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LOCALISM AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY – LIBERTARIAN PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The current political context of the European Union indicates a disconnection between the people and those who rule greater than ever in contemporary history. This paper will show how libertarianism, as political philosophy, contributes to reducing this democratic gap between citizens and rulers, through the specific instrument of localism. Localism represents a set of political orientations that focuses on local values, resources and involvement of citizens. It generates public policies supported and implemented by citizens because they have ownership over them. The paper will include a brief conceptual framing of libertarianism as well as localism, presenting the evolution of both concepts in contemporary political sciences. Starting from the famous words of Tip O'Neill, former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives that "All politics is local", the paper will analyze libertarian ideas on localism and will discuss them in the context of an increasing interest for these ideas in the Romanian political sphere.

Keywords: libertarianism; localism; democracy; participation; active citizens;

1. INTRODUCTION

On the 23rd of June 2016, 51,9% of British citizens voted in favour of their country leaving the European Union (https://europa.eu/newsroom/highlights/special-coverage/brexit_en, retrieved May 2019). This sent a shockwave all over the world and the entire process of Great Britain leaving the European Union (process that is still not finalised at the time of writing this paper) is called *Brexit*. Besides being one of the most commented issues in international affairs, *Brexit* is a symptom of a phenomenon that I will discuss in this paper. This is the gap between the European Union's philosophy of promoting the local, through subsidiarity and "unity in diversity" and the perception of the European Union's institutions in the eyes of the citizens.

The principle of subsidiarity is a general principle of European law and it refers to the fact that, when an issue occurs, the best approach is to deal with it at the closest level of its occurrence, thus favouring the local approach. In fact, European institutions have often been accused of making decisions for all European countries, without even consulting local or regional institutions. This was one of the key



arguments of Brexiteers in their effort to convince the British that their country would have been better off outside the European Union. The media propaganda painted a very grim picture of grey, sober, occult European public servants performing negotiations behind closed doors, keeping the public away from real decisions (Betts A, 2019).

The motto of the European Union, “unity in diversity”, suggests the idea of a common effort towards peace and prosperity while at the same time cultivating local traditions and values of all European countries.¹ This has also been a controversial issue along time, since the defenders of national values have been faced with the promoters of a federation-like European Union in which the national level bears no more importance. This aspect too is considered to have been one of the reasons for the surprising result of the Brexit vote in June 2016, since the British have always been considered to have a more particular attitude towards the idea of integration in a super-national organism.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

These facts show that the issue of local versus national and super-national is still a very current debate, with concrete consequences in world politics. My effort in this paper is to show that libertarianism, as political ideology, offers valuable solutions for issues related to localism and becomes a real political alternative in contemporary Romania, a country with a heavy load of Communist and totalitarian heritage.

The most important aspect of libertarianism is the relation with the State: in order to ensure social rights, the State breaches individual freedom by imposing taxation on almost everything: property, work, public services etc. This also has consequences on a deeper level: for example, public services such as education and health become fully controlled by the State, as their main sponsor, and are seldom used as biopower tools of social control. Biopower is a concept defined by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (Foucault M., 1978) referring to the idea that the human being in its biological aspects becomes the core of political action. This kind of biopower has a huge potential for totalitarian action of the State against individuals.

The most prominent libertarian thinkers are Friedrich Hayek (Hayek F., 1989), Ludwig von Mises (von Mises L., 1996), Murray Rothbard (Rothbard M., 2006) and Robert Nozick (Nozick R., 1974), all arguing for a minimal State. The minimal State is the state that only ensures internal and external defence and the proper execution of contracts between private parties. In fact, with all its diverse orientations, libertarianism favours private action, as natural manifestation of individual freedom.

Localism is a larger range of political orientations that promote local values and, mainly, local control of resources and lack of centralised government. Its theoretical background connects it to the concept of deliberative democracy (Ercan, S.A.; Hendriks, C.H., 2013, 422-440), in which citizens play a major role in decision-making not just by delegating political power in electoral votes but by directly participating in political debates and decisions close to their area of interest.

3. ARGUMENT OF THE PAPER&ARGUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE THESIS

The argument of this paper is that localism, in its libertarian ideological version, is one possible answer to the issue of citizen political participation in Romania.

The argument arose from the following research questions:

- Is the libertarian version of localism a potential solution to increasing the interest of citizens for political issues?
- Are there any Romanian political or civil society movements that promote libertarian localism?

As mentioned in the introduction, Brexit is just a symptom of the gap between citizens and political institutions seen by the citizens as abstract, obscure entities that impose their political agenda. This phenomenon is present all over Europe and it mainly manifests by political disengagement and electoral absenteeism (<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/continent-view/Europe/40>). The voter turnout by country for the most recent parliamentary elections places Romanian on the last spot on a list of 55 European countries, with a percentage of only 37,8.

The communist heritage of excessive centralism, corruption at the highest level of government and precarious civic education (the State controlled education system does not focus on this aspect) have led to this result. The consequences can only be negative: lack of interest and political participation leads to the ascension of extremist political movements, as well as to the perpetuation of corruption practices.

The solution provided by libertarianism as political ideology of the minimal State is a return to localism. Inspired by the much cited words of Tip O'Neill, the former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, "All politics is local" (O'Neill T., 1995), some political movements argued that, in order to improve democracy, the focus must shift from the national government to the local. This refers to taxation, meaning that taxes are better spent in the jurisdiction where they are collected. This means investments in public infrastructure that allow economic development of private local companies, creating jobs and making citizens feel like their money is well spent at their own interest.

It also refers to institutional mechanisms that encourage political participation of citizens such as participatory local budgets, in which citizens can directly decide on how a certain amount of the local budget is spent. Moreover, libertarian localism favours decentralisation of public services such as education and health. The central idea is that citizens should have the freedom to decide for themselves regarding the necessities of education in their area in accordance with the local labour market.

Local referendums, town-hall meetings, public debates on local issues of interest, civic movements of citizens are also an essential part of the instruments proposed by libertarian localism.

During the past years, the Romanian political arena diversified by the appearance of such libertarian movements, especially at a local level. The first movement is the Party of Free Men (Partidul Oamenilor Liberi) founded in 2015 in Targu-Mures, a city in North-Central Romania. (<http://oameniliberi.com/>, accessed 20 June 2019). They promote fiscal decentralization, using the Swiss model in order to encourage local economic development. In favour of deliberative democracy, POL fights for debureaucratization of public services and transparency of public decision. In order to allow more participation in political life, POL supports electoral reform, by eliminating obstacles to participation, such as the minimal number of support signatures for a candidate or a party as a prerequisite of taking part in an electoral competition, provided in the electoral law in force.

Brăila Nouă, founded in 2017, defines as the "first independent, localist, center-right party in the city" of Braila, South-Eastern Romania (<http://www.brailanoua.ro/>, accessed 13 June 2019). The party focuses on the self-sustainability of local administrations and the transparency of spending public funds. Brăila Nouă also has a common platform with another local party, PACT pentru Galați, in order to generate the actual unification between the two neighbouring communities. (<https://www.pactpentrugalati.ro/>, accessed 13 June 2019) Their inspiration is the so-called „Alliance of the West” (<https://aliantavestului.ro/>, accessed 13 June 2019), an alliance between the local administrations of Romanian Western cities of Arad, Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara and Oradea, was created in order to facilitate cooperation between these local communities with common interests in their region. The purpose is to contribute to local economic development by accessing European funding directly from the European Commission through an operational programme dedicated to this region, thus avoiding the bureaucratic and political conundrum of central government fund allocation.

These political movements are gaining speed at the local level, defining themselves as local movements interested in bringing about change in their own area. Their success is increasing, some of them already being voted into the local councils of their cities and having the opportunity to promote libertarian public policies.

The main arguments that have been brought to this approach are the danger of isolationism and the need for central government. The first one focuses on the idea that empowering local communities by letting them create and spend their own budgets will lead to a sort of autarchy in which the community closes in on itself by only accepting local products, local employees, and local businesses. The second argument comes from the long lasting tradition of big State, imposed by the communist regime, and that has led to the mentality that central government is a necessity. In its absence, local communities would have no focus, would lose control of local institutions and anarchy would install.

4. DISMANTLING THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST

In fact, neither libertarianism as political ideology, nor localism promote any concept of isolation. Libertarianism argues that individuals should be free: free to choose what is good for them, free to perform the activities that best fulfil their potential and free to associate, willingly, with whoever they think is appropriate. At the same time, localism, in the libertarian approach, extrapolates these principles to local communities so that they are free to choose the best policies for that particular community, free to develop in the direction that best suits their traits and free to associate with other local communities with common interests. Thus, local communities, when allowed to do associate by the central government, do so in accordance with their local interests, such as the Alliance of the West. The political movements mentioned are all pro-European parties, understanding the enormous benefits of European funding and also the importance of external investors in less developed regions.

Regarding the necessity for a central government, as Horia Terpe, executive director of the Center for Institutional Analysis and Development (CADI-Eleutheria), puts it:

“All non-minimal alternatives only have three possible outcomes: to become corrupt and inefficient, to function as a dictatorship or both of them at the same time.” (Terpe I., 2019)

The minimal state should focus only on defence, justice and police, leaving the markets deal with the other issues in a much more effective manner.

Unfortunately, in Romania, the three possible outcomes outlined by Horia Terpe, have taken place in reality, first during the communist regime (the dictatorship version), then nowadays (the corrupt and inefficient version) and, if we let it, even the combination between them. The concentration of resources (human, financial, political) in the hands of one central administration leads to the high level of corruption as well as the ineffectiveness of such government that becomes rigid and unable to adapt to new trends.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the issue of citizen political participation in the context of the gap between central political institutions and local communities. The discussion stemmed from two main questions:

Is the libertarian version of localism a potential solution to increasing the interest of citizens for political issues? This appears to be a solution since both libertarianism as well as localism contain the ingredients necessary for the development of deliberative democracy: liberty, individual and community initiative and decentralization. I predict that the following years of Romanian democracy will show a growing interest for these ideas since their core, liberty, both of individuals as well as of communities, is the engine of participation. If people and communities are not free to decide for themselves, what is the meaning of democracy? I do not believe that democracy can survive without one of its most important components, citizen participation. Any initiative that supports more liberty for individuals and communities to determine their own fate is welcome and will lead to the consolidation of the rule of law and will not, as some critics tend to claim, lead to anarchy. All Western consolidated democracies have developed through the growth of local communities and this is only possible in the absence of a big, centralised State that controls all resources.

The second question of the paper was if there are any Romanian political or civil society movements that promote libertarian localism? As outlined in this paper, it seems that these movements, that started from civil society, through the efforts of associations such as SOLIB (Society for Individual Liberty) and CADI (Center for Institutional Analysis and Development), as well as intellectuals such as Bogdan Glăvan with his webpage *Logica Economică* (Economic Logic)², have started to gain speed and assume the role of local political actors that propose libertarian and localist agendas for the development of their communities.

For any country, but especially for Romania, as post-communist country, the promises of libertarianism and localism should be appealing as they want to generate that individual citizen initiative that is at the heart of democracy.

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