

Report Part Title: Conclusion

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## 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 Mairland 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.