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Public disagreement: The greatest contribution of liberal politics

In order to decide whether liberalism is the right course for Slovakia, Samuel Abraham first looks at the true meaning of the term. He finds liberalism's greatest strength in its ability to open up public discussions and encourage tolerance.

Egon Gál and I have been contemplating a file on liberalism for a long time. Our aim is to present the historical development of this important ideology and examine its position and perspective today.

We were also planning to survey our Slovak situation, where liberalism lacks tradition, and is often rather freely or superficially interpreted both by the admirers and the critics. Political parties that call themselves "liberal" are mostly non-ideological and often opportunistic groupings, which view liberalism not as a political program to solve the problems of our society, but rather as some convenient label between the right and the left. Not surprisingly, the term "liberal" is often used by conservative politicians and intellectuals as a term of abuse. One of them, Peter Zajac, in a discussion of his book *A Country without a Dream*, says about Slovak liberalism: "I wish that Slovak liberals would look for answers and find them [...]. So far, all I can see is that they are at a dead end; I hear responses that are often completely amiss." If this is the truth, it is a bitter truth, not about liberalism as such but about its position in Slovakia. Hence, I consider it important to clarify what liberalism is, and only then to talk about its condition in Slovakia. For this reason, we have decided to offer a concise historical and analytical survey without, at this point, opening the discussion onto liberals and liberalism here in Slovakia.

Liberalism is often and mistakenly considered to be a hyper-tolerant and relativistic ideology, which is responsible for all the crises and sins of the modern era. However, our epoch *is* the era determined by liberal norms, and liberal democracy is a standard synonymous with western democracy. There are numerous political rules and practices today that were denied and rejected in the past, but which, thanks to liberals, have become common today. Among them are religious tolerance; freedom of speech; restriction of political powers; free elections; division of power between executive, legislative, and judicial branches; and publicly transparent state budgets to deter corruption. One can say rather that liberalism mends the crises of our time; if in some regions and during certain periods it has not functioned or has been valid only partially, this is not due to failures encoded in liberalism. It is rather the consequence of imperfect human nature, the ambition of countless autocrats and ideologues convinced that through power and some form of "human engineering" it is possible to attain paradise on earth, a return of the Golden Age, communism,

or a thousand-year "Aryan Reich". These utopias and ideals are the goals, and the people and societies the means for their fulfillment. And those who are deemed less worthy, less class- and status-conscious, less fanatical or conforming, pay the price — varying degrees of humiliation and brutality. This is the condition the liberals tried, and are still trying, to amend — through persuasion and logical argumentation, but also through material domination or through force. During the Communist era, we perceived the basic practices of liberalism to be the most lacking. Naturally, they were among the first implemented after 1989.

Liberalism, which does not have a firm codex of prohibitions and orders, does not supply an ultimate goal for society to pursue, and thus it requires a particular type of citizen and hence politicians. Through their outlook, behaviour, and disposition, they fulfill and embody its essence. Considering that liberalism, in contrast to other ideologies, does not promise plenty and happiness in the future, it must prove its legitimacy and provide some degree of fulfilment in the here and now. This is increasingly difficult to achieve and it does not have universal validity and scope. In fact, the continuous diatribes about the "crisis of liberalism" attack not only the secularization of society and the atomization of the individual, but also the universality of liberal values, a claim that seems no longer tenable. The universal ethos of liberal ideas, proclaimed by the liberal theorists from the beginning, seems to have given way to the harsh reality of its limited span and applicability. I consider the disclosure of Richard Rorty to be both important and at the same time disturbing, when he writes to us that:

It may be that the intractable disparity between North and South will make it impossible for liberals to remain internationalists; they may have to abandon their hopes of bringing the ideals of Enlightenment Europe to the world as a whole. This abandonment will do a lot of damage — though not necessarily fatal damage — to liberals' self-image and morale. So I am not very optimistic about the long-run prospects of liberalism. Yet I have no alternative to offer. All I can say is that liberalism is the best idea that Europe has ever had, and that it has made Europe and North America into the best human society so far created. But it may not work on a planetary scale.

One definition of the modern era could be the conflict between liberalism and other ideologies about the domination of certain values and political foundations. Liberalism does not contain an ideal, in the sense that development in a society should lead to a certain perfect goal. On the contrary, the liberal claims that not only is the ideal impossible, but even undesirable. In fact, an ideal would predispose the direction of development, which would clash with the basic precept of liberalism — the possibility of choice. As John Gray argues, "Man differs from animals primarily neither as the possessor of reason, nor as the inventor of tools and methods, but as a being capable of choice." One who chooses and does not allow others to choose for him. And the more choices an individual has, the richer life becomes.

Besides rejecting an ideal political system and individuals having a choice, another precondition of liberalism is the toleration of the views of others — even those that one might find utterly despicable or even harmful. To understand and tolerate someone's views does not mean, of course, to accept

them. A sceptical respect for the opinions of our opponents is preferable, writes Gray, evoking Mill, to indifference or cynicism. Even worse is intolerance, or an orthodoxy, which suffocates any rational discussion. This is Mill's basic liberal credo. This and similar types of conscious moderation make liberalism in the eyes of numerous critics aimless, void, and defenseless.

Liberalism, in order to remain in principle moderate and benevolent, must establish arrangements by which those that would like to constrain and dominate others can be contained. It sounds paradoxical, but experience shows that this is the only way that assures freedom as understood by Kant and taken over by liberals: your freedom is valid as long as you are not restricting the freedoms of others. Or expressed otherwise: power can be used against individuals in order to prevent harm to others. And liberalism is certainly not defenseless. As Ernest Gellner argues, liberalism defeated its most dangerous enemies. What is more, it defeated them through their own weapons — Nazism militarily, communism economically.

Almost no one today in western democracies questions the basic norms of liberalism. However, in the period when they were first formulated and gradually implemented, they were quite revolutionary and were rejected vehemently by conservatives and various anti-liberals. The analyst Stephen Holmes describes four core norms and values: **personal security, impartiality, individual liberty, and democracy**. Personal security vis-à-vis those who possess the means of enforcement is regulated by law equally valid for everyone. Connected to this is impartiality, where a single system of law applies to all. Personal freedom represents a broad spectrum, be it freedom of conscience, freedom to pursue ideals that another citizen considers wrong, freedom of movement, or freedom not to be monitored and followed by the state authorities. Finally, there is democracy — the first and basic right through which each society is judged and evaluated. The basic element of contemporary democracy is the right of every citizen to participate in governance either through elections, entering politics, or through public discussion in the independent media. As Holmes succinctly observes: "That public disagreement is a creative force may have been the most novel and radical principle of liberal politics." Imagine the explosive nature of these norms in the period when the "blue blood", "divine will", and sword decided about the legitimacy of those who ruled, what laws they followed, if any, and who was a serf or a slave. From this perspective, the modern conservatives are miles apart from their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors. In fact, the position of modern conservatives is not far from the position taken by early liberals in the nineteenth century. This can be easily discerned from Dewey's analysis, showing the difference between the early and late liberals.

You might object, what is the purpose of all these neat theories, rules, and norms, when not only here in Slovakia but also in other Western countries, corruption is widespread, most politicians are cynical and selfish, and everything is basically about power and economic interests? They view their activities in the perspective of an electoral period and within the radius of their own benefit, and connections and money can often buy freedom for those who act illegally. Indeed, liberalism becomes worthless if at the same time it is not fortified by an ethical component and individual responsibility, both of which are necessary for the functioning of a just political system.

Liberalism reckons with citizens who are independently minded and feel responsible for their fate. The greatest threat to liberalism comes not from outside enemies but from the apathy of its own citizens. Every society under

certain circumstances may have a majority that does not need — and often does not want — to take its destiny into its own hands. On the contrary, under plausible conditions these people are susceptible to the sirens of ethnic, religious, or other fundamentalist views, or simply become hostile to those that are different. And there are those who are oblivious to anything that is taking place politically in their seemingly quiet and prosperous society. For liberals, the freedom and status of the individual is the cornerstone by which they assess whether a political regime is good or bad; equally important for a liberal democracy's existence is that the majority of the citizens abide by and protect its written and unwritten rules.

Ancient philosophers and humanists like Spinoza, Diderot, Erasmus, Locke, or Montesquieu stressed four characteristics that were to be the basic apparatus of an individual able to form an Aristotelian "good" political regime. They are **reason, education, self-knowledge, and responsibility**. "What other hope is there for men, or has there ever been?" exclaims John Gray, referring to these maxims. There is no point in searching for error in liberalism if the society is composed of people for whom the fate of the society is irrelevant, or who lack education. If, on the contrary, these maxims are present and cultivated in a society, then liberalism is the best system of norms and rules assuring general freedom and justice. In such a society, individuals of various views can coexist in peace and prosperity.

The founder of Slovak conservatism after 1989, Ján ?arnogursk?, whom I respect not only as a politician, wrote in 1990: "We defeated Communism, we will also defeat liberalism". I was wondering what prompted such a remark from an individual who would surely not want to remove democracy, who would not want to install a monarchy, religious state, or some other dictatorship — the Communist regime, just before it collapsed, put ?arnogursk? in prison. He never offered an alternative vision, and therefore I presume that his aversion towards liberalism is subconscious, more from ignorance than as a well thought through strategy. It is quite possible that he said it as one of his *bon mots*, and hence he meant it only half-seriously. The fact remains that his young ideological followers and admirers do not take that remark as a *bon mot*, and consider liberalism as something worth "defeating".

For many people, the nature of liberal democracy acquired a new quality after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. Personal security became more significant than various kinds of freedoms. No doubt, politicians must do everything they can in order to prevent the repetition of similar catastrophes to that which happened in New York. However, their efforts must not destroy what they are attempting to defend in the first place — democracy, freedom, justice, and the way of life in liberal democracy. Defending the basic attributes and norms of liberalism will most likely be the greatest challenge of the twenty-first century.

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