

DIDACTIC UNIT 4

Democracy?

Current attitude

Gimnazjum nr 9 im. Jana Pawła II, Sosnowiec, Poland

2014-2017

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	2
2. BIOGRAPHY RATIONALE	6
3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	6
4. ACTIVITIES.....	9
ACTIVITY 1:.....	9
ACTIVITY 2:.....	9
ACTIVITY 3:.....	10
ACTIVITY 4:.....	10
ACTIVITY 5:.....	10
ACTIVITY 6:.....	10
ACTIVITY 7:.....	11
ACTIVITY 8:.....	11
ACTIVITY 9:.....	11
ACTIVITY 10:.....	11
ACTIVITY 11:.....	12
5. REFERENCES.....	13
6. AUTHORS	13

1. INTRODUCTION

Title

Democracy?

Age

Students from 14 to 16 years

Duration

2 sessions of 45 min each

Sources

- A PowerPoint presentation – historical background and lesson procedures – appendix 1, quotations of Jarosław Kaczyński for task 2 – appendix 2
- statements for discussion for task 3 – appendix 3,
- excerpts from an essay „Populism, pluralism and liberal democracy” (Plattner 2010) – appendix 4,
- excerpts from the “Democracy Index 2015: Democracy in an age of anxiety”, The Economist
- quotations of Leszek Kołakowski’s works

Appendix 2

Task 2

Read the statements of Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Law and Justice, the governing party. In each statement find the part which strikes at democracy.

1. “The nation is the sovereign and its rights cannot be limited by the parts of the Constitution or any other prescriptive acts based on some arbitrary general clauses.”

<http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kaczynski-narod-nie-moze-byc-ograniczony-przez-elementy-konstytucji-6027701353243265a>

2. “Professor Rzepliński (the president of the Constitutional Tribunal – the author’s note) is not in fact a lawyer” (after the meeting with the Sejm Speaker, April 2016).

<http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,124059,20670109,jaroslaw-kaczynski-chcialbym-byc-emerytowanym-zbawca-narodu.html>

3. “There is this dreadful tradition of national betrayal in Poland (...) It seems to be in the genes of some people, the Poles of the worst kind, who are now most active” (Republika TV, December 2015)”

<http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,124059,20670109,jaroslaw-kaczynski-chcialbym-byc-emerytowanym-zbawca-narodu.html>

4. “The Democratic Rule of Law or the Rule of Law. The documents, especially these documents of European Union, don't speak of a democratic Rule of Law, they don't speak of our Constitution, but they speak of the Rule of Law. And these two don't mean the same. These are two completely different issues. The Rule of Law doesn't have to be democratic. In democracy the people is the sovereign, the parliament its representative, and in Polish conditions also the president. These two institutions are responsible for making law. These two institutions are responsible for regulating our life”

<http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/295423-jaroslaw-kaczynski-na-kongresie-pis-suwerennosc-jest-wartoscia-sama-w-sobie-jest-sprawa-godnosc-i-narodu-nie-poddamy-sie-koncepcjom-sorosa?strona=1>

Appendix 3

Task 3

Why do nations which fought for democracy for so long abandon it now?

Read the possible reasons and decide which of them is the most important.

1. Democracy is based on competition (e.g. elections) and there are many people who don't accept competition so they aspire to take absolute power. They bribe voters promising to fulfil all their expectations, they create a common enemy which they are allegedly able to protect the voters from.
2. A democratic country isn't for the nation but for the citizens, which makes a crucial difference. Anyone can be a citizen, for example people belonging to ethnic minorities, but the nation may not want to allow the minorities to enjoy the same rights as the nation. Democracy makes the nation weaker and strengthens
3. the citizens – the nation doesn't accept being weaker.
4. Democracy isn't a natural law, but an artificial creation which requires effort, thinking, contribution, control on the part of the citizens. Some people are willing to give up the privilege of democratic rights even if it entails limitation of freedom so as to avoid the need to think.
5. Every system has a germ of its own destruction when it reaches its peak.

Appendix 4

Task 4

Read excerpts from an essay „Populism, pluralism and liberal democracy” (Plattner 2010) and some statements of one of the Polish politicians and answer the questions:

- Which of the statements can be considered populist? Why?
 - Which party in your country or in the world could be considered populist?
 - Can populism pose a threat to democracy? Why?
1. “Here is the definition offered in the entry on “Populism” in the Encyclopedia of Democracy:
 2. “A political movement that emphasizes the interests, cultural traits, and spontaneous feelings of the common people, as opposed to those of a privileged elite. For legitimation, populist movements often appeal to the majority will directly—through mass gatherings, referendums, or other forms of popular democracy—without much concern for checks and balances or the rights of minorities.””
 3. “Populism remains democratic in the majoritarian sense, in that it justifies itself as the agent and the embodiment of the people as a whole—excluding, of course, the corrupt and privileged elite and its agents.”
 4. “Populists want what they take to be the will of the majority—often as channeled through a charismatic populist leader—to prevail, and to do so with as little hindrance or delay as possible. For this reason, they have little patience with liberalism’s emphasis on procedural niceties and protections for individual rights.”
 5. “Populists tend to view “the people” as a homogeneous or uniform grouping in cultural as well as economic terms. Those who differ from the majority in basic cultural traits are more typically viewed as enemies of the people rather than as potential allies.”

Appendix 5

Task 5

Students work in small groups.

Read the excerpt from the “Democracy Index 2015: Democracy in an age of anxiety” and answer the questions:

1. “Democracy is more than the sum of its institutions. A democratic political culture is also crucial to the legitimacy, smooth functioning and, ultimately, the sustainability of democracy. A culture of passivity, leading to an obedient and docile citizenry, is not consistent with the healthy functioning of democracy... Without this broad, sustaining participation, democracy begins to wither and become the preserve of small, select groups.”
 - Why is participation necessary for the proper functioning of democracy?
 - What does it mean to participate in democratic system? Give examples of active participation.
 - How can you be active?

Aims

1. students know the basic features of the democratic system of government – constitutional democracy
2. students discuss threats to the democratic system of government
3. students are able to recognize threats to the democratic system of government
4. students understand the importance of active participation in the democratic system of government to find examples from one’s own country’s populist phenomena to recognise one’s own prejudices

Methodology

- Lecture – presentation of the historical background
- Text analysis
- Brainstorming
- Discussion

Other aspects

Classroom arrangement: no special arrangements

Groups Students: group work and whole class work

Equipment: projector for PowerPoint presentation and/or photocopies of materials

2. BIOGRAPHY RATIONALE

The changing situation on a political map of Europe, the shift in political sympathies, also in the USA – the cradle of democracy, towards far right and populist parties, which skillfully use the anxiety caused by terrorist attacks and fuel hatred towards people escaping the atrocities of war in order to gain support; emphasizing national values, which results in overt and cruel attacks against immigrants and undermines the idea of European commonwealth, which, among others, was established in order to provide peace and freedom by means of democratic values and principles. All these have engendered the need to discuss democracy with young people. After all it is them who is soon going to be responsible for the shape of the country, Europe and the world they live in and they often seem unaware of the fact, that freedom and civil liberties they enjoy from their birth are not necessarily given once and for all. Responsibility requires knowledge and the ability to critically assess the reality we live in. It also requires independent thinking, the ability to challenge ideas and to ask questions. Hence the topic of the lesson: Democracy? conceived as a starting point for questions for students to develop, ask and answer.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Appendix 1 slides 6 -16

“Democracy?”

Not so long ago the answer to this question seemed very simple. However, today we can observe many countries depart from democratic values.

The question arises – why the system, which as a rule gives people so much power and freedom is so often negated and abandoned? Why, even in the most democratic countries, the majority of people is willing to give power, their freedom and the right to self-determination to tyrants and populists?

Let us use as an example the history of democratic Poland, a country where the democratic system first appeared as soon as in the 15th century. At that time in Poland, similarly to England, the power of the king started to be limited by the educated and wealthy part of the society – the nobility. In the 15th, 16th and 17th century, for three hundred years, absolutism exercised in the western Europe since 17th century was absent in Poland. A king was not allowed to take any independent decision without the nobility’s consent. The situation was a powerful spur for the nobility to act and as a result the country enjoyed a great prosperity. The democratic rule of “the people” gave a motivation for work, development of science and arts and stimulated the economy. A flourishing, democratic Poland became attractive for many Europeans, as at that time it was one of the most tolerant countries, where dissenters form predominant faith were not persecuted, as it was the case in other European countries.

Unfortunately, the excess of unlimited power resulted in the “liberum veto” right, which meant that every single member of parliament had the right to dissolve the Sejm (the chamber of

parliament, the gathering of members of parliament and the king) and to invalidate all decisions which had been taken. Democracy understood in such a way, together with corruption and the self-interest of the nobility lead to the paralysis of the country and the system became a parody of itself.

When in the 18th century democracies of western Europe were born as an opposition towards absolutism, Polish democracy was nearing its end. Since the end of the 18th century, throughout the 19th century up till the year 1918, that is for 123 years, Poland did not exist politically. It was divided and taken over by three totalitarian monarchies – Russia, Austria and Prussia.

After regaining sovereignty in 1918 Poland decided to restore its democratic traditions. Unfortunately, the process which started so successfully lasted only 20 years and finished when Hitler's army crossed Polish borders and totalitarian regime with all its dreadful consequences was introduced.

Another opportunity for returning to democratic system appeared in 1945, however when fascist left Poland, Soviet communists took their place. The period of another totalitarian rule began in Poland, during which civil rights and freedoms existed only on paper. Polish democrats, those who survived the beginning of the regime, were forced to emigrate or go underground, as they risked repression, labour camps or death sentences.

Poles who survived the totalitarian regime of the partitions of Poland and the war never gave up their ideals and aspirations. They united the nation in the underground – farmers, workers, the intelligentsia and the progressive clergy. They weren't deceived by communists, who ironically called the country the Polish People's Republic, indicating to the world, that Poland was governed by the people, that the country was democratic, it was so called socialist democracy.

Thousands of people died in Poland in a fight for democracy between 1945 and 1989. Polish cultural institutions and printing shops operated in the so called "free world". They published free papers and illegal literary works or scientific publications smuggled from Poland. At that time there were two Polands – a pro-Russian, communist one with the official government in Warsaw and more and more organized, democratic one with the government - in - exile in London.

The fight wasn't easy. A Russian army with 200 000 soldiers was stationed in Poland and on the borders there were around another million of Russian soldiers. In 1981 the democratic aspirations were so high that pro-Russian government declared war on the Polish nation. On 13th December 1981 martial law was imposed as an attempt to crush political opposition. It was suspended in 1982 and lifted in 1983. During the whole period tanks were stationed in the streets and any protest ended up with arrests or death of those who fought for democracy. At that time the western countries increased their help for Polish opposition as they understood that Poles were not only fighting for their own freedom but also stopping Soviet expansion. As a result of these actions Gorbachev's era began in Russia and in Poland first free, democratic elections were held. Poles finally became a free nation and have belonged to Hellenic, democratic culture.

Since 1989 Poland has been through many economic and political changes and started to resemble the countries of western Europe in many respects. In 1999 Poland joined NATO, and in May 2004

it became a member of European Union. In 2009 when the strongest economies in Europe suffered as a result of the crisis, Poland was the only country in Europe which enjoyed the economic growth.

Slides 19-23.

In October 2015 a right-wing conservative party, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) won parliamentary elections. Earlier that year, in May, the candidate of this same party, Andrzej Duda won the presidential election. The new government, which calls itself “a good change”, short after taking power started procedures which may pose a threat for the democratic institutions and laws.

At first, the government focused on gaining influence over the most important guardian of democracy – the Constitutional Tribunal. In spite of the protests of the opposition, citizens and the Venice Commission, the government keeps on introducing crucial changes in the status of the Tribunal, which aim is to exchange the Tribunal judges, shorten the term in office of the current president of the Tribunal and give the ruling majority a more powerful impact on the Tribunal. All the directives are introduced at great speed, with the infringement of the legislative procedures and come in force without *vocatio legis*, which means immediately. The government has refused to publish the Tribunal’s judgements which are not in accordance with its policy.

At the same time the government introduced new rules concerning the media – the journalists whose opinions are not convenient for the government lose jobs or give the jobs up themselves.

Another antidemocratic move was the fusion of the function of the Minister of Justice and the Attorney General. At the moment one minister wields absolute judicial power in Poland.

The governing party, which has a majority in the parliament, influence over the Constitutional Tribunal, the media, the army and the judiciary, is quickly taking total control over the country thwarting all democratic achievements of the Polish nation.

4. ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1:

Students read the quotation (slide 2) and answer the questions (slide 3):

“We should never forget that freedom is always fragile and its case is never safe”

(Kołakowski 1990, “Niepewność Epoki Demokracji”) translation from Polish: Joanna Janas-Sajdak

- Do you agree with the author of the quote?
- How do you understand the quotation in relation to the previous lessons on resistance, collaboration and indifference?
- What is freedom to you?
- Do you feel responsible for your freedom?
- Do people today appreciate democracy?
- Is democracy safe today?

ACTIVITY 2:

The teacher asks a question (presents slide 4 of the presentation):

- How many out of 165 countries in the world can be deemed fully democratic nowadays?

Once students answer the question, the teacher presents slide 5.

According to the “Democracy Index 2015: Democracy in an age of anxiety”, a report by the Economist Intelligence Unit out of 165 countries reported only 20 countries can be deemed “full democracies”, 59 countries are rated as “flawed democracies”.

Of the remaining 88 countries in the index, 51 are “authoritarian” and 37 are considered to be “hybrid regimes”.

- Is the data surprising?

ACTIVITY 3:

The teacher presents slides 6 – 16 or gives students a printed text:
“Democracy?”(Appendix 1)

ACTIVITY 4:

Task 1

1. The teacher asks students to write down the most important features of a democratic system in order to understand what Poles gained after 1989. Students work in small groups and present their lists to the whole class. The answers can be written down on the board. The teacher adds necessary features if there is a need. The features aimed at are presented on slide 17.
 - Sovereignty of the people
 - The majority will combined with the protection of the rights of individuals
 - The rule of law – the governing bodies act according to and within the boundaries of law
 - Check and balances – the division of power into legislative, executive and judiciary; the mutual control of the powers
 - Pluralism –coexistence of various political parties, associations and other organizations
 - Freedom of speech, freedom of the press
2. Students work in groups again and ask a question (slide 18) and present their answers.
 - The breach of which feature poses the greatest threat to democracy?
 - What would be the consequences of the breach?
 -

ACTIVITY 5:

The teacher presents slides 19-23 or gives students second part of appendix 1.

ACTIVITY 6:

Task 2

Read the statements of Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Law and Justice, the governing party (Appendix 2). In each statement find the part which strikes at democracy.

ACTIVITY 7:

Task 3

Why do nations which fought for democracy for so long abandon it now?

Read the possible reasons (Appendix 3) and decide which of them is the most important.

ACTIVITY 8:

Task 4

Read excerpts from an essay „Populism, pluralism and liberal democracy” (Plattner 2010) (Appendix 4) and answer the questions:

- Which party in your country or in the world could be considered populist?
- Can populism pose a threat to democracy? Why?

ACTIVITY 9:

Task 5

Students work in small groups.

Read the excerpt from the “Democracy Index 2015: Democracy in an age of anxiety” (Appendix 5) and answer the questions:

- Why is participation necessary for the proper functioning of democracy?
- What does it mean to participate in democratic system? Give examples of active participation.
- How can you be active?

ACTIVITY 10:

Task 6

The Teacher asks a question (slide 24):

- What questions about democracy could be raised in the topic of this lesson?

Students work in groups and suggest possible questions, which may serve as a starting point for further discussion, eg. using the philosophy for children method presented in the “Collaboration” unit.

ACTIVITY 11:

Task 7

Students read an excerpt (slide 25) and answer a question:

“...we are never exempt from entering discussions about past matters nor have we the right to repeat an empty platitude: “Let us look forward, the past is over, what’s done cannot be undone”. Let us not repeat this platitude, Gentlemen, because the purpose of harassing the past is not to feed our resentments, nor to fuel sentimental affections; nor, to be precise, to learn from it what we should do today; we learn about the past in order to recognize without a mistake faces infected with its worst legacy and to pillory them in advance.”

(Kolakowski 2014), translation from Polish: Joanna Janas-Sajdak

- How do you understand this excerpt within the context of the four lessons: Resistance, Collaboration, Indifference, Democracy? (for those who covered the four lesson sequence)
- How do you understand this excerpt within the context of this lesson? (for those who only did this one lesson)

5. REFERENCES

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6. AUTHORS

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