THE DELEGITIMISATION OF AUTHORITY

Shkumbin BEQIRI, Valdon BYTYÇI

Abstract

This paper examines the crisis of authority as a moral, social and political institution, analysing the challenges posed to it and their impact on the functioning of democracy and the stability of traditional state institutions. Through an observational-theoretical and comparative approach, it examines political developments at the global level and their effects on regional and local policymaking. Particular attention is paid to the weakening of institutional authority, the growing influence of populism, and the interconnection between politics and academia. The paper also highlights the erosion of universities' role as centres of critical thinking and scientific research, portraying them as "silent institutions" and professors as "political operatives". Through the delegitimisation of authority, anti-systemic forces seek to place academia at the service of day-to-day politics. The paper concludes that restoring legitimate authority and undertaking institutional reform are prerequisites for democratic governance and social stability.

Keywords: Authority; Populism; Academia; Delegitimisation; Reform.

Challenging Authority

Donald Trump's rise to power in the United States of America (USA) marked an important turning point in the conduct of politics, the exercise of government, and the relationship between institutions and the wider public. The various challenges he mounted against federal institutions, culminating in the events of 6 January 2021 at the Capitol, represented a fundamental shift. In many parts of the world, including our region, this shift served as an inspiration for approaching politics through its contestation beyond constitutional and legal boundaries. For the first time, American institutions were no longer regarded as benchmarks of political stability and effectiveness. This created space for political violence to emerge as a means of achieving objectives that are incompatible with the values upon which society has been built. In Trump's case, one issue warrants particular scrutiny: the tendency to view politics merely as a way of organising the economy or, in less refined terms, as a way of doing business. This is a fundamental misconception, because politics extends beyond economics. Its purpose is to govern the members of a community, who constitute an essential element of the state and whose concerns are not exclusively economic.

The failure of the Weimar Republic brought Adolf Hitler to power in 1933 (Albright, 2020, pp. 39–50). Hitler dismantled the Treaty of Versailles and rearmed Germany, which, according to one of the indictments at the Nuremberg trials, thereby surpassed the combined defensive capacity of all its neighbouring countries. This example demonstrates that it is difficult to identify a political regime more conducive than democracy to the development of political demagoguery and populism in virtually any form. The question, therefore, is how state institutions can be protected from anti-systemic political forces when the system itself suffers from low levels of public trust—in other words, when it is experiencing a crisis of authority.

Because authority entails obedience, it has often been mistakenly understood as a form of force or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion and constraint: wherever force is employed, authority has failed. On the other hand, authority is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and operates through a process of argumentation. Where argumentation is employed, authority is rendered ineffective. In contrast to the egalitarian method of persuasion, the authoritarian method is invariably hierarchical. If we are to define authority, we must distinguish it both from coercion through force and from persuasion through argument (Arendt, 1998, p. 84), since no state can endure for long solely through its coercive power (Pierson, 2009, p. 32). Put simply, authority does not rely on force

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to assert itself, nor does it depend on argument to secure persuasion; rather, it rests on recognition and compliance within a hierarchical structure.

The establishment of the first rule—for example, through the adoption of a constitution—generates authority, which inherently incorporates hierarchy as its mode of operation. The same applies at the international level, where rules governing the conduct of subjects of international law are established through treaties, conventions and other agreements. International institutions have continually faced a crisis of authority. Their authority has existed in practice only to the extent that states have respected it. In terms of the legal parameters of international law, the United Nations is the most powerful organisation known to any international order. In terms of political capacity, however, it remains markedly weaker than NATO as a political and military alliance. Its authority is also limited in relation to states with superpower status, such as the United States (Aron, 2022)1. The case of Palestine illustrates this hierarchy of authority particularly clearly. Although 157 United Nations member states have recognised the independent State of Palestine (Al Jazeera, 2025), such recognition has not been sufficient to secure its status as a state in the full sense of the term for as long as the United States does not recognise it. Among the states that have recognised Palestine are influential countries such as the United Kingdom and France, both permanent members of the UN Security Council, as well as Spain, Australia, Canada and others. This example suggests that the US Presidency can generate greater international legitimacy than the United Nations itself.

Some argue that, when discussing political questions, the state and governance, we must bear in mind that all these matters form part of a broader whole. A reductionist approach, by contrast, detaches us from that whole, absolutises one part and leads us towards categorical errors (Kalin, 2025, p. 114). Trump's case reverses this principle by absolutising the part. Meanwhile, the emergence of politicians who challenge authority has become too widespread to be captured in a single list. Nigel Farage of the United Kingdom's Reform Party, Marine Le Pen of France's National Rally, and Alice Elisabeth Weidel of Germany's Alternative for Germany are among the other figures who have gained considerable prominence and, in some cases, have decisively influenced approaches to governance. Domestic political conditions and the international political environment are, in certain respects, comparable to those that preceded the Second World War, when political systems were challenged from within—as in the Balkans, where most monarchies established during the first half of the twentieth century were replaced by communist regimes—and from without, through external interventions that proved fatal for many states. These examples illustrate how peoples in many countries seek what they regard as the most suitable model of governance. Yet this seemingly endless search has, on numerous occasions, brought states themselves to the brink of collapse. Consequently, when the wider public has been unable to rationally assess political demands, it has gravitated towards movements that have produced totalitarian regimes. As Hannah Arendt observes: "The emergence of political movements that sought to replace the party system and the development of a new form of totalitarian government took place alongside the more or less general and dramatic erosion of all traditional values of authority. This erosion was nowhere a direct consequence of the regimes or the movements themselves; rather, totalitarianism, both as a movement and as a regime, appeared to be the form of government best suited to exploit the general political and social climate in which the party system had lost its prestige and governing authority was no longer recognised as such" (Arendt, 1998, p. 83). The challenges to authority witnessed throughout the twentieth century—and whose lessons the twenty-first century is also absorbing—are now being legitimised to a considerable extent through the notion of

[1] The source document contains a footnote explaining Raymond Aron's criteria for assessing state power and another explaining Robert Michels's "iron law of oligarchy". These explanatory notes are not reproduced as separate footnotes in this translated version; their cited references are retained in the main text.

sovereignism. This was evident in the Brexit campaign and its slogan “Take Back Control”, which made institutions targets of political contestation in virtually every circumstance.
In Kosovo’s political context, under the constitutional framework, the President of the Republic is the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and the country’s principal representative in foreign policy. In a state of emergency, the President exercises full governing powers. Legally, the office carries unquestionable authority; however, when that authority becomes an obstacle to the achievement of political objectives, it may be disparaged to the point where the office is portrayed as unnecessary within Kosovo’s parliamentary system. The February 2020 elections produced political actors who challenged authority in various ways. On one occasion, Prime Minister Albin Kurti stated: “The President is a ceremonial figure, let us say a state notary, who is not one of the pillars of power...” (Kallxo.com, 2020). From May 2026 onwards, and even before that, the inability to secure the presidency for one of his close associates allegedly led him, unnecessarily, to take the country towards general elections, despite having a parliamentary majority greater than that enjoyed by any previous political leader since 2001, when the first internationally recognised parliamentary elections were held. For the most-voted political leader, the presidency remains an office of paramount state importance when it serves his political interests; otherwise, it is described as little more than a state notary. In this instance, and not only in this one, authority as an attribute established by the Constitution and the law is treated as irrelevant when it does not serve what is known as the iron law of oligarchy (Michels, 2020).
Since 1789, when the nation-state model emerged and subsequently reached the height of its sovereignty throughout the nineteenth century, it has undergone two major shocks in the twentieth century through the two world wars. Yet it has arguably never faced a crisis of authority as profound as the one it faces today. Samuel Huntington’s predictions (Huntington, 2011) of a new wave of democracy accompanied by the simultaneous expansion of autocracies appear, at their core, to concern precisely the testing of the authority of nation-state institutions.

The Crisis of Academia

The delegitimisation of traditional and institutional forms of authority has also affected academia, particularly universities and, more broadly, schools. The purpose of academia and universities within a state is to serve the wider public by providing scientifically grounded assessments of public concerns and offering solutions to social and state-level problems that require effective responses.
At present, academia and universities in the Western Balkan countries, and particularly in Kosovo, have not succeeded in becoming a source of political ideas grounded in scientific research on the public and political issues facing society.
The authority of academic institutions is in continuous decline, to the extent that the university itself appears to have lost any distinctive significance. The delegitimisation of its mission seems to have become a “political objective”. Political influence is so extensive that the university has been transformed into a “political instrument” for rewarding political allies with leadership positions, including that of rector, as well as with academic titles. In this way, academia and universities have been turned into “workshops” for political militants and clients. At the same time, university professors, academics and the intellectual community that inhabits academic spaces have failed to develop a critical and evaluative awareness of socio-economic and political processes and phenomena. This has further weakened the role of these institutions, reducing it almost to a state of intellectual myopia. As a result, politicians and political parties, rather than academia and universities, have become the principal bearers of the “morality of knowledge”. Academia and universities continue to retreat into their “ivory towers”, where,

apart from securing benefits for themselves, their families and their own clannish circles, they appear unwilling to see or engage with the realities beyond them (Gasset, 2019).
In the Kosovo context, some have argued that: "The power of an intellectual professor lies in examination, analysis and criticism—or, in other words, in the thoughts and ideas conveyed through words. Their power is solely and exclusively the power of the word. This is all a person of knowledge can do: create discourse. And that is no small achievement. If professors disdain this power they possess by failing to produce intellectual discourse, then their complaints that their professionalism is not respected by students and that their voices are not heard by the media and the public carry little weight" (Selaci, 2024).
The absence of research institutes and centres within universities, covering fields such as economics, political theory, the arts, culture, medicine, engineering, programming and other disciplines, restricts the development of scientific research and critical thinking. Their establishment and substantive operation would create space for academic debate, the exchange of ideas and the formulation of concrete recommendations, thereby contributing to the identification and resolution of various social problems.
To date, and with the concern that this may continue indefinitely, the "symbiosis" between academia/universities and politics has degraded the academic world to such an extent that its role has been transformed and commercialised. This has further intensified uncertainty and doubt, contributing to the spread of populist theories and the erosion of shared values.

Conclusions

Nation-state institutions today suffer from a widespread deficit of public trust. The fact that so many politicians, leaders and heads of institutions and agencies hold anti-systemic views demonstrates the need to reinforce the institutional dimension of the state. Reform must not undermine the essential elements of democracy, such as political and civil liberties, freedom of expression and other related rights. From a neoliberal perspective, reform should focus on minimising the state's presence in citizens' lives. Conservatives, by contrast, would call for a more cautious approach to reform, one that preserves the foundations established in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Ultimately, reform should aim to restore authority to its proper position as a political attribute that enables state institutions to function effectively. To be right when the government is wrong—a principle expressed by Voltaire long ago—has become an axiom that is increasingly difficult to resist.

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