporary democratic systems, however, depart from this model. With the erosion of intermediary structures such as mass parties or associations, leaders increasingly rely on direct communication with 'the people', bypassing institutional mechanisms. This shift exemplifies the essence of a populist management style, which, while proclaiming closeness, does not foster situations where leadership recognizes social complexity. The absence of mediation weakens compromise, leads to system fragmentation, and widens the gap between expectations and the real effects of governance. This also promotes symbolic participation and the decline of civic activity. Consequently, the state is increasingly treated as a caretaker entity rather than a community co-created by citizens. Political culture shifts toward passivity and content consumption, resulting in the marginalization of deliberation and the proceduralization of opposition participation.

In this way, an advanced stage of a be observed, which may be described as the loss of the substance of democracy, appears to be entering an advanced phase of decay – one that can be described as the loss of its very substance. Although institutions formally retain their original form, they gradually cease to fulfill their assigned control and deliberative functions. Their activity becomes subordinated to the logic of political domination, and the entire system begins to function as a facade democracy, one in which form obscures the lack of real substance.

One of the most serious challenges to the condition and potential consolidation of contemporary democracies is populism. This concept has long been intensively explored widely examined in both scholarly research and public debate. Although its presence in political discourse is now almost constant, it requires a more in-depth structural analysis. It is insufficient to treat populism merely as an ephemeral rhetorical phenomenon or solely as a campaign mobilization strategy. Rather, one should recognize its internal logic, which systematically influences the semantic transformation of key concepts in contemporary democracy.

At the core of this logic lies a persistent tendency to articulate social demands in opposition to the institutional order of liberal democracy. Populism operates through the mechanism of redefining concepts such as the 'will of the people' or 'the elites', which, within the framework of traditional democratic order, serve integrative and legitimizing functions in a pluralistic perspective. In populist logic, however, their meanings

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<sup>14</sup> J.O. y Gasset, *Bunt mas*, trans. P. Niklewicz, Zakrzewo 2016, pp. 36, 47-48.

undergo a profound transformation, which in practice leads to a reconfiguration of the very model of power and representation.<sup>15</sup>

In the classical liberal-democratic perspective, the 'people' is understood as a diverse political community whose will is shaped through a deliberative process that takes into account conflicts of interest, the need for institutional mediation, and the complexity of social conditions. Populism, by contrast, introduces a semantic narrowing of this concept: 'the people' ceases to denote all citizens and becomes a homogeneous construct, supposedly coherent culturally and morally. From this perspective, the representation of this homogenous whole is usurped by a leader or political movement that claims the exclusive right to express its will.

In practice, this entails the rejection of pluralism as a constitutive element of democracy. In place of an open field for negotiating interests, a binary structure emerges: the people versus the enemy of the people. The latter is identified with the elite, whose definition also undergoes significant transformation. Traditionally, political, expert, or intellectual elites serve in democracy as intermediaries and guarantors of the quality of public deliberation.<sup>16</sup> Populism undermines this function by constructing the image of the elite as a detached, privileged group, disconnected from real social interests and often portrayed as treacherous toward the 'true people'.

In this sense, populism does not so much offer an alternative institutional model as it alters the interpretive rules of public life. It shifts the emphasis from procedures to emotions, from mechanisms of checks and balances to direct legitimation based on the identification of the leader with a homogeneous national community. Compromise is replaced by moralistic opposition, in which the political opponent is no longer an equal participant in debate but is presented as an ideological and ethical enemy.<sup>17</sup> In this context, institutional constraints such as courts, the media, or parliamentary oversight mechanisms cease to be perceived as elements of a system of checks and balances. Instead, they begin to function as alleged obstacles to the realization of the 'will of the people' and are thus seen as tools in the hands of elites acting in the interest of external forces or 'anti-national' values. This perspective does not lead to a direct break with democracy but rather to its systematic weakening through the blurring of meanings, the redefinition of legitimacy, and the shifting of axiological foundations. As a consequence, constitutional culture erodes, ceasing to serve as a shared point of reference and becoming yet another arena of conflict.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> K. Kłosińska, M. Rusinek, *Dobra zmiana, czyli jak się rządzi światem za pomocą słów*, Kraków 2019, pp. 19-25, 70-72, where, among other things, the example of 'anti-Polishness' is discussed as a tool for redefining concepts in political discourse in order to delegitimize opponents.

<sup>16</sup> M. Burton, R. Gunther, J. Higley, "Elity a rozwój demokracji," in J. Szczupaczyński (selected and ed.), *Władza i społeczeństwo*, Warszawa 1995, pp. 18, 23-24.

<sup>17</sup> B. Bugaric, "Could Populism be Good for Constitutional Democracy?," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, vol. 15 (2019), p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> G. Halmai, "Populism, Authoritarianism and Constitutionalism," *German Law Journal*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2019), pp. 302-306.

In place of a deliberative public space one based on exchange of reasons and readiness to confront differing positions viewpoints within the political community an increasingly amorphous sphere of conflict emerges, where communication aims not at understanding but at antagonization. In this context, rhetoric is transformed into a tool of delegitimization. The audience ceases to be a partner in dialogue and begins to be perceived as a threat to the integrity of the community. This process is not limited to the linguistic level but penetrates deeply into political culture, significantly weakening the capacity to forge cross-party agreements and complex forms of institutional cooperation.

The danger intensifies particularly when it is reinforced by other disintegrative processes, such as the growing mediatization of political life, the erosion of a culture of argumentation, or the decline of trust in intermediary institutions between citizens and authority. Within this environment political communication loses its deliberative character, taking the form of performative actions, whose main goal is not persuasion but the manifestation and reinforcement of group belonging. The consequence of this state of affairs is an intensification of polarization, which not only deeply divides the political arena but also extends to other spheres of social life, ranging from education and culture to everyday interpersonal relationships.

In this construct, the citizen ceases to be a genuine participant in public life, and their role is reduced to that of a passive observer of the political scene, whose logic is subordinated to the interests of closed decision-making centers. Although electoral mechanisms still formally operate, the exercise of power gradually becomes independent of social legitimation and transparent oversight, resulting in a growing distance between political institutions and the citizenry. Facade democracy, despite its superficial durability, proves structurally incapable of absorbing and processing real social tensions. The lack of effective channels for articulating and representing interests leads to increased frustration and opens the space for extra-systemic solutions, including authoritarian tendencies.<sup>19</sup> It is at this point that the reflection signaled in the first part of this study returns: the potential fusion of democracy, which seemingly retains its institutional framework while simultaneously losing the capacity to perform its fundamental deliberative, integrative, and oversight functions.

## THE NATURE OF POLISH DEMOCRACY AND THE 2023 REFERENDUM

The diagnosis of the state of democracy in Poland today cannot overlook empirical data, such as statistics, surveys, and other examples of public opinion research. Findings from 2022-2023, collected by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS), reveal several phenomena that help capture the current stage of development (or regression) of the

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<sup>19</sup> M. Kiwior-Filo, "‘Brak’ państwa czy jego ‘nadmiar’ – wyzwania i zagrożenia współczesnej demokracji," *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Politologica*, vol. 21, no. 282 (2018), p. 21.

Polish democratic system. The analyzed reports clearly indicate a deep discrepancy between the formal persistence of democratic institutions and the social perception of their legitimacy, effectiveness, and representativeness. In this context, two interpretive categories can be distinguished: on one hand, the political dimension of the data (i.e., evaluations of state institutions, political parties, and the electoral process itself), and on the other, the civic dimension (encompassing issues such as citizens' influence on public affairs and the degree of perceived agency). These frameworks allow for a more balanced understanding of the contemporary condition of democracy in Poland.

It is therefore worth examining the theme of electoral discourse. Although declared support for democracy remains high in society, empirical data clearly indicate a significant deficit of trust in democratic institutions. The activity of the 9<sup>th</sup> term *Sejm*; the lower house of the Polish parliament, was evaluated particularly critically, being perceived as dominated by partisan conflicts and detached from the real problems of citizens, with 64% of respondents noting a decline in its authority.<sup>20</sup> In view of the upcoming parliament, respondents expressed expectations of greater transparency, professionalism, and substantive quality in public debate. Similar concerns were raised regarding the assessment of the fairness of the electoral process due to the additionally held referendum, where 52% of respondents pointed to a complicated voting process.<sup>21</sup> Regarding the incoming parliament, respondents expressed expectations for greater transparency, professionalism, and substantive quality in public debates. Similar reservations concerned the assessment of the fairness of the electoral process, especially in connection with the concurrent referendum, where 52% of those surveyed pointed to difficulties in the voting. Despite high turnout in 2023, 61% of respondents observed a disproportionate media exposure of representatives of the opposition and the then-incumbent government in public media, as well as their favoritism over other political groups.<sup>22</sup> Such perceptions undermine the foundations of democratic order, as elections, the key mechanism of legitimizing power, cease to be seen as reliable and transparent. This leads to further delegitimization of the system and an increase in anti-systemic attitudes, the dynamics of which can take various, often unpredictable forms. In the civic sphere, an equally concerning picture emerges. CBOS data indicate that only 41% of young people feel they have any influence over social affairs.<sup>23</sup> The sense of civic agency and social trust remains at a low level, raising doubts about the durability of democratic habits and values within Polish political culture. One of the most significant findings, indicated by 51% of respondents, is the growing belief that citizens

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<sup>20</sup> CBOS, "Ocena Sejmu IX kadencji i oczekiwania wobec nowego," *Komunikat z badań*, no. 138 (2023), p. 5, at [https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K\\_138\\_23.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_138_23.PDF), 10 December 2025.

<sup>21</sup> CBOS, "Ocena prawidłowości przebiegu wyborów oraz funkcjonowania demokratycznych mechanizmów i procedur wyborczych," *Komunikat z badań*, no. 146 (2023), pp. 4-10, at [https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/raporty/open\\_file.php?id=6709](https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/raporty/open_file.php?id=6709), 10 December 2025.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> CBOS, "Spadek poczucia podmiotowości obywatelskiej," *Komunikat z badań*, no. 39 (2022), at [https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2022/K\\_039\\_22.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2022/K_039_22.PDF), 10 December 2025.

have no real influence on political decisions.<sup>24</sup> The sense of powerlessness clearly affects the level of civic engagement. Nevertheless, there is an observed increase in participation in institutional activities, such as involvement in social organizations, alongside a rise in informal activism, including protests, local initiatives, and grassroots actions. This is also reflected in social support for greater female participation in politics, as evidenced by the popularity of campaigns such as #NieCzekam107Lat and #KobietyNaWybory.<sup>25</sup> These examples demonstrate a potential for civic mobilization that, despite distrust toward institutions, may point to the regenerative capacity of certain areas of social life and their ability to initiate changes within the democratic order. Equally concerning, however, is the increasingly noted issue of political divisions permeating private life is the growing penetration of political divisions into private life. Respondents highlighted difficulties in discussing politics with family, friends, or colleagues, a challenge noted by 68% of respondents.<sup>26</sup> Avoidance of these topics often stems from fear of conflict. This phenomenon reflects the politicization of everyday life and the effectiveness of polarization strategies, which significantly affect the quality of social bonds. Finally, an important area of the analyzed social attitudes concerns the perception of media functioning. Respondents noted their strong politicization, particularly regarding public media, perceived as favoring the ruling party, a view held by 44% of respondents.<sup>27</sup> This situation undermines the principle of informational pluralism and weakens trust in public debate. Meanwhile, the role of social media as an alternative source of information is increasing, despite its risky nature due to misinformation and the tendency for users to remain within echo chambers.

Although the reflections above, based on citizens' declarations and perceptions, leave little room for optimism, they contain a note of hope. The micro-level activities and willingness to act described above, though dispersed and often non-institutional, may serve as a sort of *spiritus movens* for the future reconstruction of democracy. Citizens who today engage locally, protest, and initiate grassroots actions could, in the future, play a key role in regenerating weakened institutional structures, thus acting as social catalysts in the process of restoring the meaning and values of democracy.

Given the state of democracy and the level of its consolidation the use of its constituent instruments, becomes particularly significant. One of the most ambiguous instruments, susceptible to reinterpretation both in terms of meaning and function, is the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> "Kobiety na równość muszą czekać 107 lat. Dzięki naszej akcji wie o tym już 19 milionów Polek," *Forbes* <https://www.forbes.pl/forbeswomen/nie-czekam-107-lat-dzieki-akcji-forbes-women-i-ofeminin-wie-tym-juz-19-milionow/nqgw63t>, 10 December 2025.

<sup>26</sup> CBOS, "Rozmowy o polityce i podziały polityczne w najbliższym otoczeniu," *Komunikat z badań*, no. 85 (2023), p. 13, [https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K\\_085\\_23.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_085_23.PDF), 10 December 2025.

<sup>27</sup> CBOS, "Ekspozycja polityków i poglądów politycznych w stacjach telewizyjnych," *CBOS Flash*, no. 2 (2023), p. 4, at [https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/flash/pliki/2023/fl\\_002\\_2023.pdf](https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/flash/pliki/2023/fl_002_2023.pdf), 10 December 2025.

referendum.<sup>28</sup> According to the Act on the Nationwide Referendum, its subject may concern matters of particular importance to the state (Art. 2, para. 1), and its organization is determined by political authorities, in particular the Sejm and the President of the Republic of Poland (Arts. 4 and 5).<sup>29</sup> It is precisely the discretionary nature of initiating a referendum and formulating its questions that allows this instrument to assume a variable character and perform different functions depending on the political context.<sup>30</sup> An example of such a redefinition of the meaning and function of a referendum was its organization alongside the parliamentary elections on October 15, 2023. This event illustrates how an instrument originally intended as an expression of citizens' will and democratic deliberation can be transformed into a tool of political influence.<sup>31</sup> The very act of conducting the referendum including the choice of date, the formulation of questions, the nature of the campaign, and social reactions became a clear example of a shift from a procedural, institutional understanding of democracy toward its emotionalization and strategic use.<sup>32</sup> In the case under discussion, the referendum was not intended to resolve social disputes through joint citizen decisions; rather, it primarily served to deepen polarization, mobilize specific groups of voters, and legitimize preexisting political narratives. Consequently, it can be reasonably argued that this vote failed to meet the criteria of a classical referendum, more resembling a plebiscite. The analysis will therefore focus on the mechanisms of political mobilization surrounding the referendum, the language of its questions, the accompanying campaign, social and civic reactions, and the ways in which this event reflects the existing tensions in contemporary Polish political life.

At the outset, it is necessary to outline the context of combining parliamentary elections with a nationwide referendum holding the nationwide referendum alongside the parliamentary elections. Although it formally complied with the *2003 Act on Nationwide Referendums*, its actual function was markedly different. Instead of serving as a space for

<sup>28</sup> K. Kurkowski, "Realizacja zasad wyborczych podczas wyborów parlamentarnych i referendum ogólnokrajowego w Polsce z 15 października 2023 r.," *Kortowski Przegląd Prawniczy*, no. 1 (2024), p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> Ustawa z dnia 14 marca 2003 r. o referendum ogólnokrajowym (Dz.U. z 2003 r. Nr 57, poz. 507 z późn. zm.).

<sup>30</sup> M. Matyja, P. Trudnowski, T. Synowiec, R. Zygmunt, *Demokracja bezpośrednia. Wizja-propozycje-dowiadcznienia-badania*, Lewin Brzeski 2024, pp. 120-122.

<sup>31</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that the 2023 electoral program of Law and Justice, *A Safe Future for Poles*, emphasized the need to strengthen mechanisms of direct democracy at the local level, including through the introduction of a so-called 'referendum day' in the middle of the term of local government bodies. These declarations are based on the principle of subsidiarity and the recognition of the sovereign authority of the nation. Although the program formally refers to local referendums, its content illustrates how the institution of the referendum can be symbolically employed as evidence of respect for citizens' voices. Political practice, however, points in a different direction. In this case, it is difficult to speak of genuine citizen deliberation; rather, the referendum mechanism is used to mobilize the electorate and reinforce a political message.

<sup>32</sup> *Referendum i wybory z 2023 r. w Polsce. Problemy prawne i kontekst polityczny*, w: *Opinie i komentarze FRDL*, Opinia nr 20/2023, Centrum Ekspertyzy Lokalnej, Fundacja Rozwoju Demokracji Lokalnej im. Jerzego Regulskiego, 10 December 2025.

citizens to resolve important constitutional issues, the referendum became a tool for political mobilization, as exemplified by slogans such as ‘On October 15, we say 4x NO’ and ‘Vote on October 15 for a beautiful and safe Poland’. Some commentators critical of the ruling party’s actions drew alarming historical analogies, recalling the 1946 referendum, which likewise employed a pattern suggesting desired answers. This suggested that both the form and conduct of the 2023 referendum were subordinated to the logic of an electoral campaign rather than to democratic social dialogue. Instead of neutral, open-ended questions inviting reflection voters were confronted with rhetorically charged questions saturated with emotional. Their purpose was not to resolve real genuine political dilemmas but to reinforce the ruling party’s message and consolidate deepened polarization. Materials employed a clear rhetoric of division, contrasting national and traditional values with external forces, elites, refugees, or the opposition. Such practices undermined democratic pluralism and further entrenched social divisions. The set of referendum questions concerning migration, the sale of state assets, borders, and retirement age reveals a distinctly value-laden framing.<sup>33</sup> These were not neutral civic inquiries but deliberately designed to evoke emotions such as fear, anger, and a sense of threat affects that strongly mobilize the electorate. Slogans appearing in promotional materials, such as ‘It’s already an invasion they are coming here’, ‘We reveal Tusk’s secret plans’, ‘Privatization was a plan to rob the Poles’, or ‘I was supposed to work until death’, clearly indicate an intention to generate social anxiety. It is therefore worthwhile to analyze each question individually and then relate them to historical examples of referendums in the Third Polish Republic, which also employed emotions as a tool of political influence.

The question on the sale of state-owned assets was intended to evoke fear of losing economic sovereignty. Rather than inviting a debate on the principles of privatization and the efficiency of public asset management, it was alarmist in nature, appealing to strong emotions. Similarly, the question addressing the retirement age emphasized a perceived threat to social stability, appealing to fears of losing employee benefits. Campaign slogans such as ‘Poles have already been brutally deceived by the PO–PSL government regarding the retirement age’ reinforced this belief.

The migration-related questions ‘Do you support removing the barrier on the border of the Republic of Poland with the Republic of Belarus?’ and ‘Do you support accepting thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, in accordance with the compulsory relocation mechanism imposed by the European bureaucracy?’ – were clearly designed to mobilize voters through fear of external threats. Instead of enabling a rational debate on migration policy, they reinforced negative stereotypes and deepened social divisions.

The referendum also sparked broad public debate, with non-governmental organizations such as the Watchdog Polska Civic Network playing an active role. The organization criticized both the content of the questions and the manner in which the

<sup>33</sup> M. Musiał-Karg, F.C. Bértoa, “Polskie wybory parlamentarne i referendum z 15 października 2023 roku. Wokół najważniejszych wątpliwości i zastrzeżeń co do łączenia obu głosowań powszechnych,” *Politeja*, vol. 21, no. 1 (88/2) (2024), pp. 47-55.

referendum was conducted, emphasizing their instrumental nature, lack of neutrality, and strong emotional charge. Allegations further concerned procedural irregularities, ambiguities, and breaches of regulations that undermined the transparency of the process.<sup>34</sup> In response to these concerns, several civic groups called for a boycott of the referendum as a form of protest against its instrumentalization and the attempts to limit restrict public debate. This appeal constituted an important counter-narrative to the government campaign, which portrayed opponents of the referendum as destabilizing forces. Such a monopolization of communication limited hindered access to diverse information and marginalized critical voices, thereby weakening the pluralism of public debate in the public sphere.

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES

In recent decades, liberal democracies have undergone profound structural and cultural transformations, significantly reshaping the traditional relationships between political leaders and citizens.<sup>35</sup> One of the most telling manifestations of this change has been the shift from the role of a leader to that of a follower. In this context, a politician no longer shapes public opinion as much as reflects and follows it. A similar metamorphosis can be observed in the traditional definition of leadership understood as the ability to synthesize competing interests and create a coherent vision of the common good. Contemporary political practice, however, reverses this previously established logic. Leaders increasingly focus on building popularity, emotional resonance, and media presence rather than on making autonomous decisions.<sup>36</sup> It is important to emphasize that this shift is not merely a matter of semantics; on the contrary, it represents a profound change in the logic of representation and the way power is legitimized. As Bernard Manin notes, in the context of ‘audience democracy’, the key factor is not ideological affiliation or party discipline, but the leader’s ability to remain constantly available for emotional mobilization and communicative visibility.<sup>37</sup> As a result, political authority becomes increasingly personalistic, ephemeral, and susceptible to fluctuations in public sentiment. This analysis presents these metamorphoses of leadership as a reflection of a broader crisis of representation and the functional capacities of democratic systems. Particular emphasis is placed on the phenomena of the emotionalization of political messaging, media dependence, ideological dispersion, and the

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<sup>34</sup> K. Batko-Tołuć, “Nie daj sobie wcisnąć ‘referendum,’” *Sieć obywatelska Watchdog*, 9 October 2023, at <https://siecobywatelska.pl/nie-daj-sobie-wcisnac-referendum/>, 10 December 2025.

<sup>35</sup> L. Viviani, *Leadership and Democracy. A Political Sociology of the Personalisation of Leadership*, London 2024; A. Campi, *Trasformazioni della politica*, Soveria Mannelli 2024.

<sup>36</sup> L.D. Gregorio, *Demopathy and the Democratic Malaise. Symptoms, Diagnosis and Therapy*, London 2021.

<sup>37</sup> B. Manin, *Zasady rządów przedstawicielskich*, Warszawa 1998, p. 274.

erosion of institutional durability. Although these tendencies vary across national contexts, they collectively provide a framework for diagnosing contemporary leadership in democracy.

One of the key transformations in contemporary democratic leadership is the redefinition of the role of consensus, which is now used primarily as a tool or even as a mechanism of governance itself. Historically, the consensus served as a foundation for ensuring the continuity of legitimacy, making unpopular decisions, and supporting long-term political programs. Today, however, it has increasingly become an end in itself. For instance, the value of political decisions is increasingly often assessed not in terms of substantive accuracy or long-term impact, but through popularity in polls or, increasingly, by the sentiments circulating on social media platforms.

This logic of governance becomes subordinated to the volatile unstable expectations of public opinion, understood not as a rational deliberative community but as a variable and polarized audience whose approval must be constantly secured. As Carl von Clausewitz stated, *War is the continuation of politics by other means*. Today, one might say that politics has become the extension of electoral campaigns, where symbolic gestures, strategic ambiguity, and communicative visibility take precedence over programmatic coherence. The transformation of the structure of democratic leadership faces two significant turbulences. First, the capacity for long-term planning is weakened, as actions are shaped by current moods rather than future-oriented calculations. Second, a reactive posture is reinforced, in which the primary objective becomes avoiding unpopularity rather than pursuing the common good. Consequently, democratic politics becomes ephemeral, threatening both its effectiveness and its very legitimacy.

It is also worth noting that, in this context, an interesting contrast emerges between democracies and authoritarian or hybrid regimes such as China, Russia, India, or Turkey which, despite departing from liberal norms, demonstrate greater strategic continuity and resilience to social pressure.<sup>38</sup> Leaders in these systems are freed from the necessity of constant social validation, allowing them to implement programs rooted in longer-term horizons. This structural asymmetry weakens the position of liberal democracies in global competition. The more electorates become unstable, the narrower the space becomes for durable leadership. As a result, democratic leaders become increasingly focused on news cycles and short-term approval indicators, losing the capacity for long-term institutional and geopolitical thinking.

Is the fragility of leadership in democracies then solely the result of personal shortcomings? In hindsight, one could argue that it is, because in an era of communication overload and accelerated politics, traits that enable rapid advancement often matter more than the ability to govern effectively. A successful politician is no longer just a competent administrator but also a cultural figure: recognizable and symbolically embedded in the aesthetics of everyday life. The construction of such an image relies on a set of cultural archetypes: youthfulness, attractiveness, stylistic ease, emotional

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<sup>38</sup> L. Diamond, M. F. Platt (eds), *Authoritarianism Goes Global. The Challenge to Democracy*, Baltimore 2016; B. Sweetman, *The Crisis of Democratic Pluralism. The Loss of Confidence in Reason and the Clash of Worldviews*, London 2021.

intelligence, and digital fluency. Examples such as Justin Trudeau and Giuseppe Conte demonstrate that political effectiveness is increasingly linked to the aesthetics of authenticity, understood as apparent naturalness. These leaders function as media and lifestyle figures, present across multiple platforms, managed by communication teams, and constantly optimized for public perception.<sup>39</sup> This carefully curated image, however, often remains detached from the leader's actual personality. The media persona is frequently the product of political marketing, based on precisely targeted messages tailored to the sensitivities of different segments of the electorate. Leadership thus becomes a performance of a specific narrative of social expectations.

At a psychological level, this model can be potentially dangerous, as it fosters the growth of narcissistic traits. The leader increasingly seeks admiration, measuring their effectiveness by the intensity of attention received. In this context, Max Weber's warning that vanity is the mortal sin of politics takes on a particularly timely and relevant significance.<sup>40</sup> A characteristic phenomenon of this metamorphosis is also the fluidity of positions. In a digital world, collective memory becomes inherently fleeting, which is why leaders more and more often adjust their views to changing public moods. Consequently, promises can be quickly annulled, contradictions ignored, and lies repeated as a tactical tool rather than seen as a threat.

Leaders who initially enjoy high levels of support rarely maintain it over the long term, and their careers have become increasingly unstable and dependent on fleeting social moods. The model of long-term leadership once represented by figures such as Angela Merkel, Tony Blair, and Felipe González now seems more the exception than the rule. Contemporary leadership instead follows the logic of the 'Borgia syndrome': a rapid rise ascent fueled by charisma, emotional resonance, or favorable circumstances, often followed by a swift and brutal fall. Such rotational dynamics destabilize political systems, limit the strategic horizon of governments, and force them to operate in short cycles of opportunity, making long-term planning nearly impossible. As novelty becomes the primary currency of legitimacy, every public figure quickly becomes a relic that must be replaced, triggering successive waves of disappointment and turnover. Ultimately, leadership ceases to function as an anchor of political stability. Instead, it becomes an element of symbolic circulation. Leadership, therefore, is a kind of exclusive construct, constantly evolving. It is impossible to know what stage will come next if we can even anticipate it, let alone accurately name it. The politician becomes trapped in a cycle of volatility, turning into an aesthetic figure that, as approval declines and eventually disappears, is left among the abandoned relics of narcissistic leadership.

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<sup>39</sup> D. Taras, R. Davis (eds), *Power Shift? Political Leadership and Social Media*, London–New York 2020; R.M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Political Communication. Media and Politics in a Digital Age*, London–New York 2022.

<sup>40</sup> M. Weber, *Politik als Beruf*, Berlin 1992.

## DEMOCRACY AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

Contemporary democracy operates clearly in the shadow of technological discourse. The digital revolution, which inaugurated the new millennium, not only fundamentally transformed the ways of communication, but also reshaped the structure of the public sphere. In this redefined reality, it is not only the channels of transmission that have changed, but also the position of the key subject of political life the citizen vis-à-vis the state, power, and knowledge the position of the citizen the central subject of political life vis-à-vis the state, power, and knowledge. What was initially intended as a form of emancipation such as access to information, the ability to express opinions, and participation in discussion has increasingly become a mechanism of exclusion, cognitive isolation, and the 'commodification' of social behaviors. The citizen no longer appears as a co-creator of the democratic order, but rather as a passive consumer of content. His or her participation in the political community is reduced to reactivity. Fundamental values of democracy freedom, representation, and deliberation are today undergoing profound transformation under the influence of algorithmic logic and the dominance of a visual culture that is often illusory.

In this context, one cannot overlook the warning formulated by Giovanni Sartori, who as early as the 1990s pointed to the troubling phenomenon of the 'visualization' of politics. He argued that a society saturated with images loses the capacity for abstract thinking, which leads to a weakening of its ability to participate in public debate. As Sartori wrote, the image reduces the complexity of reality, relies on emotion, and avoids argument.<sup>41</sup> In his view, television was the beginning of this transformation. Digital media, however, have intensified and popularized this logic, becoming the dominant cognitive environment. Within this model, the user ceases to operate on the level of reflective consideration and instead begins to consume content filtered through emotions, the rhythm of delivery, and an optimized format.<sup>42</sup> This picture is complemented by Mirosław Lakomy, who observes that the apparent interactivity offered by digital media does not translate into real agency. Online politics resembles marketing rather than deliberation: instead of collective decision-making, there emerges a marketplace of content precisely targeted, optimized for engagement, yet devoid of depth and the value of community-building.<sup>43</sup>

The complexity of politics is reduced to moral dichotomies, where inclusive and exclusive positions are interpreted through the prism of emotional arousal: fear, compassion, indignation, or pride. In such an ecosystem, the leader no longer functions as the creator of the political agenda, but rather as a resonator of social affects, responding in real time to shifting impulses flowing from digital arenas of communication. In this context, it is worth turning to Jürgen Habermas's concept of communicative arenas and rereading it in light of contemporary models of information flow within digital

<sup>41</sup> G. Sartori, *Homo videns. Telewizja i postmyślenie*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 26-27.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> M. Lakomy, *Demokracja 2.0. Interakcja polityczna w nowych mediach*, Kraków 2013, pp. 135-169.

environments. The inclusion of these new forms of communication thus undermines the classical notion of politics as an exclusively verbal and rational deliberative process. The public sphere is being transformed into an affective-technological infrastructure, in which political communication unfolds simultaneously on multiple levels emotional, symbolic, algorithmic, and sensory. It should therefore be noted that this new infrastructure of power, entwined with the logic of digital platforms, not only modifies the style of managing democracy, but redefines its very role.

The 2023 referendum provides a telling example, both in terms of narrative mobilization and of simulated pluralism, in which the dominant message gained a monopoly within the visual-media sphere. This process of deforming the information space reaches a particularly dangerous level with the development of generative technologies such as deepfakes. As analyses by the Demagog Association (a Polish fact-checking organization) indicate, artificially generated recordings, images, and statements are increasingly affecting the cognitive mechanisms of audiences. False statements by politicians, manipulated media reports, or images of places that never existed become highly persuasive material, especially when they align with the emotional expectations of recipients. Information ceases to be a medium of truth and instead becomes a space of creation.<sup>44</sup> A deepfake is not merely a technological forgery but an ontological falsehood: it constructs alternative versions of reality that often appear more convincing than the complexity of facts than factual complexity itself. As a result, society loses its capacity for a shared understanding of the world, which translates into the erosion of the foundations of collective political action. In this context, the reflections of Yuval Noah Harari take on particular relevance. Under digital conditions, freedom must mean more than the absence of censorship; it should encompass the right to uncorrupted knowledge, the protection of privacy, and decisional autonomy.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, the expansion of technology is increasingly justified by the rhetoric of 'security', 'convenience', or 'efficiency'. What was initially meant to liberate the citizen ends up leading to their subordination. Jamie Bartlett points out that society ceases to be a community of engaged citizens and instead becomes a mass of 'clickers', individuals who no longer act but merely react.<sup>46</sup> Democracy undergoes a transformation into a simulation of community, increasingly resembling a matrix rather than a deliberative forum.<sup>47</sup> De-

<sup>44</sup> A. Majchrzak, A. Szymkiewicz, "Deepfake (nie)doskonały. Czy AI tworzy realistyczne obrazy," *Demagog*, 25 May 2023, at [https://demagog.org.pl/analizy\\_i\\_raporty/deepfake-niedoskonaly-czy-ai-tworzy-realistyczne-obrazy/](https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/deepfake-niedoskonaly-czy-ai-tworzy-realistyczne-obrazy/), Stowarzyszenie Demagog, 10 December 2025.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Y.N. Harari, *21 lekcji na XXI wiek*, trans. M. Romanek, Kraków 2018, pp. 312-314.

<sup>46</sup> J. Bartlett, *Ludzie przeciw technologii. Jak internet zabija demokrację (i jak możemy ją ocalić)*, trans. K. Umiński, Katowice 2019, p. 50-53.

<sup>47</sup> The phenomena described also fit into a particular dimension of Polish political discourse, where technology is often not treated as a cognitive challenge but as a space for axiological struggle. For part of the ruling camp, it becomes a tool for 'recovering' the public sphere, which should be subordinated to national values and cleansed of 'foreign' influences. This type of message is present in publications such as *Let Free Poles Write the Constitution* (Krystyna Pawłowicz), *Empowering Polish Politics* (Wojciech Roszkowski), *Repolonization of the Judiciary* (Małgorzata Wassermann), and *National and Anti-National Media* (Leszek Sosnowski). In these narratives, freedom of speech is narrowed to the right

mocracy is transformed into a simulated community, increasingly resembling a matrix rather than a deliberative forum.

## IN SEARCH OF A REMEDY – INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

In the face of the growing challenges confronting contemporary democracy in Poland and Europe such as political polarization, the erosion of social trust, and information manipulation, the need to develop an effective remedy becomes increasingly urgent. At least in the initial stage, such a remedy should contribute to restoring the legitimacy of fundamental democratic principles and strengthening citizens' real participation in decision-making processes. In the modern history of democracy, political leadership has played the role of an institutional corrector, a figure capable of giving direction, dynamism, and decisiveness to the often-cumbersome mechanisms of representative government. The leader was meant to mediate between dispersed interests and the common good, embody the collective aspirations of citizens, and stabilize the political system through vision and responsibility. Today, however, the very concept of leadership increasingly contradicts its classical understanding in the democratic context. The methods by which leaders are chosen, their communication styles, and the functions they perform in governance have undergone profound transformations. In place of the integrative role, there has emerged a popular tribune who absorbs social emotions. When authority is subordinated to popularity, institutional stability suffers. When convictions give way to strategic flexibility, citizens' trust disintegrates. Max Weber warned against democracies 'without a head' that is, without carriers of vision, responsibility, and independence. The problem today, however, is not a lack of leaders, but their imprisonment within the logic of digital metrics. We are confronted with leaders who lead by following, who seduce more than they persuade.

The previous analysis of the concept of democracy aptly highlighted its complexity, ambiguity, and the internal tensions accompanying contemporary political systems. However, in the context of observed social and political phenomena, a question arises: is it possible to 'recover' the original meaning of democratic values and to rebuild deep trust in public institutions? On the one hand, it can be argued that fundamental democratic values such as freedom, the rule of law, and pluralism are increasingly instrumentalized by political actors. This leads, in turn, to their dilution and use for particularistic, rather than collective, purposes. As a result, these concepts transform into empty slogans that serve more to legitimize specific interests than to foster genuine dialogue. This situation confirms the diagnosis of an erosion of a shared language for public debate and demonstrates the importance of critically redefining democratic concepts not merely in a formal sense, but in the spirit of their real significance and highlights the need to critically redefine democratic concepts – not merely in a formal sense, but in

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to express views aligned with a specific national ethos, while media and algorithms are expected to be 'repolonized' not in the name of pluralism, but to enforce ideological hegemony.

the spirit of their substantive meaning. On the other hand, rebuilding trust in institutions requires not only changes in language and rhetoric but, above all, concrete actions that ensure real transparency, accountability, and citizens' access to decision-making processes. In this context, civic education plays a crucial role. It should not only enable critical analysis of political messages but also support active citizen participation in public life. Its overarching task is to counteract alienation and social fragmentation phenomena that create fertile ground for populist and authoritarian tendencies. At the same time, independent media and civil society acquire particular importance, serving as guardians of democratic values and mechanisms of accountability. This role, especially in the era of digital media and disinformation, is invaluable. However, they too are increasingly subjected to political and economic pressures. Therefore, the restoration and strengthening of media pluralism should become a priority for all stakeholders concerned with the quality of public life. Nor can we ignore a fundamental dilemma facing contemporary societies: are citizens willing to sacrifice part of their freedom in the name of security and the growing expectations placed on the welfare state? This question is particularly pressing in light of the rising popularity of authoritarian attitudes that undermine the foundations of liberalism. To maintain its vitality, liberal democracy must demonstrate the ability to balance these conflicting needs, ensuring the protection of individual rights while simultaneously safeguarding the stability and security of the collective. Finally, one essential question remains: is democracy itself prepared to face and confront the challenges of an era marked by deepening polarization? In the authors' view, the answer requires openness to far-reaching reforms both institutional and cultural that would strengthen mechanisms of inclusivity, dialogue, and community-building. Only in this way can social divisions be overcome and the trust necessary for the enduring functioning of the democratic order be restored.

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