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The checks and balances system – the evolution of public governance in a historical and theoretical context*

In the modern democratizing global politics, countries are becoming clearly oriented towards the achievement and implementation of fundamental aspirations, ideals, and values that can be secured through a democratic political regime. Historical practice convincingly confirms that the principle of distribution of power is an integral element of democracy and the rule of law, which ensures an adequate level of political freedoms and the protection of human and civic rights. The global spread of democracy in the modern world indicates that the separation of powers poses a crucial challenge for countries that have embarked on democratic political transformations. The abuse of power is one of the most important problems in power relations, and the principle of mutual deterrence between the branches of government was established to overcome or mitigate this problem. Global experiences indicate that the checks and balances system is a reliable means of eliminating negative phenomena during the organization and execution of state power, through which different branches of government interact to resolve national issues.

The historical principle of unity in the face of adversity, social interactions, and agreement between social groups representing different interests is key for understanding the evolution of the modern system of checks and balances in democratic states. However, the mechanism responsible for the introduction of the checks and balances system

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into social and political practice can be traced back to ancient times because power and its distribution have always attracted public attention.

The aim of the article was to analyze the development of theories and ideas underpinning the development of the checks and balances system in global practice. Throughout human history, the problems associated with the checks and balances system have been explored by philosophers, including Aristotle¹, Polybius², Plato³, Cicero⁴, Machiavelli⁵, Montesquieu⁶, Locke⁷, Rousseau,⁸ Adams⁹, and Marshall¹⁰. The evolution of the checks and balances system in the world history has also been analyzed by Ukrainian researchers, among them Sylenko¹¹, Gaidanenko¹², Zhuk¹³, and Rabkalo¹⁴. Despite the fact that the checks and balances system has been widely researched, an integrated periodization approach to studying the evolution of views on the separation of powers and the associated constraints and counterbalances has not been proposed to date. This problem is particularly relevant for Ukraine, where the checks and balances system and its main elements are not stable and have been changed during the establishment of Ukrainian statehood.

Research hypothesis. The research hypothesis postulates that the theoretical underpinnings of the checks and balances system in the organization of government in different historical periods have been influenced by social, political and public factors which have led to the emergence of the modern concept of the checks and balances system.

Methodology. The historical method was used in this study to analyze the evolution of views on the checks and balances system in the historical and social context. The systematic method was applied to study the checks and balances system as a network of interconnected elements. Different approaches to the interpretation of checks and balances were compared using the comparative method. Historical documents and regulations were studied with the document analysis method.

¹ Aristotle, Politics, vol. 2, Kyiv 2000, p. 246.

² Polybiu, Universal History, vol. 1, Moscow 1992, p. 158.

³ Plato, State, vol. 3, Kyiv 2000, p. 200.

⁴ M. Cicero, About the State, vol. 1, Kyiv 1998, p. 81.

⁵ N. Machiavelli, *The History of Florence*, Moscow 2014, p. 97.

⁶ C. Montesquieu, A. Baskina, On the Spirit of Laws. Selected Works, Moscow 1995, p. 89.

⁷ J. Locke, *Two treatises on the Government*, vol. 1, ed. A. Makarovsky, Moscow 1988, p. 98.

⁸ J. Russo, About a public contract, ed. O. Khoma, Kyiv 2001, p. 189.

⁹ J. Adams, Defence of the constitutions of the United States, Boston 1990, p. 26.

¹⁰ J. Marshal, Intention-In Law and Society, New York 1986, p. 145.

¹¹ L. Sylenko, Constitutional Foundations of the System of Checks and Balances as a Means of Organization and Functioning of State Power in Ukraine, Kyiv 2000, p. 12.

¹² N. Haidanenko, System of checks and balances in modern democracies, Odessa 2010, p. 32.

¹³ N. Zhuk, *Checks and balances in the system of separation of powers in Ukraine (general theoretical problems)*, Kharkiv 2006, p. 90.

¹⁴ V. Rabkalo, *The system of checks and balances in the field of state-management relations*, Kyiv 2008, p. 25.

The views on the distribution of power and the checks and balances system evolved in different historical periods which should be identified. It should be noted that this field of historiographical research is not universal or complete. Various systems have been proposed for classifying the main stages of evolution of the checks and balances system, but in our opinion, these approaches require deeper systematization. In this article, the evolutionary process was divided into several historical periods to compensate for the lack of qualitative assessments, temporary setbacks in the separation of powers in global practice, the main achievements and successes, as well as the historical aspects of the evolution of the checks and balances system (including external factors and events):

I. The pre-classical stage which can be divided into:

a) A period in ancient political philosophy when the need for a functioning system of checks and balances was first recognized. The first pragmatic ideas about the organization and emergence of direct democracies in independent city-states (*polis*) were formed during this period.

The *polis* was the dominant model of social, economic and political structure of a class-based civil society. Participation in the political life of the *polis* was regarded as an honor and a civil duty by the city's founders. According to Aristotle, the concept of the *polis* emerged to cater to the residents' daily life needs, but it promoted the "common good" and was regarded as the highest form of social justice. Plato wrote that only the *polis* could fully satisfy man's material and spiritual needs.

Social relations in the *polis* were based on the principle of political equality of people, but the residents did not enjoy equal social status which was based on property ownership. Only the citizens enjoyed political rights and could hold public office.

It should be noted that the modern system of checks and balances system relies on the ideas developed in Antiquity. The need for a division of power was recognized by ancient Greek philosophers. In particular, Plato (427–347 BC) believed that the division of labor between different social classes should constitute the basis for the creation of an «ideal» state and society. Each class should act independently without interfering with other people's affairs to satisfy the general needs of the *polis*¹⁵.

Aristotle (384–322 BC) argued that power should be divided between three state bodies: a legislative body (People's Assembly), in which all free citizens may take part; an administrative body (magistracy) which has the authority to rule; and a judicial body that metes out justice¹⁶.

Polybius' (210–128 BC) interpretation of the checks and balances system is closest to the modern concept. According to Polybius, the division of powers between the Con-

¹⁵ Plato, op. cit., pp. 223, 224.

¹⁶ Aristotle, op. cit., p. 114.

sul, the People's Assembly, and the Senate as a dynamic equilibrium was the best political form of government. These bodies must interact with each other by mutually constricting and supporting one another¹⁷.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) elaborated on the concept of the division of power in the political and legal discourse of ancient Rome. In his philosophical treatise entitled *On the Commonwealth*, Cicero concluded that an aristocratic senate republic incorporating elements of monarchical (royal), aristocratic (the power of the optimist) and democratic (power of the people) rule is the perfect and most politically stable state. The proposed combination of all three forms of government remotely resembles a modern three-dimensional system of power distribution. Enlightenment philosophers widely relied on Cicero's views in their teachings¹⁸.

b) The Middle Ages when the theoretical framework and practical implementation of democratic principles was inhibited by absolute monarchical rule. In Western Europe, the evolution of theories about the checks and balances system was thwarted by the emergence of theology and the contradictory relationship between the spiritual and the material world. The views formulated by several thinkers of the High and Late Middle Ages were an exception to the rule.

It should be emphasized that several factors hindered the evolution of political thought in the Middle Ages. Firstly, secular power was weak due to the weakness of European states that had been created from the ruins of ancient empires. As a result, the power of religion appears to be the second reason. In both the regional and international context, religion rose above statehood, and its dominance was consolidated in different states. Christianity, Islam and Buddhism were the major religions of the world. However, power and the relations it asserted had to be theoretically justified and legally consolidated upon the emergence of strong feudal states and secular power. Therefore, the relationship between religious and secular power (church and state) was the main political problem in the Middle Ages.

The evolution of the state power doctrine was impeded in the following stage of the pre-classical period. In the High Middle Ages (11th–14th centuries), the first distinction between legislative and executive functions in a state was made by the Italian scholar Marsilius of Padua (1280–1343) in his work entitled *The Defender of Peace*. Marsilius of Padua recognized the need for mutual non-interference of religious (church) and political (state) power in public affairs. He also argued that all government bodies that administer justice and enforce laws should be accountable for their actions¹⁹.

¹⁷ Polybiu, op. cit., pp. 130, 131, 132, 135.

¹⁸ M. Cicero, op. cit., pp. 55, 56.

¹⁹ M. Padua, *Defender of the World*, Moscow 2014, pp. 109, 110, 111, 112.

In the Late Middle Ages (14th–16th centuries), the Italian thinker Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527) was the first researcher who scientifically substantiated the system of checks and balances on the example of Florentine authorities. In the *History of Florence*, Machiavelli described the model of political power in Florence, which combined complex and confusing mechanisms of checks and balances to prevent arbitrariness. Machiavelli argued that the new system of government in Florence would preserve legitimacy, freedom and glory for a long time²⁰.

II. *The classical period* which witnessed the formation of the classical theory of power distribution and the prerequisites for its implementation in the modern era $(17^{th}-18^{th} \text{ centuries})$. The theoretical framework of the separation of power and a system of mutual deterrence between political opponents was developed during this period. The ideas formulated in the Age of Enlightenment and the events that gave rise to the industrial revolution became the new determinants of social and political order.

Historically, the Enlightenment is regarded as an era of considerable progress in global political thought. Capitalist social relationships were established in the early stages of the Enlightenment, which led to the emergence of brilliant thinkers in Europe, America and Asia. Profound changes in economic, political and spiritual life, the development of science, technology, culture and education, as well as revolutionary changes in social relations and public consciousness contributed to the emergence of a new worldview which posited that mankind would become the ruler of the world by rebuilding social relations on reasonable grounds. These theories and events prompted the belief that all humans are equal, have equal rights, and are free in their decisions and actions. Legislative measures were developed to ensure civil and political freedoms.

The classical interpretation of the checks and balances system and its theoretical framework evolved during the Enlightenment. The doctrinal justification of the separation of powers and the establishment of a system of checks and balances can be found in the writings of Locke and Montesquieu. According to the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), the division of power is necessary foremost for the protection of human rights and freedoms. Locke was a supporter of a representative system which is created by the people and is responsible to the constituents. In *Two Treatises on Public Governance*, Locke makes a distinction between the legislative, executive and allied (federal) branches of government, and outlines the main ideas regarding the system of checks and balances. According to Locke, legislative power is supreme over executive power in the sense that laws are strictly binding for the government, officials and judges²¹. In turn, the monarch wields executive power and has the right to dissolve and convene a parliament, the right to veto, the right of legislative initiative, and the right to improve the

²⁰ N. Machiavelli, op. cit., pp. 68-100.

²¹ J. Locke, op. cit., pp. 65-68.

electoral system. However, the monarch must be strictly accountable to the «letter of the law» and should not prevent the parliament from convening regularly. These mechanisms of the checks and balances system have been modified since, but they are actively used in modern democratic practice²².

Many scholars believe that the theoretical framework for the equal distribution of powers and the checks and balances system had been originally developed by the French thinker Charles Louis Montesquieu (1689–1755). In his work entitled *On the Spirit of the Laws*, the philosopher argued that power must be combined, regulated, restrained, propelled into action, and balanced to create a moderate government²³. Montesquieu made a distinction between legislative, executive and judicial branches of power, and remarked that the concentration of power in one branch always leads to abuse and arbitrariness («power equilibrium»). A system where «one authority restrains another» should be created to minimize the above risks. According to Montesquieu, each of the three branches should restrain and restrict each other. Montesquieu's concept of the triad of branches of power offered an alternative to monarchical absolutism and laid the ground for the modern theory of constitutionalism²⁴. This liberal approach to civic freedoms and rights, and the separation of powers were enshrined in the first European constitutions and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789.

The principles of the distribution of powers were also addressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–1778) doctrine. According to this Enlightenment thinker, the indivisibility of sovereignty implies the inadmissibility of the separation of powers, but the competence of executive and legislative bodies should be delineated to avoid lawlessness. The executive branch should be led by the sovereign, but the people's assembly should act as a legislative gatekeeper to avoid usurpation²⁵.

III. *The period of legal enforcement and implementation*. This period witnessed the introduction of constitutional approval for the separation of powers and the widespread implementation of the system of checks and balances in democratic states (beginning with the first legislative consolidation in the US Constitution of 1787).

The implementation of the system of checks and balances was consolidated in the constitution. The Pacts and Constitutions of Rights and Freedoms of the Zaporizhian Host, an agreement between hetman Pylyp Orlyk and the elders and Cossacks of the Zaporizhian army in 1710, was the first document in history to legally incorporate certain elements of the system of checks and balances. The document contained 16 arti-

²² C. Montesquieu, A. Baskina, op. cit., pp. 287–289.

²³ Ibidem, pp. 288–289.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ J. Russo, op. cit., pp. 117–125.

cles, and it established the principle of the separation of powers between the legislative (General Council), executive (headed by the Hetman and the general officer), and the judiciary (General Military Court) branches of government, with elements of mutual restraint²⁶.

Despite the historical primacy of Pylyp Orlyk' constitution, the US Constitution of 1787 is considered the standard of declarative approval of the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances. The principle of the separation of powers laid the ground for the consolidation of a presidential government in the United States²⁷. James Madison, the father of the American constitution, emphasized the expediency of the checks and balances system in the theory of the division of powers as a necessary element to prevent the abuse of power²⁸.

John Adams was one of the first American politicians to refine the classical ideals of democracy. He posited that the three independent and mutually balanced branches of power – legislative, executive and judicial – should be distinguished in the apparatus of power. The interactions between the three branches of government were modeled on Cicero's treatise *On the Commonwealth*. John Marshall, the head of the Supreme Court, relied on his personal observations and experience to justify the need for a judicial review of compliance with the Constitution, and considered the judicial system and the right of judicial supervision to be a cornerstone of the checks and balances system²⁹.

The first declarative statement of the principle of the separation of powers and the interactions between the branches of government can be found in the French Declaration of Human Rights and Freedoms of 1789 and the French Constitution of 1791. The practical application of the principle of the separations of powers received theoretical support from West European politicians and thinkers at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. This concept received wide support in Germany. The prominent German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) advocated the separation of legislative («collective will of the people»), executive (legal ruler and an accountable executive branch) and judiciary (appointed by the executive branch) powers³⁰. Another German philosopher, Georg Hegel (1770–1831), developed a political and legal doctrine of the separation of powers in the state as a pledge and guarantee of public freedom, highlighting the legislative branch of power, government power, and the power of the sovereign³¹.

²⁶ T. Chukhlib, Pacts and Constitutions of the Laws and Liberties of the Zaporozhian Army 1710, Kyiv 2011, pp. 8–15.

²⁷ L. Levy, Encyclopedia of the American Constitution, New York 2000, p. 128.

²⁸ C. Sheehan, James Madison: Father of the Constitutio, New York 2013, pp. 23–25.

²⁹ J. Marshal, op. cit., pp. 70-74.

³⁰ I. Kant, *Metaphysics of morals*, vol. 1, Moscow 1965, pp. 145–146.

³¹ G. Hegel, *Philosophy of law basics*, Kyiv 2000, pp. 209–211.

Similar views were expressed by the great British theorists of European liberalism, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, as well as French political thinkers Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville³².

In Europe, the development of democratic ideals was significantly suppressed between the end of the 19th century and the fall of fascist regimes and the establishment of sovereign rule in the former satellite states of the Soviet Union. When these countries embarked on the path to democracy, the fundamental elements of the system of checks and balances were applied by the newly established governments, with some variations across these states. Political theory continues to be widely researched, but the theoretical and practical dimensions of the checks and balances system in modern democracies have never been examined in a single integrated study.

IV. *The period of changes in political and legal doctrines* against the background of socialist theory. In this period, the development and spread of ideas concerning the distribution of power was inhibited, mainly due to the rising popularity of Marxist and socialist ideology, and the gradual Sovietization of East European countries. The basic elements of the system of checks and balances were applied only after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new independent states that transitioned to democracy, with some variations across these states³³.

V. *The modern period* of modification of the checks and balances system and the creation of modern theoretical approaches to substantiate the need for the system's application in various forms of republican rule. The checks and balances system became one of the most important attributes of democratic rule, and it led to the establishment of tripartite governments to uphold the rule of law.

The system of checks and balances has been modified considerably in recent decades. Its implementation and functioning depend primarily on the form of government, and it is associated with democratic governments that are divided into three branches to prevent any single body from wielding too much power. The problems associated with the the checks and balances mechanism have been recognized by modern political thinkers. The functional powers of government branches in different political systems have been widely discussed in foreign political literature. The system of checks and balances has been studied extensively by the following schools of political thought:

 American School of Political Science. The research done by this group focuses mainly on the distribution of powers and the interactions between the branches of government declared in the US Constitution. American scholars have examined the checks and balances system in the context of the interactions between independent branches of government enshrined in the Constitution by focusing on the ways in which

³² A. Kormych, *History of the doctrines of the state and law*, Kyiv 2009, pp. 143–162.

³³ Ibidem.

power is exercised in a presidential republic. The most prominent scholars in this school of political thought researchers include Bruce Ackerman³⁴, Francis Fukuyama³⁵, Thomas Sargentich³⁶, and Jeremy Waldron³⁷. In the American school, the system of checks and balances was researched largely in the context of jurisprudence.

- West European School of Political Science. Most of the research conducted in this school consists of comparative studies of different forms of government. It should be noted that East European scholars focus mainly on mixed forms of government. This school of thought is represented by renowned thinkers such as Jean Blondel³⁸, Elliot Bulmer³⁹, Vitalino Canas⁴⁰, Deidre M. Curtin⁴¹, Pamela Pansardi⁴², and others.
- Russian School of Political Science. The representatives of this school include O. Zaznayev⁴³, K. Zueva⁴⁴, A. Mishyn⁴⁵, I. Tretyak⁴⁶, and others. Russian political philosophers focus mostly on the institution of the presidency and the strength of presidential powers in the context of interactions with other branches of government.

The basic concept of the system of checks and balances remains essentially the same, but its specific features have been transformed through the accumulation of new knowledge and world practices. The modern system of checks and balances has the following characteristics:

 it is applied in countries that abide by the democratic principle of the separation of powers. This concept does not exist in non-democratic states, where power is concentrated in the hands of a single ruler;

³⁴ B. Ackerman, *The New Separation of Powers*, "Harvard Law Review" 2000, vol. 113, no. 3, pp. 633– -725.

³⁵ F. Fukuyama, *Checks and Balances*, "The American Interest" 2017, vol. 12, pp. 13–18.

³⁶ T. Sargentich, *The Presidential and Parliamentary Models of National Government*, "American University International Law Review" 1993, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 579–592.

³⁷ J. Waldron, *Separation of Powers or Division of Power*?, "New York University School of Law Working Paper" 2012, no. 12–20, p. 34.

³⁸ J. Blondel, *The Need to Study the «Presidential Republic» as a General Phenomenon of Contemporary Government*, https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/ 9781137482488 (accessed: 21 XI 2021).

³⁹ E. Bulmer, *Presidential Veto Powers*, "International IDEA" 2015, no. 14, p. 40.

⁴⁰ V. Canas, *The Semi-Presidential System*, https://www.zaoerv.de/64_2004/64_20 04_1_a_95_124.pdf (accessed: 19 XI 2021).

⁴¹ D. Curtin, Accumulated executive power in Europe. The most «dangerous» branch of government in the European Union, Amsterdam 2009, p. 30.

⁴² P. Pansardi, *Democracy, domination and the distribution of power: Substantive Political Equality as a Procedural Requirement*, "Revue internationale de philosophie" 2016, vol. 1, pp. 91–108.

⁴³ O. Zaznayev, *Measurement of presidential power*, "Uchenye Zapiski Kazanskogo Universiteta" 2005, pp. 14–21.

⁴⁴ K. Zueva, *The system of checks and balances as a direct element of the principle of separation of powers*, "Uchenyye zametki TOGU" 2013, vol. 4, pp. 17–20.

⁴⁵ A. Mishyn, Constitutional (state) law of foreign countries: textbook for universities, Moscow 2010.

⁴⁶ I. Tretyak, *The mechanism of checks and balances as a way to prevent and resolve constitutional and legal conflicts: a comparative legal aspect*, "Law Enforcement Review" 2018, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 43–50.

- the system is influenced by the form of government which determines the political mechanisms in a country's system of governance, the country's economic performance, as well as historical, political, cultural and social factors;
- the elements of the system have a formally defined character. For example, the impeachment procedure is clearly delineated in the Constitution of Ukraine;
- the system is influenced by the form of government. In a federal state, the emphasis is placed on «vertical» interactions, namely the links between the central authorities and federal districts. A unitary state is characterized by «horizontal» interactions at the level of the central government.

Diverse opinions have been expressed in research studies on the system of checks and balances. As a result, this phenomenon can be analyzed in different contexts, and its operating principles can be scrutinized under various conditions.

Conclusions. It can be concluded that: the theoretical framework underpinning the systems of checks and balances has evolved significantly throughout history. In the examined historical periods, the observed changes in the organization of government were affected mainly by social and political processes. To a certain extent, historical views have been incorporated into the modern system of checks and balances, and they are embodied in the theoretical framework and practical implementation of the system that has evolved in the face of dynamic social and political change.

The main lines of political and philosophical thought on the system of checks and balances and mutually restrictive branches of government in different historical periods were discussed. A periodization approach was proposed for analyzing the ideas and views that had emerged throughout human history, and the following key periods were identified: the pre-classical period, the classical period, the period of legal enforcement and implementation, the period of changes in political and legal doctrines, and the modern period.

The system of checks and balances continues to evolve in modern democratic states, while retaining its fundamental ideas that had been laid down in different historical epochs. To maintain its relevance, the checks and balances system should be considered in detail from the perspective of other scientific disciplines. Further research on the distribution of powers in modern democratic republics is needed to identify the main strengths and limitations of the system's efficacy in the state apparatus. This is especially true of Ukraine, where the evolution and practical implementation of the checks and balances system should be analyzed in the historical context.

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The checks and balances system – the evolution of public governance in a historical and theoretical context

Summary: The article deals with the main historical periods marking the evolution of the checks and balances system. The separation of powers and the functioning of the checks and balances system in the light of various schools of legal and political thought were emphasized.

A periodization approach was proposed for analyzing the ideas and views that had emerged throughout human history. It was emphasized that the basic principles for the establishment of government and dividing the powers between the branches of government had been laid down in the era of Antiquity. The characteristic features of the checks and balances system in modern democracies were described.

Keywords: checks and balances system, democratic transformation, division of powers, historical development

System der *checks and balances* – die Entwicklung des öffentlichen Managements im historischen und theoretischen Kontext

Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel befasst sich mit der Entwicklung der Ansichten und Ideen über das Überprüfung-und-Ausgleich-System (*checks and balances*) in verschiedenen historischen Epochen. Das Augenmerk liegt dabei auf der Machtverteilung und der Funktionsweise des Systems *checks and Balances* im Lichte verschiedener juristischer und politischer Denkschulen.

Bei der Analyse der Entwicklung von Ideen und Ansichten zu *checks and balances*, die sich in der Weltgeschichte herausgebildet haben, wird eine Periodisierung vorgeschlagen. Es wurde hervorgehoben, dass die Epoche der Antike die grundlegenden Prinzipien für die Regierungsbildung und die Verteilung der Befugnisse auf die verschiedenen Regierungsorgane festlegte. Die charakteristischen Merkmale von *checks and balances* in modernen Demokratien wurden beschrieben.

Schlüsselwörter: System von checks and balances, demokratischer Wandel, Machtverteilung, historische Entwicklung

118

System kontroli i równowagi – ewolucja zarządzania publicznego w kontekście historycznym i teoretycznym

Streszczenie: W artykule zanalizowano ewolucję poglądów i koncepcji na temat systemu kontroli i równowagi (*checks and balances*) w różnych okresach historycznych. Zwrócono uwagę na podział władzy oraz funkcjonowanie systemu kontroli i równowagi w świetle różnych szkół myśli prawnej i politycznej.

Zaproponowano periodyzację w analizie rozwoju idei i poglądów dotyczących kontroli i równowagi, które pojawiły się w historii świata. Podkreślono, że epoka starożytności wyznaczyła podstawowe zasady tworzenia rządu i podziału kompetencji między poszczególne organy władzy. Opisano charakterystyczne cechy systemu *checks and balances* we współczesnych demokracjach.

Słowa kluczowe: system kontroli i równowagi, transformacja demokratyczna, podział władz, rozwój historyczny