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.

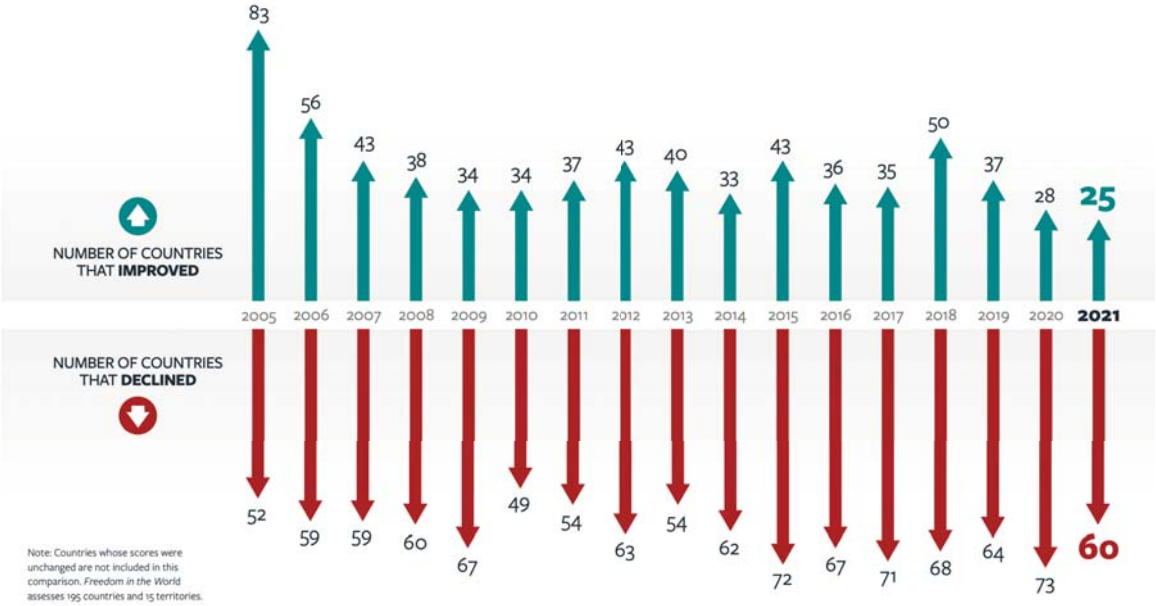
There is plenty of evidence illustrating the gradual erosion of democracy and freedom around the world. Every annual global assessment of the state of democracy now warns of a serious decline of civil liberties and quality of democratic institutions. In one of its recent reports, the American think tank 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).

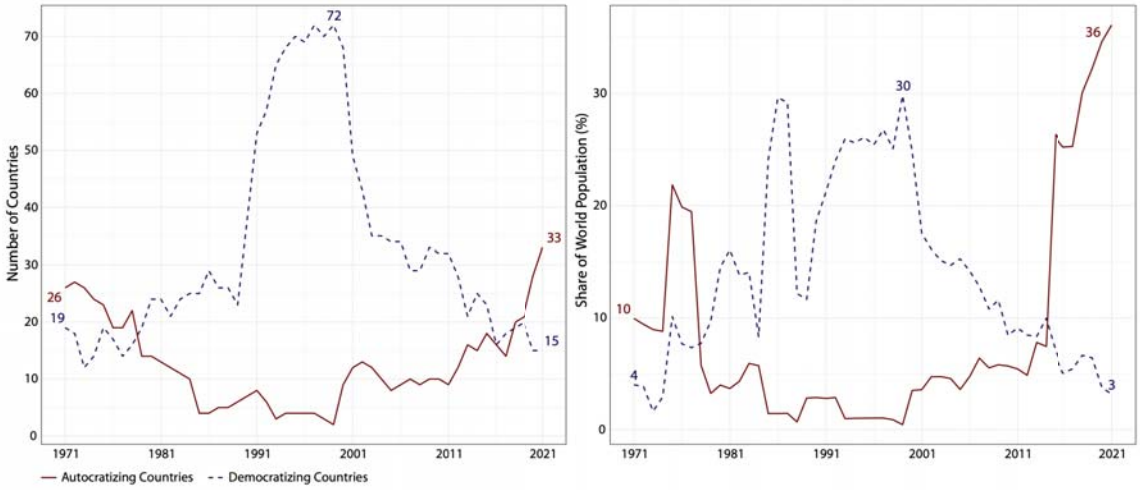
Figure 1. Democratic Decline



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).

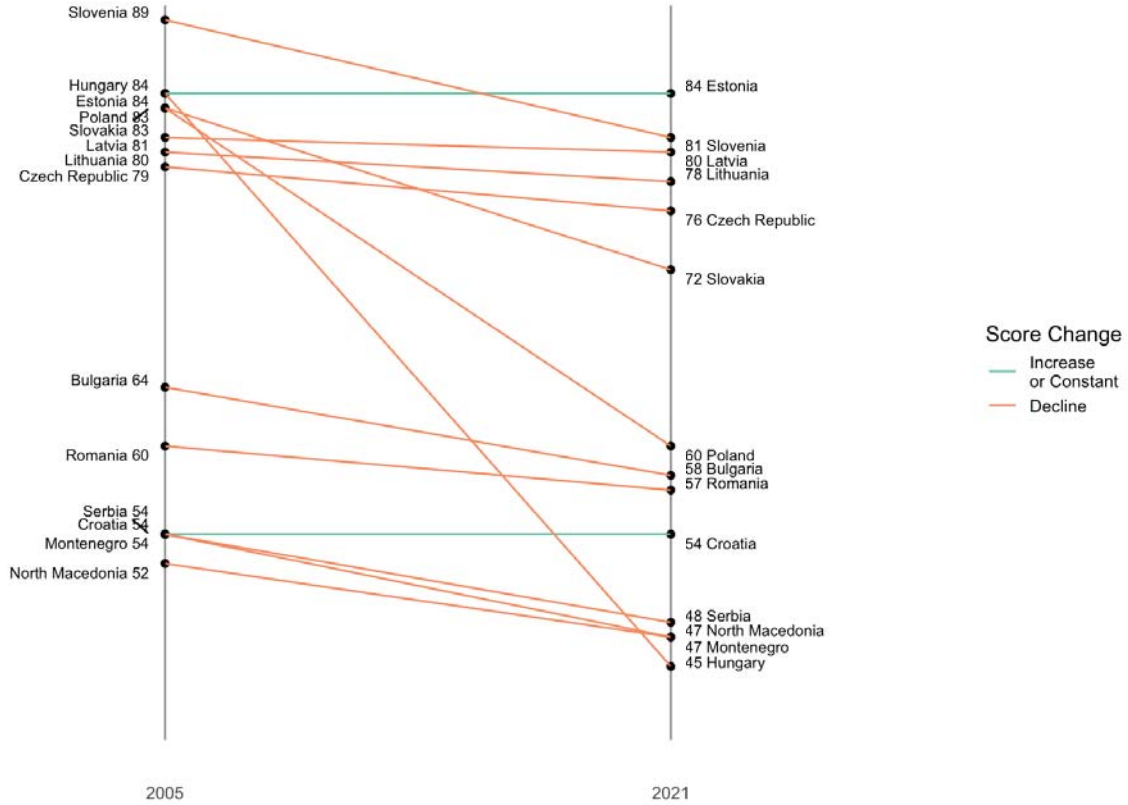
Researchers from the Economist Intelligence Unit reach similar conclusions about the state of democracy. Its 2021 Report Democracy Index, which rates the state of democracy across 167 countries based on five measures (electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, 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).

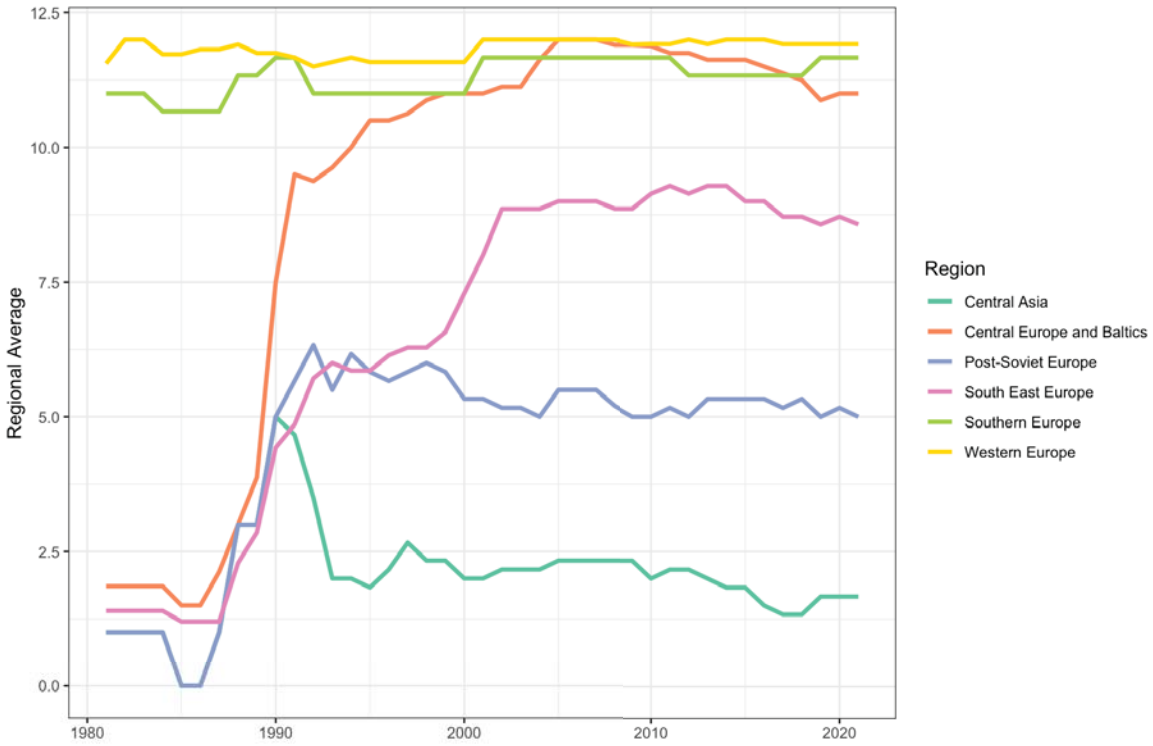
Figure 3. Consolidated and Semi-Consolidated Democracy Scores



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