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."

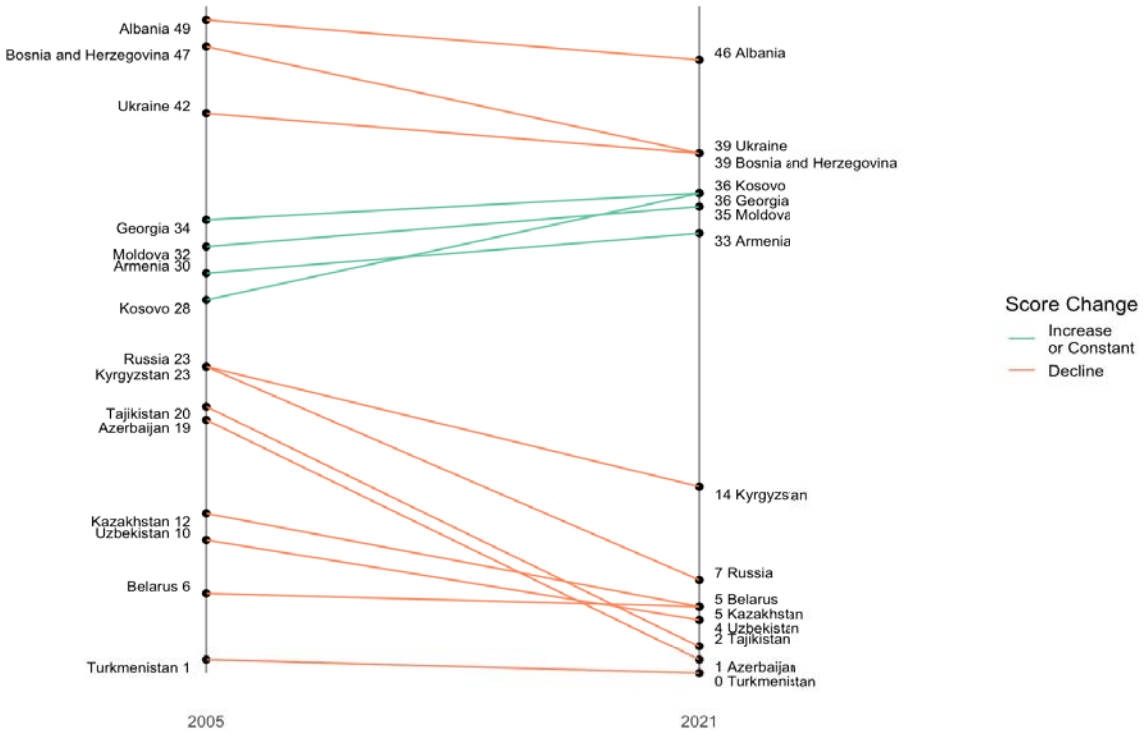
Friedman (2022) points to the unprecedented accumulation of unconstrained power by some current authoritarian leaders: "If you ask me what is the most dangerous aspect of today's world, I'd say it is the fact that Putin has more unchecked power than any other Russian leader since Stalin. And Xi has more 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.

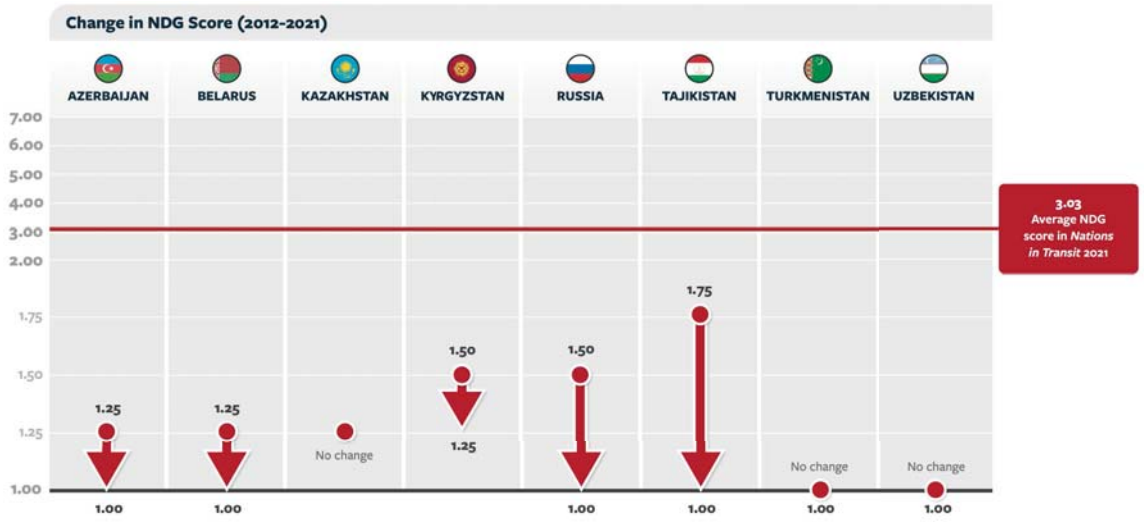
Figure 5. Hybrid to Fully Authoritarian Democracy Scores



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.