

Transformations of Democracy and the Problem of Wealth: Some Remarks on Oligarchy and the Czech Case*

Ondřej Lánský

Institute of Philosophy, CAS, Prague

lansky@flu.cas.cz | ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6626-5605

Abstract:

There are many signs that our democracies are undergoing a transformation: populism, an erosion of civic participation in political parties, to replace citizens' decision-making with expert knowledge, and the growing power of super-wealthy people. Urbinati grasps these problems in terms of three phenomena: technocratic depoliticisation, populism, and plebiscitarianism. This article argues that the central issue in contemporary democracies is wealth and inequality, and that is why we need a fully developed concept of oligarchy. Although Urbinati tries to take oligarchy into account, she does so mainly in relation to media ownership. This article considers oligarchy as a phenomenon typical for the contemporary era, and analyses it in the context of the development of Czech society during the last decade. The article adapts Jeffrey A. Winters' oligarchy theory to the Czech context, effectively connecting political and societal spheres. Finally, the article suggests that only a re-conceptualised theory of democracy enriched by the theory of oligarchy can provide an effective starting point for addressing the pitfalls of the transformations of democracy.

Keywords: Czech Republic; democracy; economic inequality; media ownership; oligarchy; opinion formation

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46854/fc.2024.1s101>

* This study was written as part of the research activities of the Department of Political Philosophy and Globalization Research of the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague. I want to thank Lukáš Matoška and Jan Bíba for a lot of advice and discussions on the topics of this text. Finally, I thank two undisclosed reviewers of the first version of this text for their critical examination and many recommendations on how to improve my text. The text was originally finished in November 2021. The information and dates in this text are current as of this date.

Today populism, the rise of wealthy politicians in many countries, the erosion of civic participation within political parties, and the tendency to exclude citizens from decision-making in favour of experts, may be regarded as manifestations of democracy's malaise. There are many signs that our democracies are undergoing profound change. The most visible aspect of this transition in the Czech Republic is probably the success of Czech billionaire Andrej Babiš and his political movement ANO 2011 (English: YES 2011) and the rise of right-wing populist tendencies associated with nationalism, anti-immigrant and anti-elitist rhetoric.¹ The growing power of the very rich (plutocrats or oligarchs) in the political sphere seems to be an essential aspect of these changes, and can be characterised as the problem of wealth. This paper suggests that the oligarchical order of modern society is crucial for understanding contemporary politics and societal processes.

The paper's primary purpose is to offer an interconnected analysis of the phenomenon of wealth in democracy from two partially distinct perspectives. The first is political theory, and the second is political sociology and political science. Hence the paper aims to analyse the problem against the background of the theory of transformed democracy and the theory of oligarchy. It employs both Urbinati's *theory of disfigured democracy* and Jeffrey Winters' *theory of oligarchy*, adapted to Czech society. The focus is on the context of Czech politics from 2013 to the present day. Czech society is an excellent example of the growing influence of super-wealthy people in politics for several reasons. First, Czechia is a relatively equal society in the distribution of income, but is relatively unequal in wealth (as will be shown below).² Second, the economic elite formed after the Velvet Revolution is relatively stable, and in the last decade some members of this social stratum – the super-wealthy³ – have tried to shape Czech politics directly. Thus Czechia represents an outstanding example of a newly reshaped democracy (after the 1990s), which is now experiencing transformations in democracy.

1 The most potent populist political subject in the Czech Republic is the party *Svoboda a přímá demokracie* (SPD; English: *Freedom and Direct Democracy*) led by Tomio Okamura. Cf. *Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index*. Stockholm, Timbro 2019, p. 22.

2 For example cf. Komárek, J., *Wealth Inequality in the Czech Republic*. Praha, PAQ Research 2021. Available online at [www: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eCt-Y216ynSaRcYVudAlum1_goCFW1w_/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eCt-Y216ynSaRcYVudAlum1_goCFW1w_/view) [cit. 29. 5. 2023].

3 According to Branko Milanović's attitude, the super-wealthy individuals' list (based on Forbes list) "...includes in 2013 and 2014 about 1,500 individuals who together with their families represent one-hundredth of one-hundredth of one percent of the world population (yes, it is 1 percent of 1 percent of 1 percent)." Milanović, B., *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge – London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2016, p. 37. In the Czech context, this means calculating with the top of Czech billionaires: ten or fifteen in maximum.

The general aim of this text is to enrich Urbinati's position by highlighting the significance of the role of wealthy people in the analysis of politics. In the first section of the article, different views on the current state of democracy are summarised. The paper considers several empirical indexes of democracy and different approaches to the problem, from the *crisis thesis* to Urbinati's theory of the metamorphosis of democracy. It argues that rising inequality and the influence of super-wealthy people in politics constitute a serious threat to democracy. The second part of the paper turns to the question of the most appropriate theoretical model for grasping the rise of super-wealthy people and their political influence. It looks at concepts of elites and oligarchy, or plutocracy. I suggest that Jeffrey A. Winters' theory of oligarchy provides the most useful model for understanding the role of super-wealthy people in politics. Furthermore, analysis of oligarchs as individuals is highly compatible with the class analysis of modern society, and supplements it. The paper's third section is devoted to the methodological specification of the application of Jeffrey Winters' theory of oligarchy to contemporary political and social processes in the Czech Republic. This section also briefly introduces empirical analysis of Czech oligarchs and their impact on politics and society from 2013 onwards. The last section (conclusion) deals with the theoretical consequences of these findings for a proper understanding of changes in democracy, especially in the Czech Republic. Hence, the paper combines different spheres of analysis: political theory and empirical analysis of politics (political science and political sociology).

1. Crisis or Transformations of Democracy: Urbinati's Diarchic Theory of Democracy

Democracy is today the most widespread global political system.⁴ But in recent decades contemporary democratic societies (especially the European and North American countries) have faced a number of phenomena in the political sphere that suggest ongoing change in democracy and politics. After the series of political revolutions and social changes in the 1990s, when some believed that democracy was becoming the universal form of political system, contemporary societies have started to face disruptions of democratic stability. The German political scientist Wolfgang Merkel distinguish-

4 According to *Democracy Index 2020*, almost half (49.4 %) of all humanity lives under full or flawed democracy. Cf. *Democracy Index 2020. In Sickness and in Health?* London, The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021, p. 3. Available online at [www: https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/](https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/) [cit. 29. 5. 2023].

es three analytical approaches to the presumed disruptions of democracy: use of indexes of the quality of democracy, mass surveys of public opinion, and finally, empirical analyses of components of democracy.⁵ In the following section I concentrate only on the first two.

As suggested by scholars who create democratic indexes, strictly speaking there is no crisis of democracy. For example, the US nongovernmental organisation Freedom House measures democratic governance in 29 countries (the Czech Republic included) based on expert knowledge. The primary tool is the *Democracy Score* using a scale from 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democracy.⁶ It seems there have been no extensive changes in stabilised democracies across the world for the last three decades.⁷ According to the Democracy Score, the Czech Republic is among the consolidated democracies, although there has been a certain minor decline in its rating from 5.79 (in 2015) to 5.64 in 2020.⁸ For comparison, however, the *Democracy Index* (compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, the research division of the Economist Group) shows a persistent trend of deterioration in the quality of democracy almost everywhere in the world. The value of the Democracy Index for the world was 5.52 in 2006, but 5.37 in 2020.⁹

There are other indicators of democracy not based on expert knowledge. One example is the *Democracy Barometer*, an index that measures the quality of democracy against three basic principles: freedom, equality, and power control.¹⁰ In 2017 the highest DQ rating (which is the final index of the quality of democracy) in 2017 was that of Switzerland (4.41), and the lowest that of Turkey (3.10). In the last decades, it has shown a mild decrease in general. The DQ for the Czech Republic in 2017 was 3.83, and the mean for the period from 1993 to 2017 was 3.76 (with the lowest value in 2005).

5 Merkel, W., Is There a Crisis of Democracy? *Democratic Theory*, 1, 2014, No. 2, pp. 11–25.

6 The last published edition involved over 125 analysts and nearly 40 advisers for evaluation. Cf. *Freedom in the World 2021 Methodology*. Washington, Freedom House 2021, p. 2. Available online at [www: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FreedomInTheWorld_2021_Methodology_Checklist_of_Questions.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FreedomInTheWorld_2021_Methodology_Checklist_of_Questions.pdf) [cit. 29. 5. 2023].

7 Merkel, W., Is There a Crisis of Democracy?, pp. 18–19.

8 Bartovic, L., *Nations in Transit 2020*. Czech Republic, Freedom House 2021. Available online at [www: https://freedomhouse.org/country/czech-republic/nations-transit/2020](https://freedomhouse.org/country/czech-republic/nations-transit/2020) [cit. 29. 5. 2023].

9 Like the Democracy Score, the Democracy Index is based mainly on expert assessments. It takes a value from 0 to 10. It differentiates four types of democracy: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes. Cf. *Democracy Index 2020*. In *Sickness and in Health?*

10 “The Democracy Barometer is based on a middle-range concept of democracy, embracing liberal as well as participatory ideas of democracy, which illuminate the phenomenon from different perspectives.” Engler, S. – et al., *Democracy Barometer*. Codebook. Version 7. Aarau, Zentrum der Demokratie 2020, p. 6. According to this approach, a good democracy should establish a balance between equality and freedom. The power control is the tool for the maintenance of this balance.

To sum up, some indicators of democracy have not changed dramatically for the well-established democracies (like France or Germany). Specific changes in participation and representation have nonetheless been observable even in these countries. In particular, while the representation of women and minorities has risen, “[e]specially the lower social classes increasingly abstain from political participation and do, for instance, participate less in general elections.”¹¹ The Czech Republic appears to be a comparatively stable country with a relatively average quality of democracy. All the same, as I intend to demonstrate later, the problem with the abstention of lower social classes from politics also affects the Czech Republic.

Another option for examining the question of changes in democracy is mass survey. This enables us to evaluate the level of trust in political institutions. The EU surveys published by Eurobarometer have been showing the stability of level of trust in core political institutions (parties, parliaments, governments) since the 1970s,¹² and this trust is relatively low. According to the Report published by Eurobarometer in 2020, we can see a moderately low trust in political institutions ranging from 23 % (trust in political parties) to 40 % (trust in governments).¹³ One way to interpret this phenomenon is that the data might indicate relatively low trust in the political (democratic) system. However, this does not necessarily imply a rejection of the system. The fact is that Czech citizens, like in most Eastern and Central European countries, express relatively lower trust in the government (40 %), the national parliament (27 %), and political parties (only 17 %) than is the average of the EU (except for trust in government where the number is the same).

According to the Czech Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM), the proportion of citizens showing distrust in the government of the Czech Republic has been higher than the proportion showing trust for the whole period since 1998, with just several episodes when the reverse was true.¹⁴ The situation is worse in the case of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of parliament) where the level of distrust has been higher than trust continuously since 1993 (with the only exception in July 1996). The highest level of trust in the chamber was in November 2002, when it reached 40.2 %. On the other hand, distrust for the Senate of the Czech Republic (the second house of the Czech parliament) has dominated since January 1997.¹⁵ These findings

11 Merkel, W., *Is There a Crisis of Democracy?*, p. 19.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

13 *Public Opinion in the European Union. Standard Eurobarometer 93*. European Union, The European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication 2020.

14 I.e., two months in 1998, from September 2002 to January 2003, from June 2009 to May 2010, October 2014, and October 2019.

15 *Time Series of Selected Questions from The ‘Czech Society’ Survey*. Prague, Public Opinion Research Center (CVVM), 2020. Available online at [www: https://cvvmapp.soc.cas.cz/](https://cvvmapp.soc.cas.cz/) [cit. 29. 5. 2023].

show that trust in the central political institutions in the Czech Republic is not very high, but it is doubtful to see them as proof that democracy in the Czech Republic (and in general) is in crisis. Nevertheless, for Roberto Foa and Yasha Mounk, these kinds of finding do indeed suggest that liberal democracies in Western or Atlantic states face a severe and profound structural crisis.¹⁶ Yasha Mounk, in his insightful analysis of liberal democracy in recent decades even argues that "...liberal democracy is now decomposing into its component parts, giving rise to illiberal democracy on the one side and undemocratic liberalism on the other."¹⁷ Mounk links illiberal democracy with the rise of populism and undemocratic liberalism with the tendency of elites to govern without public consent.

It is in fact difficult wholly to accept or wholly to reject the theory of the crisis of democracy. Western democracy certainly seems to be experiencing some alterations, but I believe that the most promising way of understanding these trends is via the concept of transformations of democracy. Nadia Urbinati's theory of democracy as a diarchy builds on a very similar understanding of the current dynamics in democracy. For example, Urbinati sees populism as a post-fascist reductive version of democracy, but not as a form of destruction of democracy.¹⁸ The concept of transformations of democracy is a good fit with her conception of disfiguration of democracy.¹⁹

In the analysis of the dynamics of democracy, Urbinati prefers Bernard Manin's concept of a metamorphosis of representative government.²⁰ Manin argues that changes in a democracy are related mainly to two of the four principles of the representative system: that those who are governed have freedom of expression, and that political decisions are public and submitted to public deliberation (the other two principles are elections for the selection of rulers and a certain independence of those elected). These two principles are precisely the areas of the transformations of the democratic body described above: the decline of trust in political parties and, in general, low levels of trust in representative forms of politics. In short, the political par-

16 Foa, R. S. – Mounk, Y., The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect. *Journal of Democracy*, 27, 2016. No. 3, pp. 5–17. To identify the disruptive forces in democracy, they analyse data from the Worlds Values Survey from 1995 to 2004. On this basis, they observe two complementary tendencies: withdrawal from democratic institutions and rising support for authoritarian alternatives.

17 Mounk, Y., *The People vs. Democracy. Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2018, p. 20.

18 Urbinati, N., *Me the People. How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2019.

19 Finchelstein, F. – Urbinati, N., On Populism and Democracy. *Populism*, 1, 2018, No. 1, pp. 15–37.

20 Urbinati, N., Reflections on the Meaning of the 'Crisis of Democracy'. *Democratic Theory*, 3, 2016, No. 1, pp. 21–26.

ties and their mediating function between government and the people are in decline. This is manifest in the growth of leadership in politics (the personalisation of politics) and is leading to what can be termed *audience democracy*.²¹

Urbinati connects her theory with empirically detectable processes in contemporary politics and society. She analyses contemporary dynamics in the political sphere as three types of disfiguration: the epistemic and unpolitical directions of deliberation, populism, and the plebiscite of the audience.²² In addition, Urbinati uses a diarchical conception of democracy based on the identification of two corresponding kinds of power. The first is (political) *will*, which refers to elections, institutions, and the political frame. The second kind of power is *opinion* based on public reason and political judgment, not on institutions of political order. These two kinds of power are separate but still very close to each other.

The disfigurations mentioned above (sometimes viewed as manifestations of the crisis of democracy) relate to the distortion of the sphere of *opinion*. For example, what Urbinati calls the unpolitical democracy of experts refers to the effort to bring rationality and knowledge into the heart of democratic decision-making by neglecting democratic procedures in the course of the search for truth (democratic Platonism). The idea of the intellectual elite (or experts) as a suitable body of government prevails in unpolitical democracy,²³ and is the essence of this type of disfiguration of democracy. Populism is the form of disfiguration based on the strategy of the use of opinion to unify people as an alleged single and indivisible body. Finally, plebiscitarianism as the third type of disfiguration involves the fabricating of the opinion content presented to the people in the form of political images. Communication experts and the media in general are responsible for forming this content.

Urbinati's theory is also grounded in a procedural conception of democracy, emphasising the normative character of proceduralism. Democratic procedures are a sufficient (and, in fact, the best) tool for ensuring a stable and peaceful society and equal political rights, i.e. political liberty. For Urbinati, procedural democracy is therefore the companion of liberalism: liberal values are inherently connected with democracy. "Grounded on opinion pluralism and vote-counting, democracy entails the open expression of dissenting views and the existence of a majority-minority divide – it thus entails civil

21 Manin, B., *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1997, pp. 193–235.

22 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2014.

23 Urbinati, N., Unpolitical Democracy. *Political Theory*, 38, 2010, No. 1, pp. 65–92.

and political rights.”²⁴ These add *isegoria* (the equal opportunity to be heard, in short equal political rights) to *isonomia* (the right to vote). Equal political rights are implicit in democratic procedures. “The democratic process can thus open the door to an endless process of democratisation as contestation against new forms of unequal distribution of power.”²⁵ Fully acknowledged political rights are the very foundation of democracy itself. An inclusive democratic process is a tool for assuring equal liberty to all citizens. According to Urbinati (and Maria Paula Saffon), procedural democracy is both liberal and egalitarian at the same time. It integrates citizens into the social body through the system of political, civic, and social rights, making these rights the preconditions of their participation in democratic processes. It is therefore difficult to imagine a society that is both democratic (in this sense) and at the same time in any way significantly unequal (in the economic sense) because severe economic inequality would be a real obstacle to the participation of the poorer in democratic processes. All the same, according to Urbinati, “...proceduralist democracy is inherently liberal and egalitarian; its foundational value and guiding principle is equal liberty – the equal opportunity to express one’s voice in politics, and the equal weight given to that voice in decision making.”²⁶ My view is that democracy (specifically democratic procedures) demands a more egalitarian society with tangible outcomes. On the other hand, proponents of proceduralist democracy, such as Urbinati, believe that the goal of these procedures is linked only to political equality.

Urbinati’s conception is normatively proceduralist because for her the principal value of proceduralism lies in its relationship to citizens’ self-government. She agrees with the minimalists (such as Adam Przeworski) that the proper conception of democracy should refer only to procedures, not to results. On the other hand, while the minimalists are content with the claim that democracy conceived in this way prevents violence and leads to peaceful resolution of conflicts, Urbinati emphasises that it also protects *equal liberty*. This is the normative aspect of her proceduralism. In other words, what distinguishes this notion of proceduralism from that of the minimalists is precisely the emphasis on citizens’ self-government. Liberal principles should thus be inseparable from democracy. Political equality gives democracy its proper figure. Contemporary disfigurements disturb democracy’s figure, but while disfigured, it does not cease to be democracy. According to Urbinati,

24 Saffon, M. P. – Urbinati, N., Procedural Democracy, the Bulwark of Equal Liberty. *Political Theory*, 41, 2013, No. 3, p. 456.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 458.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 460.

then, political equality embodied in democratic procedures in all spheres of democracy (not just in the sphere of institutional order) is the guarantee of a stable and well-ordered society.

The equal distribution of political power is, according to Urbinati, the most promising tool for controlling power itself. To her normative arguments Urbinati adds some suggestions for improving the state of democracy, offering at least three guidelines “...for maintaining and protecting democracy’s diarchic figure.”²⁷ The first is the suppression of opacity in the process of interdependence between representatives and citizens. The second is the reduction and regulation of the use of private resources in political campaigning. The third is the protection of pluralism of information from the power of political majorities and potentates. Nadia Urbinati also mentions the problem of the relationship between rich and poor in politics, or in other words the problem of oligarchy, but in a very general way. In her book *Pochi contro molti* (2020), she worked with the image of the political struggle of the few against the many. On this occasion, she noted that the few are much more politically aware than the many.²⁸

The question nonetheless remains: why do super-wealthy people have such immense political power in contemporary democracies? I believe this question should be asked the other way around: why do so many poor people remain almost powerless under these circumstances? The question is essential because democratic indices and other instruments do not offer clear evidence of a significant crisis of democracy. At this point, it might be objected that the theory of proceduralism – which is, in fact, the content of Urbinati’s theory – cannot be criticised for the workings of actual existing democracies. In other words, the theory of proceduralism simply cannot be subject to the same objections that we justly raise against a specific liberal-democratic practice. Urbinati could always easily defend her theory by arguing that proceduralism has not been sufficiently applied in these cases and that this is the main reason why problems persist. My argument here does not therefore challenge the very idea of proceduralism but I only point out what I consider essential to emphasise or add in the context of the “proceduralist idea”. In my opinion, Urbinati does not give the problem of wealth and oligarchy (plutocracy) the weight that it deserves.

Back to the question mentioned above: Why do so many poor people remain almost powerless under these circumstances? (Or why do super-wealthy people have such immense political power in liberal democracies?)

²⁷ Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, p. 239.

²⁸ Urbinati, N., *Pochi contro molti. Il conflitto politico nel XXI secolo*. Bari – Roma, Editori Laterza 2020.

From the point of view of Urbinati's diarchic understanding of democracy, the significant influence of wealthy people in politics (in contradistinction to the influence of the poor) manifests itself in the sphere of opinion. The most obvious form of this influence is media ownership and the functioning of the media world itself. The ability to be heard is not the same for wealthy people and poor people. That is probably why for Urbinati the media constitute the primary terrain where the democratic process must be improved by limitation of the power of wealthier social groups. The improvement would be ensured by a better concept and practice of public ownership of media and the restriction of media ownership by super-wealthy people.²⁹ This is not, however, the only way in which super-wealthy people influence politics. I address this topic in the context of Czech realities below.

Besides all this, I believe we can speak of an inner disfiguration embodied in normative proceduralism. The source of this inner disfiguration is that proceduralism does not provide reliable and unconditional social and economic mechanisms to ensure the fulfilment of democracy's promise for everyone. The main problem of current trends in democracies may be less democratic Platonism, populism, or plebiscitarianism than the absence of solid foundations for social engagement. I believe this problem needs to be approached on the basis of an understanding of oligarchy (or plutocracy) ground in political science and political sociology. This is where political theory interacts with political sociology. Furthermore, I believe that the findings of political science and political sociology could be crucial for political theory in some cases. In short, I suggest that empirical facts could (and should) provide limits to our normative thinking.

2. Plutocracy: Elites or Oligarchy?

Our task is to sociologically analyse the contemporary dynamics of transformations of democracy in the political sphere. To do so, we can build on a set of relevant theories and conceptions: the theory of economic elites, or theory of oligarchy and related empirical approaches. Before approaching this task, however, I must mention some findings concerning wealthy people in general and in Czech society in particular, because knowledge of the empirical context is essential to my argument.

There have been several recent studies of the relationship between wealth and the growth of inequality. For example, Branko Milanović has found a specific pattern in the growth of inequality over the last decades (on the global

29 Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured*, pp. 53–59.

level). Quite a large group of people (approximately 50 % of the world population) has benefited from significant economic growth. They include people from booming Asian economies (mainly China). By contrast, in Western societies over the last thirty years, the middle stratum, while still relatively wealthy by global standards, has experienced a decline in economic growth. In other words, the middle classes in economically strong countries like the USA or the EU countries have gained less than in previous periods. The social group whose wealth has been growing very rapidly indeed is that of the super-rich – the global plutocrats or the Top 1%.³⁰ The global wealth share of the Top 1% of the wealthiest people in the World is now approximately 46 %. According to Milanović, we should look in detail at the super-wealthy because there are significant differences between subgroups from the Top 1%. In 2013 there were just 735 bi-billionaires (with a wealth of \$ 2.25 billion in 1983 prices).³¹ This is a minuscule group, but its members have incredible economic power, which most of them use in politics, i.e. global plutocrats.

How should we conceptualise this group of the super-wealthy individuals? One possibility is to dust off the idea of elites. Various classical theories of elites have been developed since the 19th Century as part of attempts to understand aspects of modernisation that emphasise power relations and social hierarchies. The classics of elite theory include Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels, but during the 20th Century, the conceptual category of elites was used for critical analyses of social structure or division of power. For example, C. Wright Mills offered a study of the American power elite,³² and G. William Domhoff used the concept of the elite to research the US upper elite.³³ The contemporary context of elite studies is intellectually even broader. According to Shamus Rahman Khan, “...we can think of elites as occupying a position that provides them with access and control or as possessing resources that advantage them – the difference is in our unit of analysis (individuals or the structure of relations).”³⁴ One widely employed approach to elites today is the theory of performance-based positional or functional elites. Sociologists analyse the elites as specific groups in media, politics, administration, business, judiciary, military, or trade unions.³⁵

None of these approaches are wholly suitable for the understanding of the importance of super-wealthy individuals, because in their case we are talking

30 Milanović, B., *Global Inequality*, pp. 36–45.

31 In 2013, there were 1,426 people on Earth with a wealth of over \$ 1 billion.

32 Wright Mills, C., *The Power Elite*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 1956.

33 Domhoff, G. W., *Who Rules America? Power, Politics, and Social Change*. New York, McGraw-Hill 2006.

34 Khan, S. R., *The Sociology of Elites*. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38, 2012, No. 1, p. 362.

35 Hartmann, M., *The Sociology of Elites*. London – New York, Routledge 2007.

about at most a few thousand people in the world. The general orientation of these sociological approaches is analytically helpful, but because the group of super-wealthy people is tiny and relatively closed (making it hard to analyse directly), a more individualistic methodological approach is required. I prefer the approach offered by *oligarchy theory* as developed by Jeffrey A. Winters.

Winters' theory of oligarchy³⁶ offers a unique approach to the description and analysis of an essential part of political life that he believes has eluded both sociological class analysis and study in terms of classical political science. Winters' starting point is that wealth and its concentration have in practice been considered almost untouchable in various political and economic systems.³⁷ Of course, the legitimacy of wealth and property has been questioned numerous times throughout history, but never for a significantly long period. Unlike citizenship, slavery, racial discrimination, or gender, questioning wealth has so far not been a sustained primary theme in the struggle of the poor or less affluent against super-wealthy people. In this context, Winters argues that "... massive personal wealth is an extreme form of social and political power imbalance that, despite significant advances in recent centuries on other fronts of injustice, has managed since antiquity to remain ideologically constructed as unjust to correct."³⁸ Winters' approach focuses primarily on key actors – oligarchs – that possess economic and material resources with political consequences for the functioning of the whole society. 'Wealth defense' is the central motivation of oligarchs' behaviour and forms the foundation for their ideology.

Winters' conception differs from the classic theories of oligarchy. Authors using the term oligarchy have followed Aristotle in focusing mainly on understanding oligarchy as a form of governance.³⁹ This means that they have taken a collectively orientated point of view of the role of super-wealthy peo-

36 Winters, J. A., *Oligarchy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2011. For analysis of US oligarchy cf. Winters, J. A. – Page, B. I., *Oligarchy in the United States? Perspectives on Politics*, 7, 2009, No. 4, pp. 731–751; for analysis of Indonesian oligarchy cf. Winters, J. A., *Oligarchy and Democracy in Indonesia*. *Indonesia*, 96, 2013, pp. 11–33. For analysis of oligarchy in a broader sense as a problem of the relation between politics and wealth cf. Winters, J. A., *Wealth Defense and the Complicity of Liberal Democracy*. In: Knight, J. – Schwartzberg, M. (eds.), *Wealth: NOMOS LVIII*, vol. 58. New York, New York University Press 2017, pp. 158–225.

37 The significant point of Winters's theory of oligarchy is that it is a materialist theory. According to Winters, the influence of property and wealth is key to a particular individual's position and power in politics. Thus, one essential aspect of this theory is that it is not a strong theory in the sense that it could contradict general theories of democracy or even Marxian/Weberian analyses of social structure. Quite the opposite, it complements these theories and points to certain elements that these theories cannot identify and describe.

38 Winters, J. A., *Oligarchy*, p. 4.

39 Coincidentally, it is Nadia Urbinati who is the author of the entry on 'oligarchy' in the *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, where she claims that "[s]ince its inception, the term has referred

ple in politics. In his approach, Winters emphasises the individual, but he stresses that his theory and analytical methodology do not conflict with either Marxism (because he analyses different aspects of power) or democracy itself (neither its practice nor democratic theory). Instead, Winters points out that under democratic conditions, modern capitalist society has created (due to its level of production) unique conditions for the concentration of property and wealth. Thus, he builds on a material inequality analysis, which he sees as the basis for a power imbalance. As Winters sees it, the coexistence of democracy and oligarchy is fragile, founded on the need for the lower strata to accept the legitimacy of the given distribution of power and, in particular, economic inequality. In order to discuss this subject more analytically, Winters uses the term 'power resources'.⁴⁰

The concept of power resources directs attention to the ability to take advantage of power from the individual's perspective. Winters does not study the way power functions. Instead, he claims that power functions both consciously and unconsciously, that power relates to culture and that its performance is bound to social structure. None of this, however, plays a vital role from the perspective of the theory of oligarchy. The main point is that, according to Winters, we can construct an individual power profile as a theoretical, heuristic device potentially enabling us to rank all members of society according to this. In this context, he identifies five power resources: formal political rights,⁴¹ official positions,⁴² coercive power,⁴³ mobilisational power,⁴⁴ and material power.

particularly to the determination of a social class to acquire political power in order to further its own interests and so implied not simply a government by the few, but rule by and for the few." Urbinati, N., *Oligarchy*. In: Bevir, M. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*. Los Angeles – London – New Delhi – Singapore – Washington, Sage 2010, p. 984.

40 Winters, J. A., *Oligarchy*, pp. 11–20.

41 Formal political rights correspond to the Western liberal freedoms that emerged during modernisation in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, human societies have witnessed various forms of exclusion throughout history based on race, ethnicity, nationality, or gender. The introduction and development of liberal rights are a reaction to the frequent social struggles during modernity.

42 Power based on official positions reflects the function or office that an individual holds. It can include decision-making functions in government, important organisations (secular or religious), corporations, etc. In modern society, these are entities that function based on rules and involve a certain level of meritocracy. However, their functioning is influenced by the possibility of financing (for instance, from public budgets) and their networks of operations and individuals. A central characteristic of modern society is that power that comes from such positions in society is not owned but is held for a certain period of time. This form of power naturally relates to oligarchs as well, but it is far more the domain of economic, political, or cultural elites. Since this power is more or less conditioned and temporary, it does not form one of the core criteria of Winters's theory. Nevertheless, what is essential for my analysis is the extent to which political elites such as key figures from the political parties (to take one example) contribute to creating policies favourable to oligarchs.

From the perspective of an analysis of oligarchy, the most important form of power is *material power*. This power is directly (about) wealth. According to Winters, wealth and property are the essence of oligarchy, for it is through them that oligarchs can buy 'wealth defense'. In countries without a solid institutional order, one dimension of this power is the ability of oligarchs to ensure that the courts, public officials and police (to name just a few) act in their favour. In countries with a more developed rule of law, this might involve payment for the legal services of experts specialising in services for the rich and super-wealthy people (security agencies or tax advisors, for example). Although the material power of the middle and lower classes is immense if taken as the sum of all individual members of these classes, it suffers from a high level of dispersion (including the awareness related to this power). Such power depends on the (political) mobilisation of the masses, but the broad masses do not usually identify as members of a united class (or as strata with similar interests), and it is relatively difficult to mobilise them politically. By comparison, super-wealthy people are much more conscious of their position and interests than the broad masses. Their fundamental shared objective is the defence of their wealth. As Winters aptly puts it, their "...shared commitment to wealth and property defense is the source of their cohesion as a set of political actors."⁴³

As indicated above, the core of an oligarchy's political activities is wealth defence, and this is related to the forms of property ownership, meaning relationships that always exclude someone from using a property or thing. For this reason, ideology plays an essential role in the justification and legitimisation of the level and extent of wealth for that particular period. Violence (exclusion from ownership) and the legitimisation of violence are integral aspects of ownership. Here Winters distinguishes between property claims and property rights. The difference between the two is the space where a giv-

43 Of all the types of power, coercive power apparently underwent the most profound transformation during modernisation. Today, it is essentially a fact that the state holds a monopoly on direct (in particular physical) violence and coercion. Moreover, in societies of the modern type, this form of power usually no longer appertains to individual actors. We shall ignore, for instance, the question of the collapse of state sovereignty during wars or armed conflicts in developing countries.

44 The fourth type of power, mobilisational power, has two dimensions. The first is the individual ability to lead, convince, and mobilise others. The second form of this power, which relates to the mobilised, is what Winters calls people power. In his view, this power and its effects can be relatively unpredictable, and it tends to play a more significant role for only shorter periods of time in a society's history – times that, from the perspective of oligarchy, can be viewed as crises. These are often followed by extended periods of ordinary politics, which are periods of stability for oligarchs.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

en claim/right is enforced. Whereas an individual brings claims against the rest of a community or in opposition to the community, property rights are enforced by the community or in the community's name. A key point for understanding the dynamics of oligarchic aspects of politics is the relationship between individual claims and the tools by which they are enforced. Oligarchs are people who, thanks to their economic power, are capable of enforcing their claims.

Moreover, the institutional order of modern society plays a vital role in the sense that on the one hand it has disarmed the oligarchs (it is only the state that is authorised to use violence) but on the other hand it has created the tools for the common defence of their wealth: property rights, the police, a court system, to name just a few. It is important not to succumb to the illusion that democratic societies lack this element of violence (enforcing one's property rights against the rest of society): If anything, this element has been cultivated and written into democracies as one of the *de facto* objectives of the evolution of modern institutions. According to Winters, it is still true that wealth produces an unprecedented ability to influence political life, and at a certain level of accumulation and concentration, "...wealth and property become material power."⁴⁶

Winters further identifies two dimensions of wealth defence: *property defence* and *income defence*.⁴⁷ By property defence, he means oligarchs' activities aimed at defending their property against two kinds of possible attack: horizontally from other oligarchs and vertically from the poorer classes. In European feudalism, for instance, this involved the defence of one's extensive landholdings (used for agricultural production) through knights and defensive fortifications, while in modern society, the defence of property is in the hands of the state, meaning its legal system. The greatest threat to oligarchs' property is thus taxation. In today's societies, income defence requires professionals specialised in ensuring the lowest possible taxation of wealth: besides tax advisors (for optimising one's tax burden), this includes a relatively wide range of actors working through political parties. If the state is reliable in this regard and oligarchs do not face the threat of taxation (of either their property or income), then the oligarchs become to a certain extent invisible. If, this is not the case, however, they may become active in a more visible manner. Winters analyses the main ways in which oligarchs' activities are expressed in society and creates a typology of different kinds of oligarchy: warring, ruling, sultanistic, and civil.⁴⁸

46 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 20–26.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 32–38.

Perhaps the most distinctive methodological tool that Winters uses in his analyses is the *Material Power Index* (MPI), which quantifies the relative power of the super-wealthy people in a society. Generally speaking, the MPI expresses a person's material power in a particular society by showing by what multiple a member of a super-wealthy group is more affluent than a member of the poorest classes. For example, for Classical Athens, Winters shows that if the MPI for a slave is set at 1, the MPI for the ten wealthiest oligarchs is 2,432.⁴⁹ Winters works with multiple case studies, each involving different data depending on what is available. For example, in analysing the oligarchy of the USA today, Winters did not work with slaves or the country's ten wealthiest people (as he had with Athens) but calculated the country's bottom 90% versus its 400 wealthiest individuals. In addition, for all the cases that he analysed, Winters presented graduated MPI values – e.g., for the top 0.1%. I have decided to adapt this approach to the Czech situation.

3. The Theory of Oligarchy and the Czech Case

After the Velvet Revolution, the Czech Republic became an excellent example of a society that has transitioned from undemocratic rule to democracy in politics and from a state-directed economy to capitalism. This section offers a brief analysis of the sociopolitical development of Czechia after 2013 with an emphasis on oligarchy. There are two significant perspectives: socio-economic inequalities and their manifestations or consequences (in terms of social structure or political life) on the one hand, and the gradual increase in the power of oligarchs in Czech society on the other. In this regard, in this context, I have worked (with minor alterations) with Winters' methodological approach, as explained above.

In many countries the economic crisis of 2008 led to the transformation of civic dissatisfaction with economic development and politics in general into civic and (sometimes) political movements challenging neoliberalism and austerity policy (Occupy Wall Street in the USA, Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain). A similar development did not, however, occur in Czechia. Instead, a relatively short period (from 2011 to 2013) of openness to the development of criticism of austerity politics and also the post-1989 development in general, was exploited by agile and influential political forces connected to right-wing parties and oligarchs: on the one hand, they made corruption and

⁴⁹ Winters' calculation is based on a study of reliable sources, from which he calculated the average wealth of the ten wealthiest Trierarchs (486,000 drachmae), which he compared to the value of a slave (200 drachmae – slaves did not own property, but they had a quantifiable value). By dividing these two average values, he arrived at the number 2,432. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

political mismanagement a central theme, and on the other hand, they offered a nationalist critique of social conditions. This de facto right-wing reaction did not, however, touch on the core of the problems that afflict society (economy and inequality) but instead addressed the cultural level of these problems: immigration and some other substitutive and imaginary issues.

In 2011, one of the wealthiest Czechs, Andrej Babiš, founded his own movement. He was the owner of one of the giant corporations in the Czech Republic doing business in the chemistry and food processing industry, Agrofert. Babiš named his political movement ANO 2011, an abbreviation of the title: *Action of Dissatisfied Citizens*. The party acronym ANO spells out the word 'yes' in Czech. The name itself indicates the new political movement's image as a response to the marked and relatively widespread public dissatisfaction with the politics and rule of the post-1989 political elites.⁵⁰ At the same time, the acronym demonstrates the ideological grounding of the movement ANO 2011, which is, in fact, non-ideological. Andrew Roberts characterises Andrej Babiš as the self-interested type of billionaire entering politics.⁵¹ His movement has not transformed the ethos of protests against austerity politics into policies that might define a new direction for society. Instead, it fixed on a topic that could potentially damp down this protest ethos. This was the theme of an attack on bribery.

The elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 2013 resulted in the formation of a government by the victorious Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) – with 50 seats – together with two other parties: the second strongest party, Babiš's movement ANO 2011 (with 47 seats), and the People's Party (with 14 deputies). This was a relatively strong coalition government with the support of 111 deputies out of the total of 200. Bohuslav Sobotka (chairman of ČSSD) became Prime Minister and Andrej Babiš became Finance Minister. It must be stressed that Babiš's political movement, ANO 2011, is not a standard political party. Instead, it is a kind of a corporate project that complements the critical components of power that Babiš had systematically ac-

50 The source of this dissatisfaction was the partially unsuccessful transformation of the Czech economy after 1989. The best-known part of this transformation was coupon privatisation, which created the basis for the economic elite and wealthy individuals. It also caused disillusionment and disappointment in a large part of the Czech population. Besides, coupon privatisation was perceived as controversial: according to the CVVM survey from 2009, approximately 54% of respondents described privatisation as probably or decidedly unfair. Cf. Červenka, J., *Postoje veřejnosti k vyrovnání se s minulostí*. Tisková zpráva. [Publics to the topic of the settlement with the past. The Press Release]. Prague, CVVM 2009. Available online at www.https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a646/f9/100962s_po91103.pdf [cit. 29. 5. 2023].

51 Roberts, A., Czech Billionaires as Politicians. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 66, 2019, No. 6, pp. 434–444.

cumulated around his business empire at the latest from the moment when he bought the influential media group MAFRA.⁵² To this day, Babiš presents himself as a businessman who understands business and not politics, and uses this profile to rhetorically distance himself from traditional political elites, which is a common populist strategy. In other words what seemed his disadvantage at the beginning (his lack of familiarity with politics) was something that he gradually turned to his advantage, at least in the media. At the same time, ANO 2011 adopted part of the social-democratic agenda, strengthening the outflow of ČSSD voters in favour of ANO 2011.⁵³

Andrej Babiš and his political movement are expressions of both populist and oligarchic trends. Nevertheless, many political scientists and commentators have speculated on the individual motives that led him, as one of wealthiest people in the Czech Republic, to go directly into politics. In 2010, Václav Klaus (the then President of the Czech Republic) vetoed an amendment to the Act on Air Protection that would have increased the proportion of bio-components compulsorily blended into diesel and petrol. It was a complication for Babiš's business and probably the impulse for his entry into politics.⁵⁴

Another process that demonstrates the impact of oligarchs in the political sphere in the Czech Republic from 2013 has been the gradual transfer of media ownership from international corporations to domestic moguls. After 1989, most of the media was rapidly and spontaneously privatised and later (from 1993 to 2000) sold to foreign companies. Between 2001 and 2007, media ownership in the Czech Republic essentially stabilised, the majority in foreign hands. After 2008, however, some Czech businessmen from the established economic elite ventured onto the media scene. One of the reasons for their acquisitions was the consequence of the economic crisis of 2008, which negatively affected Czech media, especially print media. Most foreign owners were no longer willing to invest in their portfolios, and so tried to sell their shares. It is not necessary to describe individual sales of significant

52 To characterise the nature of this party, we can use the concept of 'entrepreneurial party'. See Hloušek, V. – Kopeček, L., Different Ways of Institutionalising Entrepreneurial Parties: Czech Public Affairs Party and ANO. *Czech Journal of Political Science*, 24, 2017, No. 2, pp. 92–115.

53 See e.g., Maškarinec, P., The rise of new populist political parties in Czech parliamentary elections between 2010 and 2017: the geography of party replacement. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 60, 2019, No. 5, p. 527.

54 During the last decade it was published many – more or less skilled – analyses of Andrej Babiš and his influence on the economy and politics. For example Kmenta, J., *Boss Babiš*. Nymburk, Nakladatelství JKM – Jaroslav Kmenta 2017; Patočka, J. – Vlasatá, Z., *Žlutý Baron. Skutečný plán Andreje Babiše: Zřídít stát jako firmu* [Yellow Baron. Andrej Babiš's Real Plan: To Establish the State as a Company]. Brno, Vydavatelství Referendum 2017; Pergler, T., *Babiš. Příběh oligarchy* [Babiš. The Story of Oligarch]. Praha, Mladá fronta 2014.

media in detail, but it is essential to emphasise that in terms of ownership in 2013 the media landscape in the Czech Republic was almost entirely different from that of 2002. In 2013, only two newspapers were partly owned by foreign subjects (these can be considered tabloids). As regards market share, the most important newspapers were Mladá fronta DNES and Lidové noviny, and since June 2013 they have both been owned by Andrej Babiš. Zdeněk Bakala and Daniel Křetínský are other Czech media moguls.⁵⁵ This change in the ownership structure of the Czech media has signalled the rise of oligarchs in Czech politics. I believe it can be interpreted as a manifestation of oligarchs' efforts to defend their property, at least in the case of Babiš and his business, media, and political tri-empire (Agrofert, Mafra, and ANO 2011).

Czechia has enjoyed steady economic growth, low inflation, and low unemployment in recent years. Income inequality (the Gini coefficient in 2018 was 0.249) is the third lowest among OECD countries.⁵⁶ At this level, the Czech Republic looks like a relatively stable and equal society. The problem, however, is wealth inequality. While the Czech elites are probably relatively small and unconsolidated by West European standards,⁵⁷ according to the Credit Suisse Research Institute, just 1% of the wealthiest people in the Czech Republic own 36 % of the wealth (and the Gini index of wealth concentration is 77.7), which is a high concentration of wealth.⁵⁸

According to Winters, around 30,000 individuals in the United States can be considered oligarchs – i.e., one 1/100th of 1 percent.⁵⁹ In the Czech Republic, this would be around 1,000 people. Like Winters, my analysis of oligarchy will always involve an even smaller portion of this segment of the

55 A more detailed analysis is offered by a study by Václav Štětka. Cf. Štětka, V., *Media Ownership and Commercial Pressures*. London, London School of Economics and Political Science 2013.

56 OECD, *OECD Data. Income inequality*. 2018. Available online at [www: https://data.oecd.org/in-equality/income-inequality.htm#indicator-chart](https://data.oecd.org/in-equality/income-inequality.htm#indicator-chart) [cit. 29. 5. 2023].

57 In 2019 a sociological team around Daniel Prokop and Martin Buchtík realized the survey of Czech Republic class structure. They were inspired by Great British Class Survey. Unlike in British class structure, Prokop's team decided not to use the term elite because they think elites are not firmly constituted in Czech society. "Unlike in Britain, in the Czech Republic there isn't a class that has very high capital of all kinds and constitutes more than 0.5%–1% of population... For the evolution of elites as a separate class characterised by very large economic, social and cultural capital, the essential factor is passing the social status, consisting of property as well as network of relations or cultural background, on to the younger generations. That is something that has been interrupted or made very complicated in basically every generation in the past hundred years, unlike, for instance, in Britain, where this group represents 6% of the population. The change thirty years ago did change the character of the elites but not completely." Cf. Prokop, D. – et al., *Divided by Freedom. Czech Society after 30 years*. Praha, Radioservis 2019, pp. 8, 16.

58 Shorrocks, A. – Davies, J. – Lluberás, R., *Global Wealth Databook 2021*. Zurich, Credit Suisse Research Institute 2021, pp. 115, 136.

59 Winters, J. A., *Oligarchy*, p. 19.

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Czech Population	10 510 719	10 524 783	10 542 942	10 565 284	10 589 526	10 626 430	10 669 324
Net worth of households [in millions of Czech koruna]	10 904 389	11 514 449	12 130 596	13 149 791	13 751 147	14 563 975	15 132 827
Share of net worth of households per capita [in millions of Czech koruna]	1,037454	1,094032	1,150589	1,244623	1,298561	1,370543	1,418349
The sum of the wealth of the 20 richest according to Forbes [in millions of Czech koruna]	483 900	525 800	572 700	661 400	804 500	829 100	917 100
The share of the wealth of the 20 richest in the net worth of households (According to Forbes)	4,44 %	4,57 %	4,72 %	5,03 %	5,85 %	5,69 %	6,06 %
MPI ^{CZ} (Material Power Index)	23 322	24 030	24 887	26 570	30 977	30 247	32 330

Table 1: MPI^{CZ} (in the Czech Republic); from 2013 to 2019 (own calculation)

population. I have calculated the MPI for the Czech Republic by comparing the assets of the twenty richest Czechs with the overall average wealth of all citizens of the Czech Republic.⁶⁰ The adoption of the MPI is a very potent empirical element of the general analysis of oligarchy, but for my analysis of Czech oligarchic structures in the post-2013 period, I will (in the spirit of the methodology mentioned above) consider oligarchic elements that may be expressed in different forms: the concentration of media power, influence on political life through intermediaries and lobbyists, and direct or indirect political engagement.

The MPI for the Czech Republic (MPI_{CZ}) is a number that expresses how many times the average member of the club of the 20 richest Czech billionaires is wealthier than the average Czech citizen. The wealth of the average Czech citizen has been calculated very simply as the total wealth of households divided by the total population of the Czech Republic. I am aware that this value is schematic and may be distorted because the net worth of households is also recalculated for infants. On the other hand, tracking these statistics over time increases their plausibility and applicability for the calculation of MPI for the Czech Republic. Table 1 shows that the MPI for the Czech Republic increased from 23,322 in 2013 to 32,330 in 2019. This expresses an increase in the difference between the twenty of the wealthiest persons and the rest of society in 2019 by almost 40 % compared to 2013. Thus, economic power, while at the same time manifesting itself in politics, has grown by almost half among the richest in the period.

Conclusion

The main goal of this text has been to show that a crucial problem of democracy is wealth and the uneven distribution of power based on inequalities. Today's democracies face many challenges, which can be characterised as disfigurements. I would argue, however, that the main problem is hidden in the very frame of the social foundations of the political body. Social and economic inequality is constantly transformed into the systematically biased influence of super-wealthy people in politics. As a result, super-wealthy people have more political power than ordinary people.

Proponents of the proceduralist theory of democracy might claim that this problem is a matter of the difference between conception and realisa-

⁶⁰ I want to thank Pavel Novák, who helped me with these calculations. They are based on data from the Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ) and Forbes, which has published a list of the wealthiest Czechs since 2014. Cf. Forbes, *100 nejbohatších Čechů* [100 Richest Czechs]. Forbes.cz, 2. 10. 2019. Available online at [www: https://miliardari.forbes.cz/](https://miliardari.forbes.cz/) [cit. 29. 5. 2023].

tion. They might argue that the principles of proceduralism have not been sufficiently applied in real democracies, which is why we can observe disfigurements. The implication would be that the cure for the ills of a somewhat disfigured (defective) democracy is the more consistent enforcement of proceduralism itself. As I have already noted above, Urbinati appends some guidelines to improve democracy to her normative argumentation: the suppression of the opacity in the process of interdependence between representatives and the citizens, the reduction and regulation of the use of private resources in political campaigning, and the protection of pluralism of information from the power of political majorities and potentates. In addition, Urbinati considers the problem of oligarchy in general terms, and even works with Jeffrey Winters' theory.⁶¹ It thus seems that Urbinati takes the problem of oligarchs into account in her approach, and I believe that her guidelines could be helpful for the goal of preserving democracy from its disturbances. All the same, I do not believe that these guidelines are sufficient for the attainment of this goal. Urbinati thinks that the thorough-going application of proceduralism (democracy as diarchy) could solve these problems. In my view, however, the theory of oligarchy clearly shows that this non-minimalist proceduralism is inadequate to the challenge presented by oligarchs, and that social and economic equality – which cannot be presupposed by proceduralism – is in reality the key to marginalising oligarchic influence in politics. It is not enough to protect politics from oligarchs; we need to reduce oligarchy and inequality.

Oligarchy theory identifies and illuminates the problem of the undue influence of oligarchs in contemporary political regimes. It is not an alternative to other conceptions usually used for understanding politics. The fact of oligarchy is not in contradiction with democracy. Democracy and oligarchy can exist almost in parallel. I have tried to show that empirical facts could (and should) limit or at least influence our normative thought. How can we put up a strong defence of normative proceduralism in theory when we live in a world where money means power? I agree with Jeffrey E. Green, who reminds us that oligarchy (or plutocracy in his formulation) has been an inherent component of the liberal-democratic regime and that liberalism is, in general, blind to the problem.⁶² I therefore suggest that the main disfigurement of democracy is hidden in the conception of (even non-minimalist) proceduralism because it is impossible to demand social and economic equality as preconditions of democracy in the frame of proceduralism. Oligarchy in general and specifically in the Czech Republic shows that unequal

61 Urbinati, N., *Pochi contro molti*.

62 Green, J. E., Liberalism and the Problem of Plutocracy. *Constellations*, 23, 2016, No. 1, pp. 84–95.

ity is the driving force of changes in the political sphere, leading to the disfigurement of democracy's procedures. For me, the guidelines proposed by Urbinati are regrettably insufficient for maintaining democracy under these circumstances.