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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).<sup>1</sup>

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 Desanaiké for comments and research assistance.