

## Virtual School of “Dialogue, Democracy and Peaceful Conflict Resolution”

### *DEMOCRACY – Žarko Puhovski* Lesson IX



#### **Žarko PUHOVSKI**

Born in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, 1946. After studies in Zagreb (physics and political sciences) and Frankfurt (philosophy) he was an assistant and then professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Zagreb. Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study (Wissenschaftskolleg) in Berlin. Visiting professor at the Free University in Berlin, European University center for Peace Studies in Stadtschlaining (Austria) and at the University of Klagenfurt; occasional lectures at universities in Berlin, London, Oxford, Budapest, Madrid, Bologna, etc. Member of the Transcend network, of Advisory Panel of The European Journal of Philosophy and of the Standing committee on intersocietal relations of the Ethikon Institute, Los Angeles. Was awarded the European Club of Rectors Extraordinary Award for Peace and against Xenophobia 1993.

Author of numerous studies and essays and seven books (*Interest and Community*, 1975; *Context of Culture*, 1979; *History and Revolution*, 1980; *Reason and Society*, 1989; *Socialist Construction of Reality*, 1990; *Dictionary of Basic Political Terms*, 1990; *Politics and Economy of Transition*, 1993). Numerous articles on these items and problems connected with the post-communist transition and the post-Yugoslav wars were printed in English and German.

Žarko Puhovski was co-founder of the first alternative political movement in former Yugoslavia in the year 1988, and of the Croatian Helsinki Committee for human rights in 1993.

## Principles of democracy

Democracy comes from the Greek word, "demos," meaning people. In democracies, it is the people who hold sovereign power over elected legislator and government.

Although nuances apply to the world's various democracies, certain principles and practices distinguish democratic government from other forms of government.

Democracy is government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all citizens, directly or through their freely elected representatives.

Democracy is a set of principles and practices that protect human freedom; it is ideally the institutionalization of freedom.

Democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule, coupled with individual and minority rights. All democracies, while respecting the will of the majority, zealously protect the fundamental rights of individuals and minority groups.

Democracies guard against all-powerful central governments and decentralize government to regional and local levels, understanding that local government must be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible.

Democracies presupposes as one of the prime functions to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society.

Democracies conduct regular free and fair elections open to all citizens. Elections in a democracy cannot be facades that dictators or a single party hide behind, but authentic competitions for the support of the people.

Democracy subjects governments to the rule of law and ensures that all citizens receive equal protection under the law and that their rights are protected by the legal system.

Democracies are diverse, reflecting each nation's unique political, social, and cultural life.

Democracies rest upon fundamental principles, not uniform practices.

Citizens in a democracy not only have rights, they have the responsibility to participate in the political system that, in turn, protects their rights and freedoms.

Democratic communities are committed to the values of tolerance, cooperation, and compromise. Democracies recognize that reaching consensus requires compromise and that it may not always be attainable. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit."

On the surface, the principles of majority rule and the protection of individual and minority rights would seem contradictory. In fact, however, these principles are twin pillars holding up the very foundation of what we mean by democratic government.

Majority rule is a means for organizing government and deciding public issues; it is not another road to oppression. Just as no self-appointed group has the right to oppress others, so no majority, even in a democracy, should take away the basic rights and freedoms of a minority group or individual.

Minorities -- whether as a result of ethnic background, religious belief, geographic location, and income level, or simply as the losers in elections or political debate -- enjoy guaranteed basic human rights that no government, and no majority, elected or not, should remove.

Minorities need to trust that the government will protect their rights and self-identity. Once this is accomplished, such groups can participate in, and contribute to their country's democratic institutions.

Among the basic human rights that any democratic government must protect are freedom of speech and expression; freedom of religion and belief; due process and equal protection under the law; and freedom to organize, speak out, dissent, and participate fully in the public life of their society.

Democracies understand that protecting the rights of minorities to uphold cultural identity, social practices, individual consciences, and religious activities is one of their primary tasks.

Acceptance of ethnic and cultural groups that seem strange if not alien to the majority can represent one of the greatest challenges that any democratic government can face. But democracies recognize that diversity can be an enormous asset. They treat these differences in identity, culture, and values as a challenge that can strengthen and enrich them, not as a threat.

There can be no single answer to how minority-group differences in views and values are resolved -- only the sure knowledge that only through the democratic process of tolerance, debate, and willingness to compromise can free societies reach agreements that embrace the twin pillars of majority rule and minority rights.

To preserve and protect individual rights and freedoms, a democratic people must work together to shape the government of their choosing. And the principal way of doing that is through political parties.

Political parties are voluntary organizations that link the people and their government. Parties recruit candidates and campaign to elect them to public office, and they mobilize people to participate in selecting government leaders. The majority party (or the party elected to control the offices of government) seeks to enact into law a number of different policies and programs. Parties of the opposition are free to criticize the majority party's policy ideas and offer their own proposals.

Political parties provide a way for citizens to hold elected party officials accountable for their actions in government. Democratic political parties have faith in the principles of democracy so that they recognize and respect the authority of the elected government even when their party leaders are not in power.

Like any democracy, members of various political parties reflect the diversity of the cultures in which they arise. Some are small and built around a set of political beliefs. Others are organized around economic interests, or shared history. Still others are loose alliances of different citizens who may only come together at election time.

All democratic political parties, whether they are small movements or large national coalitions, share the values of compromise and tolerance. They know that only through broad alliances and cooperation with other political parties and organizations can they provide the leadership and common vision that will win the support of the people of the nation.

Democratic parties recognize that political views are fluid and changeable, and that consensus can often arise out of the clash of ideas and values in peaceful, free, and public debate.

The concept of the loyal opposition is central to any democracy. It means that all sides in political debate -- however deep their differences -- share the fundamental democratic values of freedom of speech and faith, and equal protection under law. Parties that lose elections step into the role of opposition -- confident that the political system will

continue to protect their right to organize and speak out. In time, their party will have a chance to campaign again for its ideas, and the votes of the people. In a democracy, the struggle between political parties is not a fight for survival, but a competition to serve the people.

Citizenship in a democracy requires participation, civility, and even patience. Democratic citizens recognize that they not only have rights, they have responsibilities. They recognize that democracy requires an investment of time and hard work -- a government of the people demands constant vigilance and support by the people.

Under some democratic governments, civic participation means that citizens are required to serve on juries, or give mandatory military or civilian national service for a period of time. Other obligations apply to all democracies and are the sole responsibility of the citizen -- chief among these is respect for law. Paying one's fair share of taxes, accepting the authority of the elected government, and respecting the rights of those with differing points of view are also examples of citizen responsibility.

Democratic citizens know that they must bear the burden of responsibility for their society if they are to benefit from its protection of their rights. There is a saying in free societies: you get the government you deserve. For democracy to succeed, citizens must be active, not passive, because they know that the success or failure of the government is their responsibility, and no one else's. In turn, government officials understand that all citizens should be treated equally and that bribery has no place in a democratic government.

In a democratic system, people unhappy with their leaders are free to organize and peacefully make the case for change -- or try to vote those leaders out of office at established times for elections.

- Democracies need more than an occasional vote from their citizens to remain healthy. They need the steady attention, time, and commitment of large numbers of their citizens who, in turn, look to the government to protect their rights and freedoms.

- Citizens in a democracy join political parties and campaign for the candidates of their choice. They accept the fact that their party may not always be in power.

◦ They are free to run for office or serve as appointed public officials for a time.

◦ They utilize a free press to speak out on local and national issues.

◦ They join labour unions, community groups, and business associations.

◦ They join private voluntary organizations that share their interests -- whether devoted to religion, ethnic culture, academic study, sports, the arts, literature, neighbourhood improvement, international student exchanges, or a hundred other different activities.

◦ All these groups -- no matter how close to, or remote from government -- contribute to the richness and health of their democracy.

Democracy requires the public to make choices and decisions. In order for the public to trust the press, journalists must provide factual reporting based on credible sources and information. Plagiarism and false reporting are counterproductive to a free press.

A free press informs the public, holds leaders accountable, and provides a forum for debate of local and national issues. Democracies foster the existence of a free press. An independent judiciary, civil society with rule of law, and free speech all support a free press. A free press must have legal protections.

In democracies the government is accountable for its actions. Citizens therefore expect to be informed about decisions their governments make on their behalf. The press facilitates this "right to know," by serving as a watchdog over the government, helping citizens to hold government accountable, and questioning its policies. Democratic governments

grant journalists access to public meetings and public documents. They do not place prior restraints on what journalists may say or print.

Democracies foster a never-ending struggle between two rights: The government's obligation to protect national security; and the people's right to know, based on journalists' ability to access information. Governments sometimes need to limit access to information considered too sensitive for general distribution. But journalists in democracies are fully justified in pursuing such information.

Through free elections, citizens of a democracy confer powers upon their leaders that are defined by law. In a constitutional democracy, power is divided so that the legislature makes the laws, the executive authority enforces and carries them out, and the judiciary operates independently.

Democratic leaders are neither elected dictators nor "presidents-for-life." They serve fixed terms in office and accept the results of free elections, even if it means losing control of the government.

In constitutional democracies, executive authority is generally limited in three ways: by a system of checks and balances separating the national government's executive, legislative, and judicial powers; by federalism, which divides power between the national government and the state/local governments; and by constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights.

At the national level, the executive is limited by the constitutional authority vested in the legislative branch and by an independent judiciary. Executive authority in modern democracies is generally organized in one of two ways: as a parliamentary or a presidential system.

° In a parliamentary system, the majority party in the legislature forms the executive branch of the government, headed by a prime minister.

° In a parliamentary system, the legislative and executive branches are not entirely distinct from one another, since the prime minister and members of the cabinet are drawn from the parliament. In such systems, the political opposition serves as a chief means of limiting, or checking the authority of the executive.

° In a presidential system, the president is elected separately from the members of the legislature.

° In a presidential system, both the president and the legislature have their own power bases and political constituencies, which serve to check and balance each other.

Democracies do not require their governments to be weak, only limited. Consequently, democracies may be slow to reach agreement on national issues; yet when they do, their leaders can act with great authority and confidence. At all times, leaders in a constitutional democracy function within the rule of law that defines and restricts their authority.

Elected legislatures are the principal forum for deliberating, debating, and passing laws in a representative democracy. They are not so-called rubber stamp parliaments merely approving the decisions of an authoritarian leader.

Oversight and investigation powers allow legislators to publicly question government officials about their actions and decisions, and otherwise serve as a check on the power of various government ministries -- especially in the presidential system of governing where the legislature is separate from the executive.

Legislators may approve national budgets, conduct hearings on pressing issues, and confirm executive appointees to courts and ministries. In some democracies, legislative committees provide lawmakers a forum for these public examinations of national issues.

Legislators may support the government in power or they may serve as a loyal political opposition that offers alternative policies and programs.

Legislators have a responsibility to articulate their views as effectively as possible. But they must work within the democratic ethic of tolerance, respect, and compromise to reach agreements that will benefit the general welfare of all the people -- not just their political supporters. Each legislator must alone decide on how to balance the general welfare with the needs of a local constituency.

Legislators often provide constituents with a sympathetic hearing for their individual complaints and problems -- along with help in getting assistance from large government bureaucracies. To do this, they often maintain a staff of trained aides.

National legislators are usually elected in one of two ways. In plurality elections, sometimes called "first past the post," the candidate with the most votes wins. In the proportional system, often used in parliamentary elections, voters usually cast ballots for parties, not individuals, and representatives are chosen on the basis of their party's percentage of the vote.

A proportional system tends to encourage multiple, tightly organized smaller parties. Plurality elections encourage a looser, two-party system. Under either system, representatives engage in the debate, negotiation, coalition building, and compromise that are the hallmarks of democratic legislatures. Legislatures are often bicameral, with two chambers, and new laws generally require passage by both the upper and lower chambers.

These are the principles of democracy, the best it can theoretically give to any political community which is – by political culture and other preconditions - ripe for.

**For further discussion remains nevertheless:**

How far are the best among the functioning democracies from these ideals?

How far are our societies?

In which aspect are real problems of the people who are worst off (poverty, invalidity etc.) to be represented in modern democracies?

What's the role of the decentralisation?