

Modern Democracy and Autocracy

Contribution to the course *General Theory of the State*

I. Democracy, dictatorship, totalitarianism and autocracy

- *democracy*: sovereignty of the people, rule of the majority in a *pluralistic society*, regular free and fair elections, democratic freedoms and open public discourse
- *dictatorship*: no legitimation of the rulers by the people, no or strongly restricted democratic freedoms, no or restricted public discourse, no separation of powers
 - note, however, that the freedoms in private life are often not or not much more restricted than in democracies!
- *totalitarianism*: a dictatorial regime with *total grip on the life of the citizen* (public activities, professional life and private life)
 - examples: national socialism, fascism, communism (Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism), islamism (Taliban, ISIS)
 - extreme: the regime even decides about your profession (→ East Germany) or your wife/husband (→ Khmer Rouge)
 - note that democracies can also show elements of totalitarian intolerance (example: laws regulating free sex among adults)
- *autocracy*: a new, heterogeneously used term for dictatorships and semi-dictatorships, notably for those who have emerged from and then corrupted a democratic regime
 - no or unfair, unfair or manipulated elections
 - officially recognised but practically ineffective democratic freedoms
 - no or strongly reduced rule of law, no effective separation of powers
 - in some cases oppression of minorities and intolerant suppression of private freedoms

II. Old and modern ways to establish dictatorships

1) The classical way: revolution, military coup, coup d'état

- the prevailing way in the 20th century
- an open way: no elections anymore...

2) The modern way: acquisition of power through democratic elections and transformation of the political system into autocracy or dictatorship

- the prevailing way in the 21st century
- a disguised way: elections will continue but not be free and fair anymore
- most prominent examples: Russia, Turkey

3) In particular: the populist way

- a more and more common, efficient way; examples: Venezuela, Hungary, Poland; attempts/threats in the USA, UK, Italy, Romania, Philippines
- often based on nationalism, religious extremism or extremist conservatism or leftism but first of all on intolerance and authoritarianism
- immense use of lies and propaganda, notably in the social media, unsubstantiated attacks on the so-called "elites", pushing of enemy stereotypes (Soros, Islam, LGBT, the "West")
- after being elected, strategic placement of regime buddies in all influential positions in the state, authoritarian governance, elimination of independence of the judiciary and separation of powers, weakening of the rule of law, restriction of the democratic freedoms of the opposition, oppression or takeover of critical private media etc.
- a special variant: *oligarch rule* (manipulated "democracies" controlled by influential "businessmen"), notably in East Europe

III. How to become a dictator - a practical instruction

- see Annex

How to become a dictator - a practical instruction

Would you like to become the next bad dictator of your country? It is easier than you may imagine! Just follow the following steps, which have already been successful in numerous countries, such as Turkey, Hungary, Poland and (at least attempted) the U.S.A. Important: You must follow them exactly in the right order. Then they will work.

1. Found a new populist party and win the next elections. Lots of bots, fake news and hate speech, unsubstantiated criticism of the "elites", nationalism, racism, law and order slogans and moralist or religious intolerance will work well.
2. Once you are President or Prime Minister, first **neutralise the Constitutional Court**,
 - by cutting down its competences (the way of Hungary)
 - or replacing the current constitutional judges by your buddies (the way of Poland, Turkey)
3. **Convert the state-owned public media into instruments of government propaganda** (the way of Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Russia etc.). You need their support for the next steps!
4. **Abolish the independence of the judiciary** so that they cannot stop you anymore (the way of Hungary and Poland). If you are good you can issue direct orders to the judges in the individual case (the way of Turkey).
5. **Restrict the freedom of the private media** by authoritarian legislation, so that they do not dare anymore to criticise you. In addition, let your rich buddies buy important critical media and bring them in line. Now you may also restrict social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok etc.) or - even better - let your buddies take them over (attempted by U.S. President Donald Trump) OR replace them by government-controlled alternatives (the way of China).
Caution, you will meet fierce resistance! Make sure that the public media support you by intense propaganda!
6. Now it's time to **restrict the freedom of assembly** by restrictive legislation, e.g. granting priority to government officials and religious groups to use the public space (the way of Poland). Of course, you can also exploit the COVID-19 pandemic for this purpose...
7. **Reduce the scope of action of NGOs**, in particular of human rights groups, by establishing a bureaucratic government control (the way of Moldova) and limiting financial support and cooperation with foreign partners (the way of Russia and Hungary).
8. **Abolish the freedom of science** so that the researchers and intellectuals will not dare to criticise you anymore (the way of Hungary). In particular, kick out the annoying foreign universities and lecturers!

Now you can enjoy your life as a dictator. Enjoy it quickly because after some years or decades it may end, and the risk of dictators ending one day in the grave or prison is high. If, however, you do not want to become a dictator, be alert if you see that the described steps are planned or taken. The decline from democracy to autocracy only happens where the people allow it to happen!