

How Authoritarian Governments Stay in Power: Examining Key Factors and Understanding Democratic Backsliding

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Abstract

This paper highlights how tools of authoritarian stability can help people understand the concept of democratic backsliding. It divides the tools into 3 pillars and stresses on the different theories about democratic backsliding. The research study explains case studies about democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary by giving examples of how the 3 pillars of authoritarian stability were used by the regimes of these countries.

Overall, the findings explain how establishment democracies can become weaker when key institutions of government are gradually controlled by the ruling parties.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding; Corruption; Economic mismanagement; Mismanagement of the justice system; Dissatisfaction with politicians; Economic hardships, Power of the single ruler; Limited or no political competition; Lack of individual freedom; Rise of authoritarianism; Future of democracy; Out of touch elites

Introduction

Understanding why Authoritarian Governments are More Popular

Understanding authoritarian stability is crucial for explaining why democratic backsliding can happen gradually rather than through sudden actions. This demonstrates how leaders can maintain power whilst weakening democratic institutions, such as courts, media and political opposition.

On another level, research has pinpointed that across 12 high income democracies, 64% of respondents have expressed that democracy is not working. For instance, in The United States of America (2024), which is considered to be the most powerful democracy in the world, 7 states have not accepted the option of ranked choice voting. In continents, such as Africa where support for democracy is comparatively higher than most western democracies, the support for democracy has witnessed a downfall. This is due to reasons, such as corruption and mismanagements of the justice system, poor economic management and dissatisfaction with politicians. For example, in a populated country, such as South Africa, only 29% of people agreed that democracy is preferable compared to any other kind of government.

Research conducted by Pew Research Center (2018) stressed that people's dissatisfaction with democracy in many cases can be linked to facing economic struggles and hardships. In 24 out of 27 countries that were surveyed, citizens who expressed that the national economy was in a bad shape were likely to believe that democracy was not working as intended. It had failed to deliver results in terms of the economic development and progress of the countries.

Understanding the Concept of an Authoritarian Government

Aung Saa Suu Kyi, a politician, an author and Nobel peace prize winner stated that authoritarianism can be defined as a political system in which power lies in the hands of a single ruler, or a small elite group of people in a country. In an authoritarian state, citizens have limited or no room for political competition, and the government has little regard for individual freedom and rights. As of 2025, 75% of the world's population lives under an autocratic regime. Therefore, understanding how these regimes emerge, maintain control and adapt to modern pressures is essential for explaining the rise of authoritarianism, assessing its effectiveness and identifying what the future of democracy could be.

The Reasons for People's Dissatisfaction with Democracy

The main reasons for dissatisfaction with democracy are connected to lack of economic growth. For instance, in 2014, Brazil witnessed a decline in their economy as they faced recession. The economy reduced by more than 7%, which led to 13 million people being unemployed. As a result, people were dissatisfied with the government. This pattern of democratic dissatisfaction can be commonly witnessed in Europe. For example, in a survey conducted by French publication *Le Monde* in 2025, 96% of respondents reported feeling dissatisfied or angry about the state of the country. 90% of those respondents recognised that the country was in decline compared to only 75% in a survey that was conducted in 2022.

Additionally, France faced a period of political instability and a situation of crisis after the 2024 legislative election, which resulted in no clear majority for any party. Therefore, it resulted in a 'hung parliament' where none of the three major parties won a majority that was required to form a government. After long rounds of negotiations and compromises, Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron was able to form a minority government. In saying that, there have been 3 motions of 'no confidence' which have been raised by the citizens against the Prime Ministers that Emmanuel had appointed. This included Michel Barnier, Francois Bayrou and Sebastian Lecornu. Barnier and Bayrou's government collapsed due to having budgetary disputes, and Lecornu resigned less than a month after being reappointed, as he faced hostility from the opposition parties.

The Significance of the Paper

This paper explains how tools of authoritarian stability can help us in understanding democratic backsliding by dividing it into three pillars. This includes: authoritarian stability, legitimation, repression and co-optation. The study demonstrates how democratic backsliding is a slow but gradual process which

occurs over several years. Additionally, it underlines different theories about democratic backsliding, explains them in simple terms and explores the criticisms of the theories.

Aims and Goals of the Study

The aims and the goals of this paper are to understand the various ways through which democratic backsliding occurs. This will be done by providing explanations about three different case studies of democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary. The studies will be divided into pillars of authoritarian stability and connected to the theories of democratic backsliding by Waldner and Lust.

Literature Review

The Three Pillars of Authoritarian Stability

Existing literature has identified three pillars of authoritarian stability. They can be referred to as being the three sets of tools authoritarian governments can rely on to stay in power. This section reviews each pillar, beginning with the concept of legitimation.

Legitimation refers to the process of how a government convinces people of its right to rule and that it deserves to be obeyed. It is not about having power - it is about making that power seem justified in the eyes of the people. An authoritarian government seeks legitimation because it is a more cost-effective way of maintaining control. Legitimacy makes the citizens more likely to support the government's action(s) without the need for coercion, which can be costly. This allows the government to mobilise citizens more easily in times of crisis, such as war, economic downturns, or matters of national emergency.

Without legitimation, the relationship between the government and the citizens can become tense and unstable. This is because people would begin questioning authority, disobeying laws, protesting or seeking alternative sources of gaining power and leadership. This loss of trust in the state can lead to political unrest and revolutionary ideas. Legitimation occurs through a long and continuous process, and can develop in several ways, depending on the nature of the regime and society.

People begin seeing a government as legitimate when they feel that it represents and protects them, and delivers on its promises. This can happen through democratic methods, such as elections and rule of law. This in turn provides people with a sense of participation, or through means, such as having strong leadership, traditions, nationalism or strong economic performances. Media, schools, public speeches and ceremonies can contribute to this process, by reinforcing the idea that the government has a rightful place in society. For example, in China, the Communist Party rebuilt its legitimacy by combining reform with strong economic performance and nationalism. This helped the regime regain public support.

Repression

Repression is viewed as one of the defining features of autocratic governments. At its core, repression is the systematic use of fear, punishment and coercion by the state. This is done to silence any opposition

and prevent any challenges to the ruling elite. Repression creates an environment where citizens self censor, avoid sensitive topics and stay away from activism out of fear. Repression operates in obvious and subtle ways. Regimes can violently suppress protests, arrest opposition leaders, close media that speak out against them, dissolve political parties and imprison activists. These actions establish power and deter people from engaging in oppositional activities. However, this can have negative consequences. For instance, international condemnation or popular unrest.

To avoid this, repression can occur through more subtle methods, such as secret police, digital surveillance, public surveillance, for instance cameras on the streets, travel restrictions and routine harassment. These aspects contribute to a climate of fear and uncertainty. This one of the most effective forms of control as the state no longer needs to intervene themselves as people can intervene for each other. It is important to note that repression alone cannot provide stability, as it is expensive and difficult to maintain over time. An example of instability is in Belarus, Europe where president Lukashenko had maintained power through strong repression. After 2020, protests occurred in Belarus where security forces arrested thousands of people, injured the demonstrators and jailed political opponents.

Co-optation

Co-optation is a political strategy where a ruling regime brings powerful individuals or groups into its system in order to secure their loyalty and prevent them from becoming opponents. This can include military leaders, business elites, religious authorities and political rivals. There are several methods in terms of how co-optation works. One common method is patronage. This is where the government distributes jobs, contracts and economic benefits to reward loyalty. Another way is elite inclusion, where critics or rivals are given positions in government, advisory bodies or parliament. This makes them feel powerful whilst limiting their ability to effect genuine change in a country.

Additionally, regimes could use controlled political participation. Thus, allowing limited opposition parties or elections to appear democratic. However, they are carefully managed, so that the true power never shifts. On another level, co-optation can take the form of corruption and favouritism, where individuals are allowed to accumulate wealth and influence as long as they remain obedient and supportive of the regime. This creates unity among elites and maintains regime stability.

A successful autocracy carefully balances different people, so no single group becomes strong enough to threaten the leadership. By bringing all key players to the system, the ruling elite keeps control and avoids destabilising power struggles. An example of this can be witnessed in Russia where rich business leaders are kept close by offering them power and protection, as long as they remain loyal to the regime.

Theories of Democratic Backsliding

As the paper has reviewed the three pillars of authoritarian stability, it will now review the existing arguments about democratic backsliding. The main contribution of this article is to explain how scholarship on authoritarian stability can contribute to our understanding about democratic backsliding, by using case studies of Poland and Hungary.

There are five broad theories of democratic backsliding. First, agentic theories emphasise the role of political elites and powerful leaders, focusing on how these individuals can erode democratic values whilst in power. In contrast, arguments related to political culture highlight that the emergence, or conversely, decline of democracy is related to the values and beliefs of a society. Under this account, societies move towards democracy when the prevailing culture accepts democratic norms.

However, these explanations have been criticised for being too static. Cultural change is gradual, and therefore the explanations struggle to pinpoint rapid political change. The third group of theories focuses on different types of political institutions and how institutional design affects the risk of democratic backsliding. For instance, are presidential or parliamentary systems more vulnerable to democratic backsliding? The fourth group of theories examines the political economy conditions of a country, such as inequality and wealth. The final group of theories focuses on how interactions between different political coalitions, such as those based on class, race, religion, or ethnicity, can affect democratic backsliding.

Agentic (Leader Based Theories)

The agentic theory of democratic backsliding proposed by JJ Linz in 1978 stated that democracy weakens due to the choices that are made by powerful people. For example, leaders and political elites. According to this view, democracy does not collapse by accident. It is slowly weakened when leaders concentrate power and manipulate rules for partisan gains. This includes silencing the media, controlling the courts and pressuring opposition parties. This demonstrates that even strong democracies can decline if leaders stop respecting democratic values. In other words, agentic theory explains democracy fails not because it was destined to, but because the people in power choose to weaken it.

Political Culture Theories

The cultural theory of democratic backsliding argues that democracy depends on the values, beliefs and attitudes of society. It argues that some cultures naturally support democracy, while others make it harder for democracy to survive. According to this theory, democracy works best when people believe in ideas, such as individual freedom, tolerance, equality and open debate. This theory believes that when societies move away from traditional values and start valuing personal choice and political freedoms, they are more likely to demand democratic rule. However, critics argue that this theory oversimplifies reality, as culture alone does not create or destroy democracy. It ignores power, institutions and elite manipulation, and unfairly blames citizens instead of leaders for any failure.

Political Institutional Theory

This theory explains how political institutions can make democracy more or less vulnerable to backsliding. Earlier scholars believed that the type of system a country adopts - presidential or parliamentary, directly affects whether democracy survives. Parliamentary systems were viewed as safer, while presidential systems were blamed for democratic failure. However, research by Jose Cheibub illustrated that presidential systems were usually chosen by countries emerging from military rule. On the other hand,

parliamentary systems are more common after civilian dictatorships. Countries that are progressing out of military regimes can already face unstable political conditions. Thus, their democracies are more likely to fail regardless of the system they choose. This means that presidential systems are not inherently harmful, they simply tend to exist in riskier environments. Once this is taken into account, the assumed link between presidentialism and democratic collapse disappears.

Political Economy Theories

The theory links economic conditions to the strength of democracy. They focus on the overall wealth of the country, distribution of wealth, the sources of income and short-term economic performance. These theories investigate whether economic factors can help create democracy, or mainly determine whether it survives once established. Research about income levels has highlighted mixed results. Some studies indicate that richer countries are less likely to see democratic collapse, however income alone does not guarantee democracy. Therefore, economics alone cannot fully explain democratic backsliding. Poor or unequal societies may be more vulnerable. In saying that, democracy's decline usually results from a mix of economic weakness, political institutions and elite behaviour, not simply money.

Social Structures and Political Coalitions

Theories of social structure and political coalitions explain how differences within society, such as class, wealth, ethnicity or religion can affect democracy. Unlike approaches that treat citizens as similar, these theories focus on how groups form, compete and cooperate politically. Leaders need support from certain groups to stay in power which can include military leaders, key officials, or ordinary citizens. On another level, how coalitions are built can affect political stability. High reliance on private rewards can breed corruption while certain public policies might create economic instability. This theory illustrates that democracy depends not just on laws or values but on how social groups interact, the alliances they form, and the resources that are exchanged between leaders and citizens. Effective coalitions can strengthen democracy. On the other hand, fragile or exclusionary ones can make it vulnerable to breakdown.

Methodology

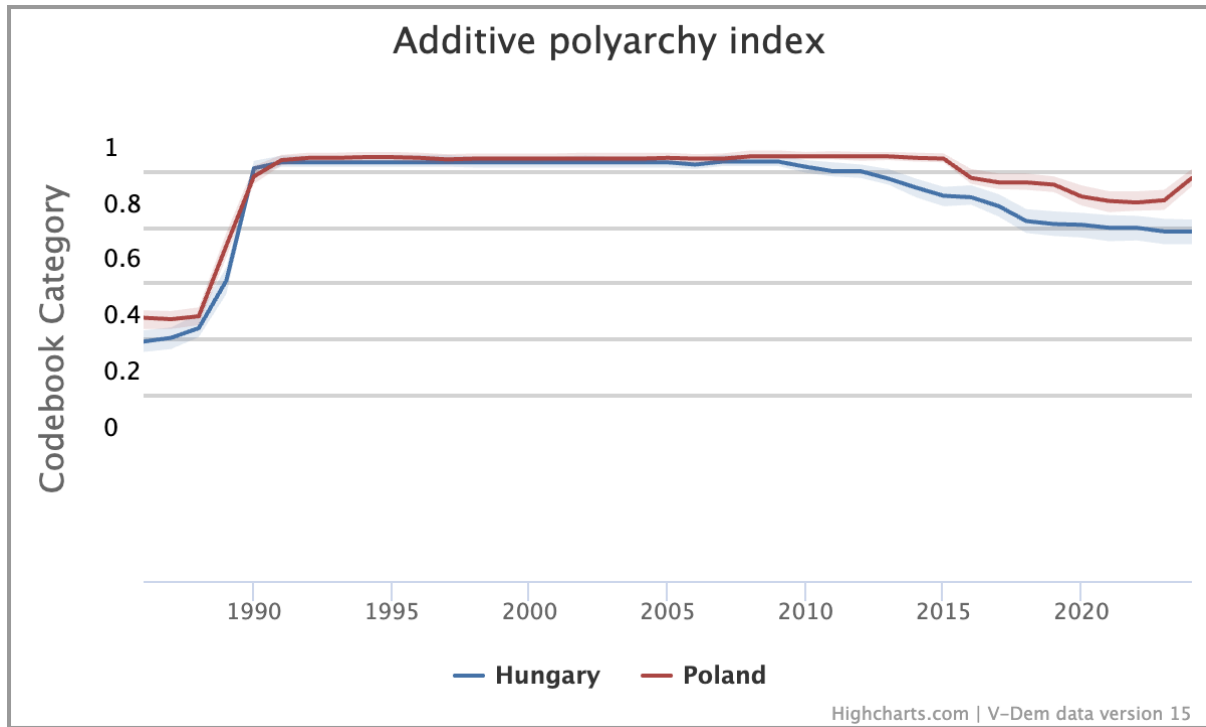


Figure 1: Measuring Electoral Democracy in Hungary and Poland

This paper conducts a most-likely case study of Poland and Hungary. This means that it is a most-likely case to probe whether mechanisms of authoritarian resilience can help us understand democratic backsliding, as both countries are standard cases of backsliding. This is illustrated in the figure above, which shows the polyarchy index of Hungary and Poland from the 1990s to the 2020s. This is taken from the V-Dem dataset Polyarchy and it captures the amount in terms of how much the electoral principle of democracy is achieved. This is where leaders are held accountable and responsive to the public through competitive elections (V-Dem, n.d.).

The data illustrates that while the condition of democracy has improved since the fall of Communism, Hungary suffered a downfall after Viktor Orban came to power in 2005. Similarly, Poland had undergone a decline after Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PIS) came to power in 2015. This demonstrates that the downfall which was suffered by Hungary is a lot greater than the one that was endured by Poland. Additionally, the conditions in Poland have improved since the 2020s, whilst Hungary has continued to decline.

A polyarchy can be defined as a dataset that captures the extent to which the electoral principle of democracy is achieved. According to V-Dem’s episodes of regime transformation dataset, Poland was downgraded from a liberal democracy to an electoral democracy from 2015-2016. This pinpointed a downfall in the democracy of Poland, as during this time the PIS party came into power and several incidents of democratic backsliding had occurred.

Democracy in Hungary suffered a downfall, as it moved from a liberal democracy to an electoral autocracy in 2017. This is due to the several cases of democratic backsliding by the Orban government. This included attacks on independent institutions, suppression of opposition and co-operation of elites.

Liberal democracy: a liberal democracy is a political system where elections matter. In saying that, individual rights, freedoms and checks about power that protect individuals from government overreach matter as well. The government cannot simply do whatever they want since strong institutions can limit its power.

Electoral democracy: an electoral democracy is a political system where free and fair elections exist. However, many other individual rights and freedoms are missing. Strong institutions are heavily controlled or influenced by the government, so there is no one to keep the powers of the government in check. The data indicates similar levels of income in both Hungary and Poland which makes them economically similar.

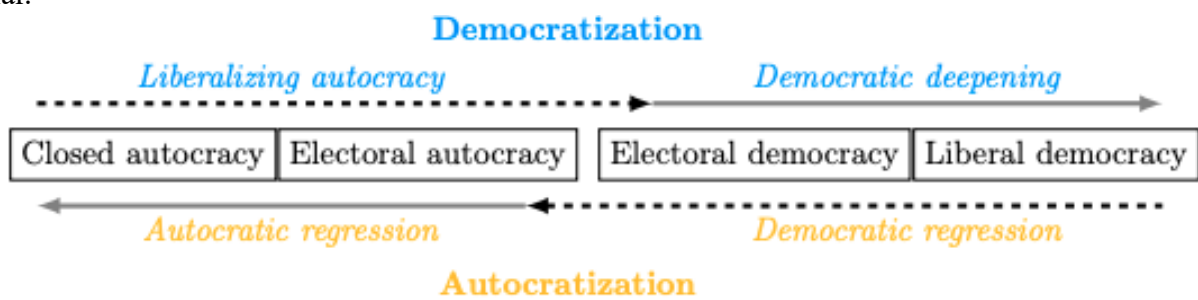


Figure 2: Conceptualizing episodes of regime transformation

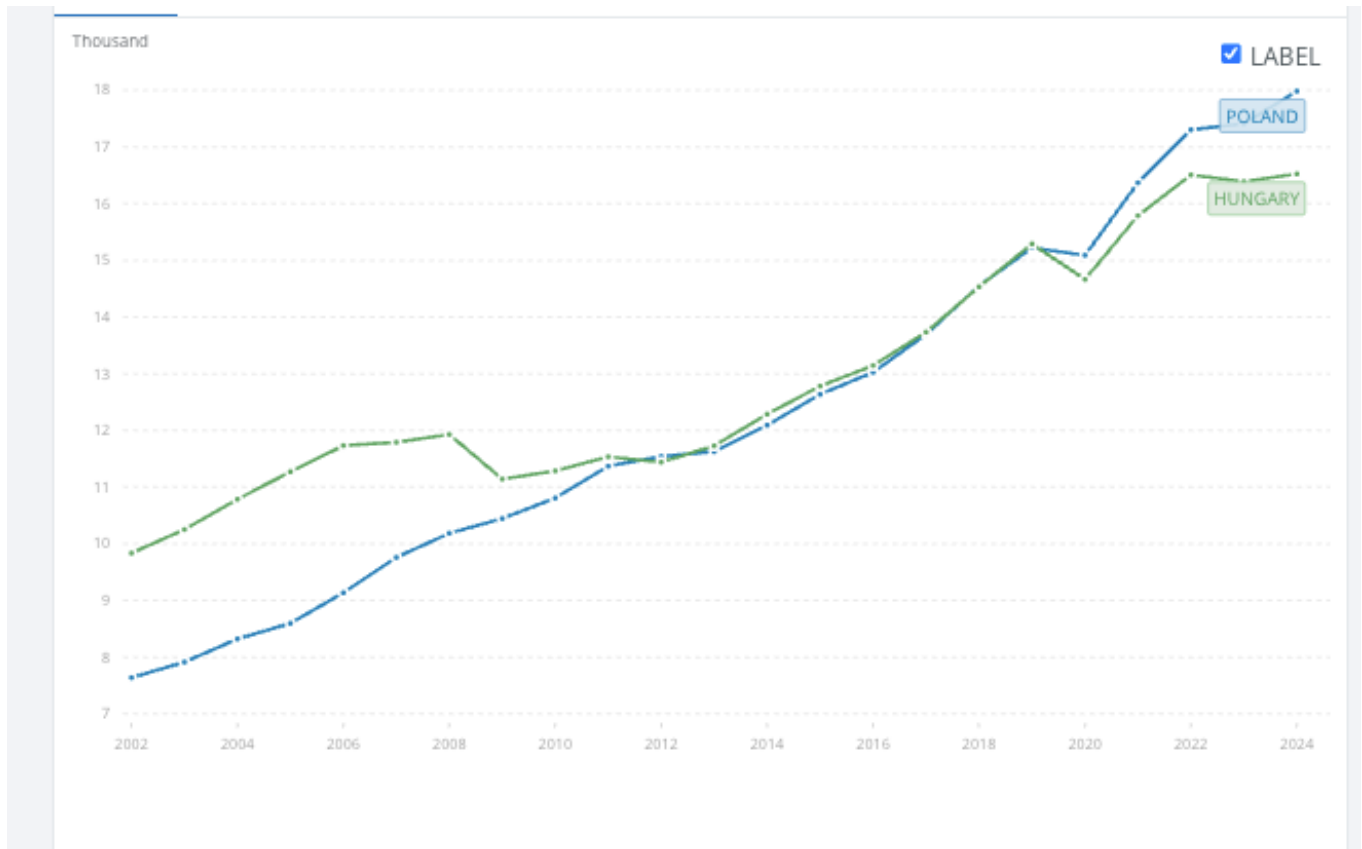


Figure 3: GDP Per Capita (constant 2015 USD) 2002-2024, Poland and Hungary. The graph illustrates similar levels of income in the two countries

Findings and Discussion

Constitutional crisis in Poland

In Poland, the judges are chosen by the lower house and to be sworn in, by the president. In 2015, the PiS won a majority in parliament and the candidate that was supported by them became president. This meant that the PiS controlled the presidency and the parliament. In saying that, they did not control the constitutional tribunal which is the highest court in Poland, and the court that was mainly chosen by the previous center had resigned from the Civic Platform (PO) party and they could still block many of the new parties' laws.

Before the elections, in October 2015, they had appointed 5 judges to the tribunal. However, after the PiS had won the presidential election, the new president - Andrzej Duda, refused to swear in the judges and the PiS appointed their own judges instead of them. Three of the judges were legally due to replace judges whose terms were ending. It was important to note that two of them were chosen too early and were supposed to be filled in after the government took power. The constitutional tribunal ruled that the first 3 judges appointed by the center left party were valid, however the last two were invalid. So the three judges were supposed to be ones by the PO and two judges should have been by the PiS.

The PiS ignored the ruling and said that the decision by the court does not have any legal force, and is not legally binding. In addition, the PiS changed the law to appoint all five PiS judges which provided a strong hold and position to the constitutional tribunal. This is a great example of legitimation as the PiS did not justify their actions by saying that they want to control the courts. Instead, they wrapped an unconstitutional move in an argument which sounded legal, technical and even democratic. By doing this, they framed an unconstitutional power grab as a lawful reform. This falls under Waldner and Lust's coalitional theory of democratic backsliding, as the PiS used the crisis to install loyalist judges. This was done in order to strengthen their coalition which ensured that the tribunal would not block any laws that benefited their coalition.

Hungary: Repression

The CEU was a university founded by George Soros and was based in Budapest. Orban's government viewed Soros as a political enemy and began portraying CEU as a threat to national sovereignty.

In 2017, the Orban government passed a new higher education law which introduced requirements that are designed specifically to make the Central European University's (CEU) operation illegal. The new law required all non-EU affiliated universities to have an agreement between Hungary and the university's home country, and the university to have a campus in its home country. This would require CEU to open a campus in the United States.

Education is a state level competence in the U.S. and not a federal one. The state of New York was ready to sign an agreement. However, Hungary insisted on a federal treaty, knowing that the U.S. federal

government had no legal reasons to negotiate one. Due to this, Hungary refused to sign any agreement with the state of New York. The CEU had to move to Vienna because of this reason. This is a clear case of repression through lawfare. This is because the law specifically targeted the CEU which was viewed as an enemy by the Orban government for promoting liberal values. This highlights Waldner and Lust's agentic theory of democratic backsliding, as Orban and his personal antagonism towards Soros played a pivotal role. Thus, this was a planned action by the executive aimed at weakening independent institutions and consolidating power.

Cooptation

Nepszabedsag was Hungary's largest independent newspaper publication. It was historically affiliated with left leaning politics, and was known for investigative reporting and criticism of the Orban government. In October 2016, the newspaper was abruptly shut down and employees were told by email that operations had ceased immediately. The official reason given was financial losses. In saying that, journalists and critics argued that it was politically motivated and designed to silence a critical voice which was present during election time. Shortly after the shutdown, it was acquired by business figures and oligarchs that were loyal to Orban and the newspaper publication has not resumed publishing since then.

In 2018, hundreds of media outlets including television, print and online news were donated to the Central European Press and Media Foundation, which is controlled by rich elites with close ties to the Orban government. This is a case of co-optation, as hundreds of outlets were merged under the foundation and by consolidating the media under loyalists, the government co-opted previously independent institutions and turned them into instruments of political messaging.

Conclusion

Democratic backsliding has been an issue for concern because it reveals how fragile democratic institutions can gradually be weakened from within. Rather than collapsing abruptly, democracies erode through slow and gradual changes. Democratic backsliding has become increasingly concerning in a world where we are increasingly witnessing dissatisfaction with democracy, and an increasing number of autocracies and weak democracies.

This paper has pinpointed how tools of authoritarian stability can help us understand democratic backsliding by dividing the tools into three pillars. These three pillars are: legitimation through which a government tries to convince people that it is rightful to rule. Repression refers to a method by which the government tries to silence critics by using fear and violence. Co-optation which is a political strategy to make powerful individuals and organisations feel loyal to the government. To illustrate the argument, three cases of Poland and Hungary were explained and divided into the three pillars.

In terms of future research, people can conduct a study about how democracy in Poland was able to recover while Hungary still remains in decline.

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