POLICY BRIEFS SERIES

Democracy and Authoritarianism in the 21st Century: A sketch

Grzegorz Ekiert, Harvard University

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HARVARD Kennedy School
ASH CENTER
for Democratic Governance
and Innovation

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About the Author

Grzegorz Ekiert is Laurence A. Tisch Professor of Government at Harvard University, Director of the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies (CES), and Senior Scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies. At CES, he co-chairs the Seminar on Democracy – Past, Present, Future.

Ekiert's research and teaching interests focus on comparative politics, regime change and democratization, civil society and social movements and East European politics and societies. His books include: Ruling by Other Means: State-Mobilized Movements, co-editors Elizabeth J. Perry and Yan Xiaojun, (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Assessing the Legacy of Communist Rule, co-editor Stephen Hanson, (Cambridge University Press 2003); Rebellious Civil Society. Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, co-authored with Jan Kubik, (University of Michigan Press 1999); The State Against Society: Political Crises and Their Aftermath in East Central Europe, (Princeton University Press 1996). His papers have been published in numerous social science journals and edited volumes in the U.S., Europe and Asia.

About the Ash Center

The Mission of the Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at is to develop ideas and foster practices for equal and inclusive, multi-racial and multi-ethnic democracy and self-government.

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Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation
Harvard Kennedy School
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

617-495-0557
ash.harvard.edu

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Abstract

In recent years significant academic attention has been devoted to the phenomenon of democratic backsliding characterized by assault on the rule of law, attempts to steal elections, and efforts to subjugate the judicial system and control free media. Yet, parallel political developments affecting hybrid and authoritarian regimes have by and large been neglected. This related process can be described as dictatorial drift and implies the transition from "soft" forms of authoritarian rule to hard core authoritarian policies characterized by the concentration of executive power, the destruction of political institutions such as fair elections, independent judiciary, free media, and autonomous civil society organizations, and worsening political repressions. This paper describes both democratic backsliding and authoritarian drift and argues that each are to a significant degree demand side phenomena: in countries undergoing such changes, significant parts of the electorates support anti-liberal and authoritarian policies. These two processes are illustrated by political developments in formerly communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe and in Central Asia.

If the 20th century was the story of slow, uneven progress toward the victory of liberal democracy over other ideologies—communism, fascism, virulent nationalism—the 21st century is, so far, a story of the reverse.

(Anne Applebaum, November 15, 2021)

Contemporary research on the state of democracy in the world shows a steady erosion of the quality of democratic institutions and declining respect for freedoms and civil rights. Public opinion polls register failing trust in governments, representative institutions, and political parties. Traditional political systems are falling apart, while populist and extremist parties and movements are on the rise across the globe. Autocratic leaders have tried to subvert democratic elections and employ illiberal institutional and repressive measures to stay in power. Since the early years of the 21st century, this growing "democratic deficit" has affected both old and new democracies, including many established Western ones (Hellmeier et al. 2020; Boese et al. 2022; Freedom House 2021, 2022).[1]

Yet, the worldwide erosion of democracy has been paralleled by another political trend that is less widely noted but equally significant and potentially more pernicious: dictatorial drift. This drift affects both hybrid regimes and "soft" authoritarian systems that retain a degree of pluralism and some mechanisms of constraining authority. It is characterized by the emergence of autocratic leaders, an extreme concentration of executive power, the decay of the rule of law, and the destruction of fundamental institutions of democracy: fair elections, separation of powers, an independent judiciary, opposition parties, free press, and independent civil society organizations. It also entails growing repressiveness and the use of force against political opposition both at home and abroad.

Do these two global political trends arise from the same causes, and are they both responses to a common set of factors? Moreover, are the intermediating mechanisms that drive the erosion of democracy the same as those behind dictatorial drift? In this paper, I argue that democratic backsliding is mostly driven by a combination of demand- and supply-side factors, while dictatorial drift is largely engineered from above.

On the one hand, public opinion polls across the world register a growing popular demand for the defense of traditional and anti-liberal values. Additionally, there is a rising preference for populist policies that offer protection against market mechanisms and the effects of globalization, as well as a call for stricter controls on immigration. On the other hand, populist politicians are increasingly committed to proposing specific policies, constructing populist discourses, and framing issues to appeal to anti-liberal constituencies, traditional conservative political actors, and social institutions.

Dictatorial drift emerges from above by authoritarian leaders who, after legitimately winning elections, strive to concentrate executive power, marginalize political opposition and representative institutions, instrumentalize the judicial system, and manipulate electoral institutions to escape constitutional and political constraints and controls. They seek to gradually destroy independent media, civil society organizations, and formal and informal checks and balances, and they actively mobilize anti-liberal forces and incite social and political conflicts. Both the erosion of democracy and dictatorial drift are underpinned by the emergence of conservative and reactionary civil society, which mobilize and channel the demand-side anti-liberal and authoritarian preferences (see Youngs 2018; Ekiert 2019, 2021; Atalay 2021; Platek 2023).

1. The earlier version of this chapter was published in Polish in Collegium Civitas Almanach 2022. I would like to thank Noah Desanaike for comments and research assistance.

Democratic Backsliding

The debate concerning the erosion of democracy has been ongoing for some time now (see, e.g., Diamond and Plattner 2015; Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Today, however, there is a growing consensus that the political institutions in old and new democracies face seemingly unsolvable problems. In his recent evaluation of the state of democracy in the world, Diamond (2022) describes this process as "accelerating democratic recession." The uncontested hegemony of the West and liberal values that resulted from the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet bloc is under sustained assault both at home by populist and nationalist forces and from abroad by increasingly aggressive authoritarian powers.

Explaining the current predicament of democratic regimes is not easy. To some, the main culprit is contemporary capitalism, which, due to economic globalization, escaped the regulatory regimes of national states and has caused exploding inequalities and dislocations. The rise of populism and falling support for liberal political parties is seen as a direct effect of economic transformations (Piketty 2014). To others, the problems of democracy are the result of accelerating technological and cultural changes that challenge traditional social arrangements and cultural systems (Norris and Inglehardt 2019). Yet, for others still, the core problem is a geo-political re-ordering of the world, encompassing the rise of China, the irredentism of Russia, and a perceived economic and political decline of the United States and the West more broadly.

This is often illustrated by a series of policy missteps: the war in Iraq and the subsequent struggle with Islamic terrorism, the fallout of the Arab Spring that destabilized the Middle East, and the inadequate response to the brutal war crimes perpetrated by Russian and Al-Assad regime troops in Syria—actions that made Western democracies look weak. So, too, did the failure of Western states to effectively respond to Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the takeover of territories in eastern Ukraine that encouraged Putin's regime to commence a full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022. To this list can be added a disastrous and chaotic retreat from Afghanistan, signaling to many the end of American hegemony. A growing economic might of China, as well as its authoritarian drift and escalating assertiveness, were not only long ignored by the United States and Europe but also considered unstoppable. These developments seemed to showcase the weakness and decline of Western powers even if the response to Russian aggression united the West and injected NATO with renewed purpose.

Finally, the role of crucial events on the global and national level cannot be underestimated. The 2008 financial crisis and its consequences across the world exposed the limitations of contemporary advanced economies, highlighted growing social inequalities, and reduced the resources available for responding to old and new social problems. The COVID-19 pandemic that disproportionally affected Western countries introduced an additional set of challenges and further exposed the weaknesses of their health and welfare systems. Mandatory vaccinations and other policies created resentment and anger toward the establishment. On the national level, events such as the attempted coup d'état in Turkey and the airplane accident that claimed the life of the Polish president created openings for authoritarian leaders to centralize power and attack political opposition.

All these factors contributed to the rise of populist and radical left- and right-wing parties and movements in many countries, allowing their leaders to deliberately challenge liberal values and democratic norms. Populist politicians mobilized on resentments, grievances, and growing anger toward political institutions. The electoral successes of authoritarian politicians such as Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Recep Erdogan in Turkey, and Narendra Modi in India, as well as many

others across Latin America, Asia, and Africa, showed that determined leaders can destabilize even established and otherwise well-functioning democracies.

In other words, the last two decades have not been kind to democracy and the liberal global order constructed after World War II. There is nothing surprising in the fact that debates about the crisis of democracy are common in the media and across university campuses, nor that books analyzing such problems sell millions of copies. To onlookers, it seems that each approaching election is no longer a routine change of government but rather the last chance to save democracy as we have come to know it. So common are such concerns today that it is legitimate to ask whether we are perhaps exaggerating the challenges faced by democracy today. Yet, the growing evidence that democracy is in trouble cannot be ignored.

There is plenty of evidence illustrating the gradual erosion of democracy and freedom around the world. Every annual global assessment of the state of democracy now warns of a serious decline of civil liberties and quality of democratic institutions. In one of its recent reports, the American think tank Freedom House (2022) warns that "[g]lobal freedom faces a dire threat. Around the world, the enemies of liberal democracy . . . are accelerating their attacks. Authoritarian regimes have become more effective at co-opting or circumventing the norms and institutions meant to support basic liberties, and at providing aid to others who wish to do the same." The report concludes with "[i]n every region of the world, democracy is under attack by populist leaders and groups that reject pluralism and demand unchecked power to advance the particular interests of their supporters, usually at the expense of minorities and other perceived foes."

Although the alarm regarding the state of contemporary democratic politics is widely shared, experts from Freedom House show that the crisis has been a long time in the making. Since 2006, the number of countries that have registered a decline in freedom and civil liberties and in the quality of political institutions significantly outpaced those that have registered improvements in these dimensions (see Figure 1). This trend has only strengthened in recent years. Although we have not witnessed spectacular collapses of democratic regimes during this period, gradual democratic backsliding in numerous countries indicates that we are amid a distinct political cycle. This is what Huntington (1993) describes as a "reverse wave," which characterizes the ongoing situation where, every year, more countries move toward authoritarianism than those becoming more liberal and democratic. As Diamond (2022, 169), the world's foremost expert on democratization, notes, "for a decade, the democratic recession was sufficiently subtle, incremental, and mixed that it was reasonable to debate whether it was happening at all. But as the years have passed, the authoritarian trend has become harder to miss."

Yet, today's processes of democratic backsliding differ in a fundamental way from old assaults on democracy. According to many experts, contemporary democracies are destroyed in gradual and often imperceptible ways, whereas in the past they were victims of coup d'états, wars, and revolutions. Moreover, though many elements of democratic regime are technically left in place, they are manipulated and distorted beyond recognition. Elections are no longer considered dispensable. The way democracies die may have significant consequences for the possibilities of restoring full democratic rule after the ongoing period of democratic assault.

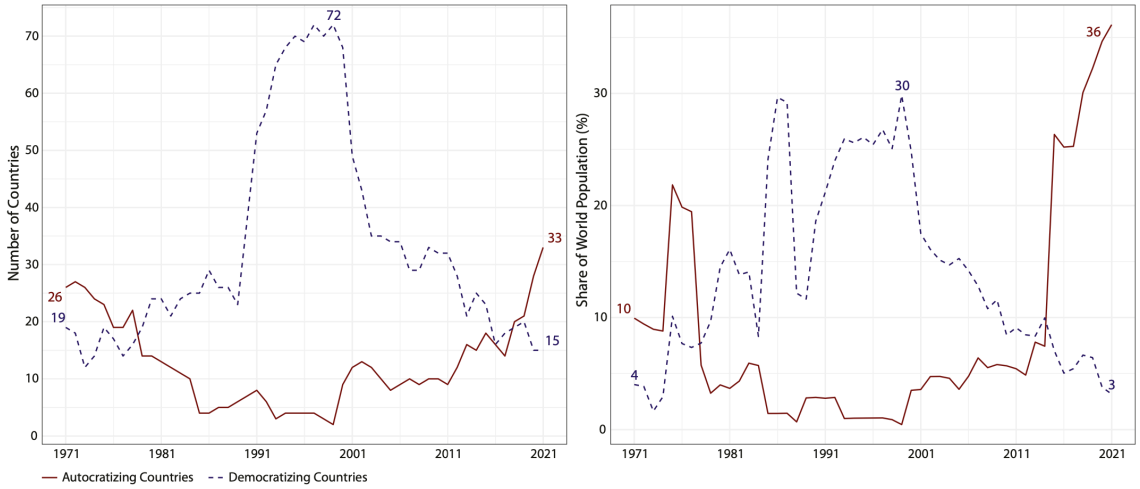
Figure 1 shows that the global democratic recession began in 2006, although some regions experienced setbacks even earlier. The year 2005 marked the last occasion when the general number of countries with enhanced scores surpassed those with declining scores. Since then, the number of countries with diminishing scores has significantly outnumbered those showing improvements. This trend improved in 2022, with 35 countries registering declining scores and 34 showing improvements (Freedom House 2023).

Figure 1. Democratic Decline

Source: Freedom House (2022).

The declining scores in the quality of democracy registered by Freedom House are matched by other organizations producing rankings of democratic performance. In its 2022 report, Varieties of Democracy Institute shows that not only did the number of countries shifting toward authoritarianism increase, but several democracies also experienced decline. Furthermore, the portion of the world's population living under authoritarian rule rapidly expanded. In the last 10 years, this percentage increased from 49 to 70 (Boese et al. 2022). These trends are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Global Share of Autocratizing and Democratizing Countries



Source: Boese (2022).

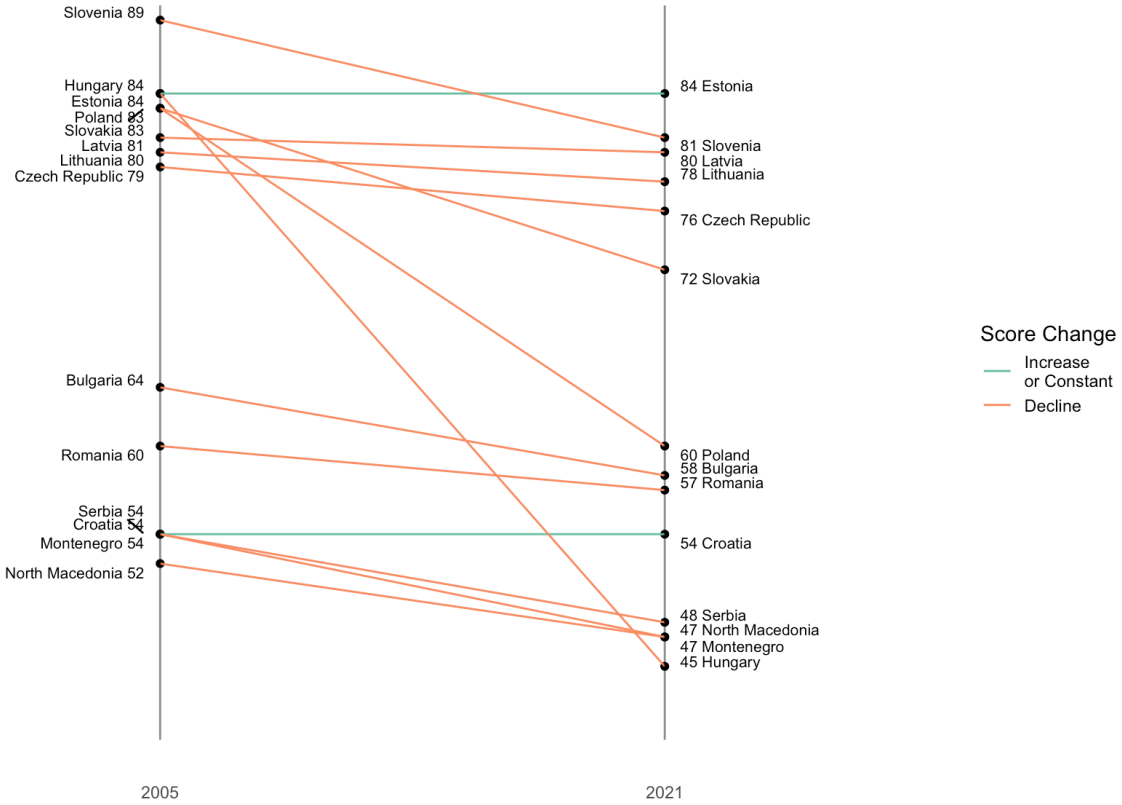
Researchers from the Economist Intelligence Unit reach similar conclusions about the state of democracy. Its 2021 Report Democracy Index, which rates the state of democracy across 167 countries based on five measures (electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, democratic political culture, and civil liberties) finds that more than a third of the world's population live under authoritarian rule, while just 6.4% enjoy full democracy. The "global" score fell from 5.37 in 2020 to a new low of 5.28 out of 10, marking the greatest such decline since 2010, following the global financial crisis (The Economist, 2022).

Central and Eastern Europe epitomize the global retreat from democracy. According to Freedom House (2021),

> [c]ountries all over the region are turning away from democracy or find themselves trapped in cycle of setbacks and partial recoveries. In the 2021 edition of *Nations in Transit*, covering the events of 2020, a total of 18 countries suffered declines in their democracy scores; only 6 countries' scores improved, while 5 countries experienced no net change. This marked the 17th consecutive year of overall decline in the *Nations in Transit* index, leaving the number of countries that are designated as democracies at its lowest point in the history of the report.

Perhaps paradoxically, the two countries that registered the biggest drop in their Nations in Transit (NiT) ratings in the last decade are Hungary and Poland—the former leaders of post-communist democratic transformation. In fact, among the 14 post-communist countries that were classified by the NiT as consolidated or partially consolidated democracies in 2005, only 2 (Estonia and Croatia) did not register any decline. All others had lower scores in 2021 than in 2005 (see Figure 3).

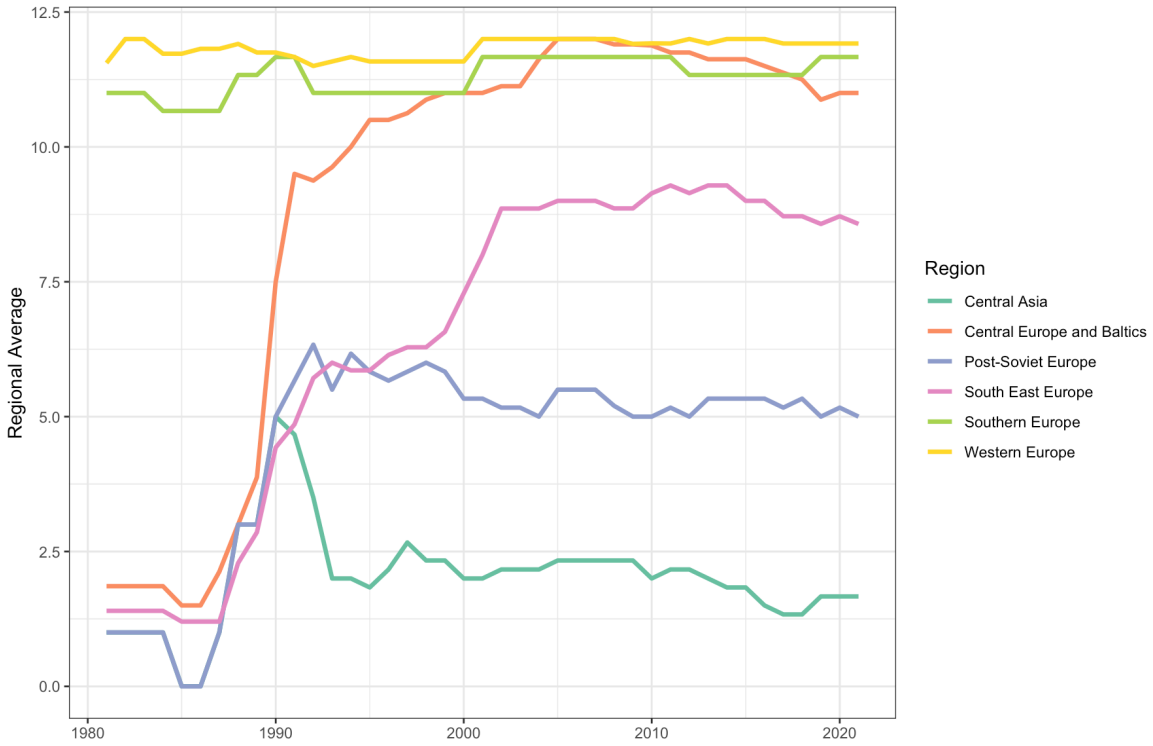
Figure 3. Consolidated and Semi-Consolidated Democracy Scores



Note: Data are obtained from Freedom House's NiT data indices.

All the above data and rankings show a paradox of political transformations in the region after 1989. When new and flawed democracies emerged as a result of the collapse of communist regimes, the prevailing expectation was that with time, these new regimes would become more mature, responsible, and better performing. They were expected to consolidate their new democratic institutions, expand civil rights and political liberties, strengthen the rule of law, and offer equal protection to their citizens. Instead, the highest levels of liberalization and democratic institutional performance were registered at the *beginning* of post-communist transformations and have only declined thereafter. This applies both to countries that established democratic regimes after 1989 and to those that never even democratized. Figure 4, based on Freedom House data, illustrates well this surprising robustness of political rights and civil liberties during the initial decade of post-communist transformation.

Figure 4. Regional Averages in Political Rights and Civil Liberties



Note: Data are obtained from Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* indices.

While it was commonly believed that EU membership is the best guarantor of the increasing quality and stability of democracy, this view needs to be revised in the light of Hungarian and Polish experiences. Currently, Hungary is the only EU member not classified as fully democratic, and Poland is quickly moving in the same direction.

The decline in the quality of democracy can be observed across several dimensions. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue, backsliding democracies show disregard for democratic rules, constitutional norms, and the rule of law; delegitimization of political opposition and liberal movements and organizations; growing tolerance for violence and hate speech directed at minorities, political opposition, and other nations; and attempts to restrict civil liberties and freedom of the press. In turn, conditions that are necessary for the proper functioning of democracy—mutual toleration and restraint—are

endangered. Scheppele (2018) describes this degenerative form of democracy as "autocratic legalism," where democratic institutions are used to consolidate autocratic power.

The causes and conditions for the erosion of democracy are hotly debated and not immediately clear. First, the literature on democratic backsliding is biased in the same way as is most of the scholarship on democratization: its theoretical optics are elite centered. The ruling elites, having won through fair elections, are seen as main culprits of democratic backsliding. They use the power of the state to gradually dismantle democracy, deliberately undermining democratic norms and institutions. Scheppele (2019, 547–548) argues that

> [t]he autocrats who hijack constitutions seek to benefit from the superficial appearance of both democracy and legality within their states. They use their democratic mandates to launch legal reforms that remove the checks on executive power, limit the challenges to their rule, and undermine the crucial accountability institutions of a democratic state. Because these autocrats push their illiberal measures with electoral backing and use constitutional or legal methods to accomplish their aims, they can hide their autocratic designs in the pluralism of legitimate legal forms.

The democratic erosion literature is also excessively focused on institutional crafting. Authoritarians manipulate institutional designs for their advantage. Yet, as much as setting up democratic institutions does not automatically produce democracy, undermining those institutions and replacing them with authoritarian ones does not make the electorate compliant and powerless. Instead, it is increasingly obvious that the demand side of backsliding cannot be ignored (see, e.g., Sadura and Sierakowski 2023)—contrary to much of the literature, democratic decline in part occurs *because*, not in spite, of popular opinion. As Arendt (1978, 306) notes, "[i]t would be a still more serious mistake to forget, because of this impermanence, that the totalitarian regimes, so long as they are in power, and the totalitarian leaders, so long as they are alive, 'command and rest upon mass support' up to the end. Hitler's rise to power was legal in terms of majority rule and neither he nor Stalin could have maintained the leadership of large populations, survived many interior and exterior crises, and braved the numerous dangers of relentless intra-party struggles if they had not had the confidence of the masses."

While the causes of global democratic backsliding are based on a combination of political, economic, and cultural factors and are highly context specific, both the demand and supply side of politics are an important part of the process. In the case of post-communist Europe, they can be summarized as follows:

- Support for anti-liberal authoritarianism varies across the region, but it is significant almost everywhere and is much higher than in the West as various public opinion polls aptly show.
- Although the main thrust in explaining backsliding is on the supply side, it is both a supply- and a demand-side phenomenon. Authoritarians are winning not only because they are ruthless and skillful manipulators but also because they have significant public support in their countries and committed international allies abroad. Accordingly, we need to take voters' expressed preferences seriously to understand which constituencies are supporting anti-liberal and populist parties.
- Traditional values and norms are very resilient, and thus cultural modernization takes more time than economic modernization (Norris and Inglehart 2016). Moreover, it is increasingly apparent that while traditional and illiberal values are the legitimate preferences among parts of the electorate, liberal democracy needs democrats to function properly and to survive. Even

the most skillful institutional manipulation is not a substitute for normative commitments. It also needs to take seriously the "toleration paradox." Thus, to survive, democracy needs normative commitments among electorates and must be nurtured, protected, and defended by political elites.

- Despite its modernizing commitments, communism only preserved traditional, anti-liberal systems of norms and values that have much deeper historical roots and are grounded in the peripheral position of these countries in historical cross-European developments (see Pop-Eleches 2018).
- Initial enthusiasm for liberal democracy was misleading. It showed the confusion by, rather than normative commitment to, liberal norms and values. Democratic backsliding is, in fact, driven by hidden anti-liberal preferences that have been legitimized and mobilized by anti-liberal political actors.
- Organized religions have been the preserves of traditional values across the region before, during, and after communism. Accordingly, churches and the right-wing pillar of civil society have become the main normalizers and mobilizers of illiberal values and virulent nationalism. They make anti-liberal hidden preferences legitimate.
- The rise of nationalist/authoritarian constituencies is not a response to specific events or crises. They constitute a stable, silent "majority" that regains its voice when populist and nationalist civil society organizations and parties make such views legitimate and especially when they contest and win elections.

Dictatorial Drift

The collapse of communist regimes not only facilitated the emergence of new democracies but also led to the arrival of new forms of non-democratic regimes that Levitsky and Way (2002) call "competitive authoritarianism." As they argue 18 years later (2020, 52), "competitive authoritarianism was a post-Cold War phenomenon—a product of an international environment that was uniquely hostile to full-scale dictatorship." This new form of soft authoritarian or semi-democratic rule is characterized by "the coexistence of meaningful democratic institutions and serious incumbent abuse [that] yields electoral competition that is real but unfair." These regimes allow significant "arenas of contestation," tolerated political opposition, and autonomous media and civil society organizations, and they do not use overt political repression or intimidation of its critics. Guriev and Triesman (2022) similarly argue that contemporary autocracies are "dictatorship-lite" and try "to conceal autocracy within formally democratic institutions" (27; see also Dobson 2012).

Levitsky and Way (2002) examine 36 regimes across the globe with these characteristics, including Russia, Serbia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia as well as several current EU members—Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Slovakia. Despite doubts about whether these regimes can be characterized by the stable equilibrium or are prone to move toward either more democratic or more authoritarian stances, the authors conclude 18 years later that "today competitive authoritarianism remains alive and well" (Levitsky and Way 2020, 51). They note that "[t]he persistence of competitive authoritarianism is somewhat surprising . . . because the Western liberal hegemony of the 1990s, which led many full autocracies to become competitive authoritarian, has waned" (1). They also argue that "[c]ompetitive politics persists because many autocrats lack the coercive and organizational capacity to consolidate hegemonic rule, and because the alternatives to multiparty elections lack legitimacy across the globe" (1). Yet, others point to the inherent instability of competitive authoritarianism. As Carothers (2018, 129) concludes, "hybrid regimes have not become a new form of stable nondemocratic rule . . . of the 35 regimes

identified as having been CA between 1990 and 1995, most have either democratized or been replaced by new autocracies."

While the initial shift of some Central and East European countries in a more democratic direction can be attributed to the EU (Ekiert, Kubik, and Vachudova 2007), most post-communist countries have now firmly embraced authoritarianism. This aligns with the emerging global trend that I previously referred to as the dictatorial drift. "Spin dictatorships" are becoming real tyrannies and very traditional highly repressive states. Though they still have some ways to go to match the record of Stalin and Hitler, with the Russian war crimes in Ukraine and China's concentration camps for its Uyghur minority, some of these regimes are becoming brutal and murderous. The view that "hard authoritarianism," as opposed to a softer form, is on the rise tends to be shared by many perceptive commentators of today's international affairs, including Anne Applebaum, Thomas Friedman, Gideon Rachman, and Larry Diamond.

In his recent book, Rachman (2022a, 11) argues that "[s]ince 2000, the rise of the strongman leader has become a central feature of global politics. In capitals as diverse as Moscow, Beijing, Delhi, Ankara, Budapest, Warsaw, Manila, Riyadh and Brasilia, self-styled "strongmen" (and, so far, they are all men) have risen to power . . . The rise of strongman leaders across the world has fundamentally changed world politics. We are now in the midst of the most sustained global assault on liberal democratic values since the 1930s."

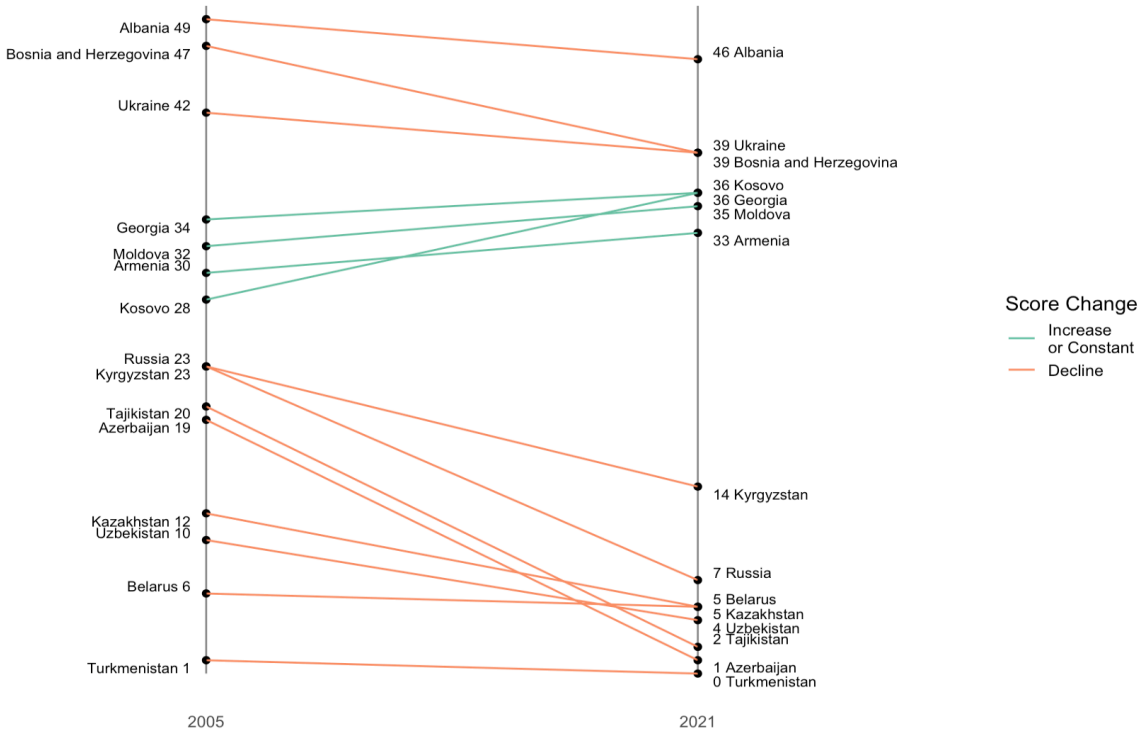
Friedman (2022) points to the unprecedented accumulation of unconstrained power by some current authoritarian leaders: "If you ask me what is the most dangerous aspect of today's world, I'd say it is the fact that Putin has more unchecked power than any other Russian leader since Stalin. And Xi has more unchecked power than any other Chinese leader since Mao. But in Stalin's day, his excesses were largely confined to Russia and the borderlands he controlled. And in Mao's day, China was so isolated, his excesses touched only the Chinese people."

Similarly, Diamond (2022, 173) argues that

> [a]lthough they differ significantly in political system, economic capacity, and global power, the Chinese and Russian regimes share important features and interests. Each has become dramatically more repressive in the last decade, with China moving toward a neo-totalitarian surveillance state and Russia toward more vengeful and pervasive punishment of political opposition and dissent. Each system has become increasingly dominated by a single ruler who, feeling insecure in power, tightens repression and stokes nationalism to enhance domestic control.

Russia and China are the most obvious examples of what I call the "dictatorial drift." However, the evidence from the post-communist world tends to support the view that this is a more general trend and hybrid regimes and soft authoritarian regimes that emerged post-communism have become more authoritarian over time. As seen in Figure 5, only 4 out of 15 regimes classified as hybrid, semi, or fully consolidated authoritarian by Freedom House in 2005 did not shift to a more authoritarian stance. A common thread among these four countries is their shared existential geo-political threat (from Russia and Serbia). They need Western support to balance their precarious geo-political situation and consequently are more responsive to Western leverage.

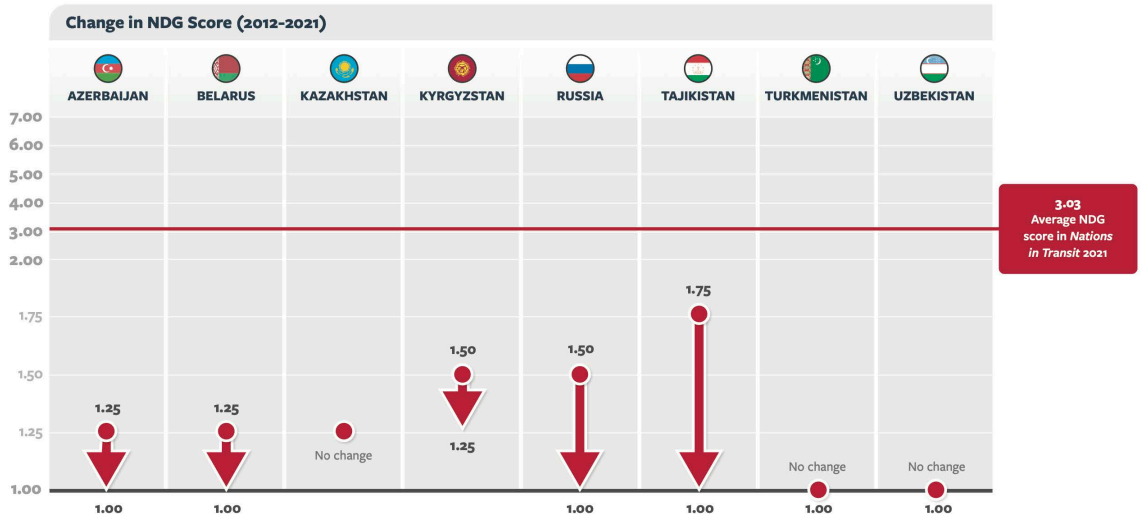
Figure 5. Hybrid to Fully Authoritarian Democracy Scores



Note: Data are obtained from Freedom House's NiT data indices.

Moreover, many countries shifting toward authoritarianism have ended up with extreme forms of authoritarian rule. As indicated by the Freedom House Index NiT, six of the eight consolidated authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet region now have the lowest possible National Democratic Governance ratings (Figure 6).

Figure 6. NiT National Democratic Governance ratings



Source: Freedom House (2021).

These new emerging dictatorships share many characteristics. As Applebaum (2021) notes,

> [n]owadays, autocracies are run not by one bad guy, but by sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial structures, security services (military, police, paramilitary groups, surveillance), and professional propagandists. The members of these networks are connected not only within a given country, but among many countries. The corrupt, state-controlled companies in one dictatorship do business with corrupt, state-controlled companies in another. The police in one country can arm, equip, and train the police in another. The propagandists share resources—the troll farms that promote one dictator's propaganda can also be used to promote the propaganda of another—and themes, pounding home *the same messages about the weakness of democracy* and the evil of America.

Applebaum refers to this aspect of dictatorial draft that is especially striking, namely the growing collaboration among authoritarian regimes, as "Autocracy Inc.," emphasizing intertwined and often non-transparent political and economic cooperation. This cooperation is further reflected by the formation of formal regional alliances led by authoritarian states that could provide alternatives to liberal regional institutions (see Libman and Obydenkova 2018). According to Rachman (2022b), "[i]n 2022, Putin and Xi are determined to make the world safe for autocracy . . . they share a determination to create a new world order that will better accommodate the interests of Russia and China—as defined by their current leaders."

Relatedly, Diamond (2022, 172) notes that "China leads four of the fifteen specialized UN agencies and, in cooperation with Russia and other authoritarian regimes, is working energetically to degrade human rights norms and democratic civil society participation within existing global institutions, such as the UN and its Human Rights Council, while seeking to craft new global rules to make the world safe for autocracy, kleptocracy, and digital repression."

The dictatorial drift and increasing cooperation between authoritarian regimes seeking to challenge Western liberal hegemony creates a new, much more dangerous world. The recent unprovoked aggression by Russia on her neighbor with the tacit approval of China is the most striking example of what may happen if dictatorial ambitions and unconstrained leaders are not kept in check by the global community of liberal democracies. Diamond (2022, 176) is right—and, indeed prescient, as he wrote before the Russian invasion of Ukraine—that

> [t]he dictatorships in Russia and China could destroy world peace before they destroy themselves. As they face the deep contradictions of their stultifying models, the authoritarian rulers of Russia and China will find their legitimacy waning. If they do not embrace political reform—a prospect that fills them with dread, given the fate of Gorbachev—they will have to rely increasingly on the exercise of raw power at home and abroad to preserve their rule. This is likely to propel them on a fascistic path, in which relentless repression of internal pluralism becomes inseparably bound up with ultranationalism, expansionism, and intense ideological hostility to all liberal and democratic values and rivals.

Conclusion

What causes dictatorial drift? Are the underlying conditions for democratic backsliding and dictatorial drift the same? What mechanisms drive both backsliding and the drift? Regarding democratic backsliding, I pointed out that this pattern results from both demand- and supply-side factors. On the demand side, the initially hidden preferences of conservative and authoritarian electorates are being legitimized and mobilized by competing politicians, parties, churches, conservative movements, and right-wing civil society organizations. On the supply side, new discourses of grievance, new distorted framings of history, state-sponsored culture wars, and populist economic and social policies fortify the control of anti-liberal and nationalist leaders. Once securing power through democratic elections, autocrats often begin a gradual (or sometimes hasty) dismantling of democratic institutions.

Dictatorial drift occurs through a gradual process that Laszlo Rajk, the infamous Stalinist Interior Minister of Hungary, described as "salami tactics." This strategy involves destroying liberal political institutions and taking over opposition parties, independent media, and civil society organizations, one thin slice at a time. The result is the destruction of alternative sources of power and of checks and balances, individual freedoms, and civil rights. In short, dictatorial drift is driven from above by authoritarian leaders who can escape controls and, once in power, gradually destroy independent institutions and checks and balances and actively mobilize anti-liberal forces.

Still, consolidating dictatorship is not easy. To establish a stable dictatorship, rulers must actively mobilize anti-liberal groups, cultivate relationships with anti-liberal organizations, provoke conflicts, and polarize the electorate. They must also buy support through populist policies, clientelism, and corrupt practice as well as intimidate and repress those who refuse to be bought. Moreover, they mobilize their supporters through skillfully manipulating their fears and concerns and of the norms and values that appeal to them. These rulers constantly search for internal and external enemies to integrate and mobilize their supporters. Using relentless propaganda from state-controlled media, they manipulate the public and hide their own misdeeds and failures. As a result, they establish the system free of constraints on executive power and political guardrails that otherwise exist in democracies and soft authoritarian systems.

Such unchecked power results in leaders who no longer face restraint. This is evident in how Putin was able to start a brutal war of aggression in the middle of Europe and how Xi could destroy all independent institutions, breaking the agreement that guaranteed the autonomy of Hong Kong (see Maizland 2022). We could easily imagine that he may decide to invade Taiwan or provoke military conflicts with neighboring countries to control the East China Sea.

There is agreement among those studying democratic backsliding and dictatorial drift that the weakening of Western liberal hegemony underlies such processes. Levitsky and Way (2010) attribute the success of post-Cold War democratic transformations to Western "linkage and leverage." Western linkage describes the intensity of the connections and the cross-border relationships between a country and the West, while leverage describes a level of vulnerability to Western pressure (including economic sanctions). One can argue that with the weakening of the West's economic position and the perception that democracy as a political system is in crisis, both linkage and leverage are much weaker today than they were at the end of the Cold War. According to Mounk (2022), "[w]ith democracy in crisis around the globe, its enemies no longer feel the need to hide their authoritarian ambitions."

The weakening position of the West and the emergence of the "dictator international"—global networks of support among autocracies—has allowed both the creation of new forms of authoritarian rule, as described by Applebaum (2021), and the emergence of strongman leaders, as described by Gidon Rachman. In contrast to competitive authoritarianism, this combination of domestic and international

factors has a much better chance of producing a stable equilibrium. The authoritarian equilibrium rests on three pillars: economic security, lies, and fear (Gertschewski 2013). Today, economic cooperation among dictatorships provides them with a greater degree of security and the capacity to survive economic sanctions. Control of the media and communications as well as collaboration among propaganda systems allows lies to pervade public space unchallenged.

Finally, military and internal security cooperation provides the necessary level of fear to prevent domestic challenges to dictatorial rule. None of these factors emerged overnight but rather are the result of long processes of political learning, as dictatorial states experiment with different strategies and solutions that are then copied by other autocrats in their global network. There are countless examples of such learning: in Poland, Kaczynski's claim to follow Hungarian strategies in Warsaw; Russia adopting China's strategies to control internet communication; Russian security police training their Belarusian counterparts; and Central Asian countries employing Russian strategies of controlling and repressing civil society organizations, among many others.

To counter the rise of ruthless dictatorships, and the human catastrophes and abuses of power they produce, the liberal West needs to get its act together. The EU must defend the rule of law, liberal norms and values, and fair democratic practices among its members. It must also play a more assertive role in global politics commensurate with its economic power. NATO, too, needs to better deter military threats from Russia and remain open to European countries seeking protection from external threats. Liberal democracies need to counter the military ambitions of China and prevent the takeover of international organizations by authoritarian powers and their supporters. They should also be prepared to pay the price for protecting liberal values and principles and must realize that hypocrisy is a losing strategy in the long run. As the 2022 Freedom House report (2022) notes, "[t]he global order is nearing a tipping point, and if democracy's defenders do not work together to help guarantee freedom for all people, the authoritarian model will prevail." How exactly this can be done is, of course, another story.

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