

The Boiling Frog Paradox or How Democracies Slowly Die. A Deep Analysis on Democratic Erosion and Autocratization in Latin America

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Introduction and Conceptual Framework

In the 1990s, Argentine political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell theorized about a particular political animal within the ecosystem of global transitions, *delegative democracies*. These emerged in contexts of deep structural crises and were characterized by a meager development of traditional democratic institutions, coexisting with deeply rooted practices of particularism, clientelism, and low state bureaucratic density. Despite these anomalies, O'Donnell maintained a relative two-faced optimism regarding transitions in Latin America: on the one hand, he foresaw few possibilities for a classic authoritarian regression in most countries of the region; and, on the other hand, he assumed that the different institutional configurations adopted by these political regimes still belonged to the genus of democratic systems, even if they were far from what traditional theory catalogs as an institutionalized polyarchy.

However, as we enter the first decades of the 21st century, Guillermo O'Donnell's predictive and analytical premises are under severe scrutiny. Multiple Latin American democracies have not only stalled in their consolidation but are undergoing explicit processes of authoritarian regression. The crucial aspect of this contemporary phenomenon is that these transitions toward authoritarianism differ radically from the institutional breakdowns (the classic *breakdowns*) that plagued the region during the 20th century through coups d'état perpetrated by the Armed Forces or through violent revolutionary insurrections.

While past ruptures operated exogenously and traumatically, interrupting the constitutional order overnight, 21st-century regressions occur from within, through institutional channels, making use of small normative, procedural, and cumulative alterations that synchronously end up distorting the essence of democracy. These processes are formally defined as *democratic erosions*. Democratic erosion is a continuous process of slight institutional modifications through which the fundamental mechanisms of checks and balances against political power are systematically but imperceptibly demolished. Among these

mechanisms, the division of powers, civil liberties, the Rule of Law, and the very capacity of the opposition or political dissidence to articulate stand out. The unequivocal result of this dynamic is an asymmetric concentration of prerogatives and resources in the hands of the Executive branch. As Lührmann and Lindberg rightly point out, contemporary democratic erosion is shrouded in formal legality, these are slow changes in the institutional structure, shielded by procedurally valid legal forms, but intended in substance to undermine substantial democratic legality and legitimacy.

This scenario raises urgent theoretical questions that this book seeks to answer, What causes this change of matrix in regime regression? What exogenous and endogenous factors influence these processes of widespread democratic erosion in the region? What are the precise tools used by actors to carry out autocratization? What institutional or cultural elements impede, appease, or act as retaining dikes against these transformations? Do Latin American democracies possess endogenous tools to defend themselves? And, fundamentally, how is it possible to strengthen existing institutions in the face of this new cycle of autocratic regression? This work offers answers through a comparative analysis of institutional factors, elite interaction, and the geopolitical influence of external actors.

Democracy, authoritarianism, and the Intermediate Zones

The Classic Dichotomy and the Insufficiency of the Schumpeterian Approach

There was a period in political science where the demarcation between democratic and non-democratic regimes possessed sharp boundaries. In the mid-20th century, Joseph Schumpeter consolidated a strictly procedural and minimalist approach, defining democracy as an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the popular vote. This vision reduces democracy to the mechanism of the electoral contest.

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However, contemporary empirical evidence demonstrates that elections, on their own, are a necessary but drastically insufficient condition. Non-democratic regimes regularly convene electoral processes in their territories; nonetheless, under no rigorous methodological criteria can they be considered free democracies or polyarchies. Giovanni Sartori warned about this distortion by pointing out that within non-democratic regimes, elections fulfill an ontologically opposite function to that of democracies. Instead of being a mechanism of institutionalized uncertainty and accountability, authoritarian elections operate as a veneer of formal legitimization before the international community and, internally, serve as instruments to measure the degree of social control and real or coerced support for the dominant regime.

To overcome the limitations of electoral minimalism, authors such as Andreas Schedler, David Collier, and Steven Levitsky proposed to conceptualize political regimes not as watertight, discrete categories, but along a spatial and multidimensional *continuum*. At one ideal pole lies liberal democracy in its highest institutional expression; at the opposite pole sits full or totalitarian authoritarianism. The most complex analytical space lies in the intermediate transition zone, a gray territory inhabited by hybrid regimes that blend, in ambiguous ways, democratic and authoritarian traits.

The Multidimensional Structure of Liberal Democracy

Contemporary liberal democracy is the historical result of the assembly of two distinct philosophical and political traditions: classic democracy (which answers the question of *who* is the legitimate holder of power) and liberalism (which answers the question of *how* that power must be exercised). As Bobbio and Sartori explain, democracy resolves the ownership of sovereignty through the majority principle, but liberalism imposes strict constitutional limits on that sovereignty to protect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the individual.

In the historical experience of 5th-century B.C. Athens, liberty was understood in eminently collective and political terms. Benjamin Constant, in his famous distinction between the liberty of the ancients and that of the moderns, demonstrated that ancient liberty consisted of direct participation in the decisions of the *polis*, which implied the complete submission of the individual to the sovereignty of the community. In contrast, modern democracy, liberal in nature, institutes a radical separation between the public sphere and the private sphere. The liberty of the moderns guarantees a space of individual autonomy where the State cannot intervene, protected by the rule of law. In an authentic liberal democracy, no one, not even an overwhelming electoral majority, possesses

unconditioned or absolute power. The principle of the majority stops where the rights of minorities begin.

Institutionally, the limitation of power materializes through three fundamental architectural axes:

- **The division of powers and checks and balances:** Derived from the republican tradition, it seeks to fragment state power into organs with different sources of legitimacy and temporality. The judicial review exercised by an independent Judiciary is the ultimate guarantee of this design, preventing the majority impulses of the Legislative or Executive from violating the constitutional text.
- **Accountability:** Operating both vertically (rulers periodically submit to citizen scrutiny in free and fair elections) and horizontally (independent institutional agencies with legal capacity to control, sanction, and review the acts of the Executive branch). Alternation and limitations on presidential re-election are coadjuvant pieces that prevent the patrimonialization of the State.
- **The sphere of public opinion and transparency:** Citizen oversight demands absolute publicity of government acts and free access to public information. Without transparency, the capacity of citizens to monitor elites is nullified. This requires the full validity of freedom of expression, diversity of information sources, and investigative journalism free from government coercion.

Robert Dahl synthesized this institutional framework under the operational concept of *polyarchy*, which requires the strict and simultaneous fulfillment of two dimensions (participation and opposition/public contestation) through minimum guarantees, freedom of association, freedom of expression, the right to vote, eligibility for public service, the right of political leaders to compete for popular support, diversity and accessibility of independent sources of information, free and periodic elections, and institutions that ensure public policies genuinely depend on citizen preferences.

The Confines of Democracy: Hybrid and Delegative Regimes

At the boundaries of polyarchy lie regimes that retain the electoral component but lack the liberal-republican framework. Schedler defines *electoral democracies* as systems that manage competitive elections but fail to institutionalize vital dimensions such as the rule of law, the integrity of public officials, and deep public deliberation. Their precarious institutional quality places them permanently on the threshold of authoritarianism.

Within this category, the *delegative democracies* described by O'Donnell exhibit exacerbated hyper-majority features. Whoever is elected to the presidency considers themselves

empowered to govern the country as they see fit, constrained only by factual power relations and by the formal temporary limits of their mandate. In the mind of the delegative leader, horizontal control institutions are perceived as bureaucratic hindrances or opposition trenches that obstruct the direct execution of the “popular will” of which he institutes himself as the sole depositary. Horizontal accountability disappears, and only vertical accountability of an electoral nature subsists.

This pathology connects directly with *populism*, understood from Cas Mudde’s ideational approach as a “thin-centered ideology” that conceives society as ontologically divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”. Populism lacks a dense doctrinal corpus, allowing it to attach itself to both left-wing and right-wing narratives. Its operational core lies in the logic of polarization and radical confrontation, the political opposition ceases to be a legitimate adversary with whom to negotiate and becomes a moral “enemy” to be neutralized or extirpated from the political community. Once in power, populist leaders deploy dynamics of extreme personalization of the regime, colonize the public administration, and promote reforms oriented toward the hegemony of the Executive branch, opening wide the doors to autocratization processes.

The Autocratization Process and the Toolkit

Conceptualizing the Autocratic Transit

Following Morlino (1985), the change occurs at the level of the regime itself that is, within the rules of the game (Morlino, 1985, p. 44). When speaking of space for public contestation and political participation in the government selection process, we are making a direct reference to the fact that a democratic regime is judged by two dimensions: the existence of political competition or the possibility of opposition, and the scope of participation (Morlino, 1985, 87).

Therefore, autocratization systematically closes both channels competition and participation. Regarding how it changes, the transformation is continuous and slow. It is not necessarily peaceful, but it does not imply the high degrees of violence associated with a coup d’état or a revolution, which explains the difficulty in detecting it in time. It is worth noting that a full autocracy does utilize violence to remain in power, repressing the opposition and violating human rights, as seen in the grim example of the Maduro regime. One crucial point, unlike a coup d’état or a revolution, this does not happen on a specific day; there is no death certificate, no set date, and no anniversary. At the same time, the process is non-linear, usually full of contradictions, advances, and retreats.

The case of Venezuela is a clear example showing that democracy does not simply end with a coup d’état; rather, it undergoes a process of “slow death”, almost imperceptible at first, but by the time it becomes obvious, it is already too late. Venezuela displays the path from democracy to a flawed democracy, followed by the transition to a hybrid regime, along a road that ends in a closed, full autocracy. Elections turn into an immense theatrical play where transparency and competition no longer exist; they become electoral facades. Oversight institutions and the division of powers are reduced to mere hindrances to the ruler, and consequently, they must be substituted or co-opted. The autocratization process continues its drift.

The Contemporary Autocrat’s “Toolkit”

As previously stated, 21st-century autocrats do not come to power through a coup d’état or a revolution. In many cases, they utilize democratic tools to gain office, and from that position, they initiate the institutional deterioration that, step by step, leads them to an autocratic government. Not all of them succeed, but their instruments are similar. Recognizing them requires structuring an alarm system that allows us to identify them before it is too late. These tools can be classified into four areas that open avenues for the abuse of power and discretion: a) resistance to accountability and the system of checks and balances; b) encroachment upon electoral rules: modifications and changes in the rules of the electoral game that alter transparency and free competition; c) the reduction of the space for public contestation; and d) the abuse or distortion of the constitutional and paraconstitutional powers of the Executive branch.

In this manner, the autocrat’s toolkit consists of:

1) Resistance to accountability and the system of checks and balances:

1.1 Executive encroachment upon the judiciary:

- Verbal harassment
- Spurious appointments, and control over access
- Open persecution

1.2 Executive encroachment upon the legislature:

- Reforms, changes in composition, and changes in the method of election.
- Verbal harassment.
- Persecution of opposition members of the legislature.
- Stripping of functions and/or budget.
- Closure.

2) Encroachment upon electoral rules: Modifications and changes in the rules of the electoral game that alter transparency and free competition.

3) Reduction of the space for public contestation:

3.1 Restrictions on freedom of the press and expression:

- Advertising funds (arbitrary distribution of official media placement).
- Censorship.
- Expropriation.
- Closure.
- Verbal harassment.
- Persecution of journalists.

3.2 Restrictions on civil society:

- Criminalization of protests, and arbitrary detentions.
- Repression of opposition protests.
- Closure of NGOs.
- Persecution, and harassment of civil society leaders.

3.3 Restrictions on political parties:

- Persecution of opposition leaders.
- Various types of restrictions to run in elections.

4) Abuse or distortion of the constitutional and para-constitutional powers of the Executive branch.

- Systematic use of instruments such as decrees or similar mechanisms, and emergency laws.
- State of exception.
- Constitutional amendments to allow re-election.
- Arbitrary use of State resources, expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus, and inflation driven by increased public spending.
- Opacity, and distortion of information.
- Polarizing discourse.
- Co-optation of security forces, army, police, and intelligence services.

These indicators present us with warning signs. The end of the road is an autocratic regime where a system of checks and balances no longer exists, replaced by the sole will of the ruler or the ruling party. It is a regime without accountability, in which protests are criminalized, political party pluralism does not exist, and opposition leaders are persecuted, imprisoned, or driven into exile. Freedom of the press is severed, with many journalists losing their lives in its exercise and defense; NGOs that do not align with the government are persecuted; the law is made and unmade according to the whim of the ruler or party; and State resources are used to reward followers and punish enemies. The demonization of the other as an enemy of the nation, anti-patriotic, a traitor to the homeland, or an imperialist agent is commonplace. Therefore, when facing a ruler who persecutes, imprisons, or cancels the opposition (including forced exile), limits or restricts freedom of expression, denies the political legitimacy of the adversary

and various forms of opposition (including NGOs), erodes and hollows out institutions, and refuses to account for their actions while battering accountability institutions, regardless of that government's democratic origins, we can state that we are facing an autocratic government.

Having described the "toolkit" of autocracies, let us examine how it functions in reality.

Liberal democracy, as noted in the previous chapter, implies political participation and the capacity for opposition. Freedom of expression is essential to exercise any form of opposition within democracies.

The cited V-Dem report indicates that by 2022, 35 countries recorded severe deficiencies in freedom of expression. A decade prior, that figure was just 7 countries. Government censorship of the media worsened in 47 countries. Government repression of civil society organizations aggravated in 37 countries, and the quality of elections deteriorated in 30 countries.

Reporters Without Borders, in its 2024 report, records similar data. Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela occupy the lowest ranks, followed closely by Guatemala. The report also sounds the alarm regarding the deterioration of press freedom in Argentina, Peru, and El Salvador. A striking piece of data, the report features five categories to classify the different countries of the region, ranging from good (highest possible), fairly good, problematic, difficult, to very serious (worst state). No country in the region falls into the "good" category, and only two, Canada and Suriname, are deemed "fairly good".

What tools are used to restrict freedom of expression? One possibility consists of directly attacking journalism, whether through social media, public speeches, threats, or even the deployment of physical violence against journalists. Another available tool is the legal harassment of the profession or mass media outlets.

Legal harassment includes a myriad of alternatives through which the free exercise of the press is conditioned, such as filing lawsuits for offenses against the honor of various public officials. Another variation is legal persecution through the opening of court cases or investigations for alleged crimes or tax irregularities. Finally, another tool used to judicially constrain the press consists of fines and sanctions imposed through agencies designed to regulate the operation of mass media.

Regimes undergoing autocratization also tend to change the rules of the game by altering or modifying the conditions under which mass media outlets operate. These variations also affect licenses granted to use the radio spectrum, signal broadcasting,

or the acquisition or importation of supplies necessary for media operations.

Alongside the contraction of the free press, there is a considerable increase in official state media and media outlets friendly to the administration. In both cases, information channels are used for regime propaganda purposes.

Finally, emerging autocracies have economic tools at their disposal to restrict freedom of expression. Among these are ordinary economic sanctions, which can take the form of fines for non-compliance with norms, regulations, or codes governing journalistic work and the operation of mass media. Another form of conditioning occurs through the arbitrary distribution of official state advertising funds. In this way, specific media outlets and journalists, usually close to the administration, benefit from large sums of money, whereas other actors are deprived of advertising for strictly political reasons that have nothing to do with audience ratings.

The decline in freedom of expression and information sources is not the sole explanatory factor of autocratization processes.

An additional indicator, which is often absent from measurements of freedom of expression, involves restrictions on academic and intellectual activity. This translates into the arbitrary arrests of academics, the closure of universities or academic chairs, or the conditioning of the proper functioning of educational institutions.

What has been expressed so far can be illustrated with concrete examples regarding restrictions on press freedom and freedom of expression:

- **Advertising funds (pauta)**

- “The AGN questioned the distribution of official advertising”
- “The Bolivian Government clashes with the press ‘that plays politics’”

- **Censorship**

- “Bolivia seeks to impose fines for insulting Evo Morales on social networks”

- **Expropriation**

- “Venezuela could be left without an opposition channel”

- **Closure**

- “Rafael Correa closes a score of media outlets”
- “NGOs and journalists protest the ‘systematic closure’ of media in Venezuela”

- **Verbal harassment**

- “How Chávez attacks the press”
- “Chávez called CNN journalists ‘idiots’ ”

- **Persecution of journalists**

- “Evo Morales’ war against the press, journalists leave their jobs due to Government pressure”

Another relevant aspect of the capacity for opposition involves civil society organizations and, principally, the freedoms associated with the possibility of demonstrating against incumbent governments. Regarding this final point, a highly explicit indicator of autocratization processes is the criminalization of social protest. How does this phenomenon occur?

In the first instance, it is possible to observe an increased presence of security forces in street protests, along with situations of arbitrary detentions or disproportionate repression.

Here too, one can see how verbal harassment functions as a significant constraint on social protest. A clear example is labeling any demonstration contrary to the administration as a “coup attempt” or “anti-democratic”. These disqualifications are consistent with one of the elements that Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) point to as the beginning of democratic “deaths”. By deeming the opposition non-democratic, the essence of democracy is attacked, given that democracy consists of broad political participation and the capacity for opposition through the appropriate institutions. The possibility of dissenting, or displaying disagreement with the policies implemented by a government, does not *per se* imply what is called “disloyal opposition”. Juan Linz defines disloyal opposition as that “which questions the existence of the regime and wants to change it” (1991, p. 57).

Another element to highlight involves the legal constraints imposed by the government to restrict or discourage street protest. These measures range from requiring protest permits to shifting the economic costs of security operations onto the organizers. In any case, the effect remains the same: the diminishment or reduction of opposition to the regime.

The restriction on dissent is also visible in the attack, persecution, disparagement, and legal harassment targeted at cultural figures who voice criticisms of the administration. Behind all the mentioned examples, one can observe how pluralism is systematically limited, an indicator of a democratic regime’s transition toward authoritarianism.

A similar situation occurs regarding political parties. Autocracies tend to undermine political competition by introducing measures that hinder the emergence of new political forces. What type of provisions can be considered an example of this?

On one hand, there are the conditions necessary to establish a new political party. This applies when the requirements to create a new political force at the subnational or national level go beyond what is reasonable (which can be established comparatively against the requirements mandated in other countries of the region, or through a substantive change in the number of signatures or endorsements required to operate).

Another way to intervene in the party system is through laws regulating party financing or provisions distributing public funds to political forces. In cases where political party financing is exclusively private, interventions can take the form of limits on fundraising, either by capping the amount of funds an individual or institution can contribute or by introducing additional requirements that contributors must fulfill. If financing is mixed or public, any change in the criteria for fund distribution alters electoral competition. It is worth recalling that incumbent governments always retain the ability to campaign discreetly using public funds through public policies and other acts of government.

Democracies also begin to traverse the slow path toward authoritarianism when economic sanctions or disqualifications are imposed on candidates or parties for “alleged” non-compliance with current electoral laws. In these cases, these restrictions go hand in hand with government control over the bodies responsible for ensuring electoral competition.

Additionally, changes in the rules of political competition must be mentioned. These modifications include alterations to electoral districts designed to expand the government’s vote share to the detriment of the opposition. This practice is technically termed “gerrymandering”. Changes may also be observed in the vote thresholds required to enter the allocation of seats in proportional systems. High thresholds tend to reduce the number of parties and distort the true nature of proportional representation.

Parallel to the restrictions on political parties and modifications to the electoral system are the provisions that affect candidacies for public office. There are limitations or disqualifications that are more or less common across the distinct democracies of the region and the world. For example, individuals deprived of their liberty, those who have committed crimes related to the exercise of public office resulting in temporary or lifelong disqualification, or ecclesiastical and Armed Forces personnel. In some countries, what is called a “clean slate” (*ficha limpia*) is added, meaning that individuals submitting candidacies must not have any convictions for corruption or other crimes committed in the exercise of public official duties.

There are other types of restrictions that can be manipulated to the detriment of viable opposition candidacies. For instance,

in some cases, the Judiciary is utilized as a tool to imprison opposition figures through opaque judicial cases. Furthermore, this tool can prove sufficient if the legislation regulating candidacies prevents any citizen from running for elective office if they have an active court case.

There is also the intervention of Electoral Justice or similar bodies intended to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process regarding candidacies. In these instances, objections or inconsistencies typically emerge in the documentation required to run for elective office. Here we find what Murillo, Levitsky, and Brinks (2021) termed the “selective enforcement” of institutions. This practice consists of observing current legislation discretionally based on whether or not it suits those who possess the capacity to enforce the regulations. A common example of this praxis is seen in requirements linked to a candidate’s legal domicile. In many cases, political careers lead representatives to move from smaller districts or provinces toward others where they have greater growth opportunities or where their candidacy is more viable. To do so, they establish a legal domicile in the new district to comply with the regulation without the due time required, or simply as a phantom address.

The autocrat’s toolkit is completed by encroachments upon the Legislative Power, the Judicial Power, and other institutions of government.

Juan Linz (1997) defines the presidential system based on two elements, rigidity and dual legitimacy. This latter element implies the existence of two branches of government derived from the popular will. Facing a potential government crisis, neither the Legislative nor the Executive branch is in a position to set itself up as the sole voice of popular sovereignty. At the same time, rigidity, understood as the constitutional delimitation of mandates, makes the resolution of government crises complex and generates incentives for democratic breakdowns. Fortunately, democratic breakdowns via military coups have become rare. Nonetheless, tensions between branches remain active.

The distinct constitutions of Latin America usually include a series of mechanisms designed to resolve these disputes. On one hand, the most frequent tool is impeachment. The purpose of this device is the removal from office of the president, vice president, ministers, or judges of the higher courts of justice. In some cases, there is a popular recall of the mandate, which allows for the removal of the public official through mechanisms involving some form of popular referendum. While Impeachment originates within the Legislative branch, the popular recall of the mandate has its genesis within the citizenry.

There are few cases that authorize the Executive branch to dissolve Congress for the purpose of calling new elections.

This procedure is colloquially known as “cross-death” (*muerte cruzada*). However, one of the tools employed by autocrats to subvert democracy consists of advancing against the Legislative branch. Just as noted regarding journalism and the political opposition in general, the most evident tool is harassment and verbal abuse toward its members. Other forms of violence also exist, such as the militarization of the legislative chamber.

At the constitutional level, autocratization processes register modifications in the composition of the Legislative branch and its election mechanisms, with the aim of bending the opposition and evading any control mechanism over the Executive branch.

Finally, there is an extreme indicator that signals a democratic breakdown: the shutdown of the Legislative branch. As noted, closing Congress to call new elections is an unusual mechanism in presidential systems generally and in the region specifically. Hence, the closure of the Legislative branch is an unmistakable sign of autocratization.

But there are other ways to neutralize the Legislative branch without resorting to closure. Constitutionally, several presidential systems confer special powers upon the Executive branch to deal with crisis situations or to sustain the president’s preferences against Congress. The decree power thus emerges as a special power for particular circumstances. In autocratization processes (and in consolidated autocracies), these tools are commonly used to annul the Legislative branch. It is worth noting that decrees grant the Executive branch the capacity to legislate on certain matters (usually delimited constitutionally or legally), and their validity depends on how this power is regulated. In some cases, such as Brazil, if Congress does not endorse the decree within a thirty-day period, it becomes void. In other countries, such as Argentina, if the decree does not receive legislative treatment, it suffers no consequences and remains in effect until its approval or rejection by Congress.

On some occasions, executives make excessive use of emergency powers that confer extraordinary faculties during moments of crisis or political difficulty. Instances of emergency are sometimes real; in other cases, they are forced interpretations of political reality. In either case, they allow the Executive branch to bypass the other institutions of government. An example of these powers is the so-called federal intervention, a faculty that allows the president to meddle in subnational politics and remove democratically elected authorities. This tool is utilized as a means to eliminate opponents from positions of power in different electoral districts.

Another type of emergency power is the state of exception. Technically, the state of exception implies a legal instance in which certain rights of citizens and/or the functioning of other institutions are limited. The early 20th-century German jurist Carl Schmitt (2009) defined the state of exception as the

ultimate expression of political power. It is in this instance where power can legally suspend the law, even override it, to create a new legality.

The abuse of these constitutional tools paves the way for what Pérez-Liñán, Vairo, and Schmidt (2019) term “presidential hegemony”, or the capacity of the Executive branch to control other institutions of government, particularly the Legislative Power and the Judicial Power. Presidential hegemony is considered one of the primary factors of democratic instability. Hence its strong connection to autocratization processes.

As previously noted, autocratization processes are gradual. For this reason, time is a key factor. The majority of Latin American democracies possess temporal limitations on presidential mandates. These limitations range from an explicit ban on re-election, as in the case of Mexico, to unlimited re-elections with intervals, as in Argentina or Brazil, or without any interval, as in the case of Venezuela (indefinite re-elections). To bypass legal limitations, autocratization processes tend to force current legislation through partial interpretations or judicial intervention. An example of this type of practice occurs following a constitutional reform that enables a new presidential term. Autocracies frequently argue that the mandates begin counting from the moment of the reform, thereby enabling further instances of re-election.

To co-opt other institutions of government, resources are required. For this reason, emerging autocracies use State resources arbitrarily for their own benefit. They also tend to expand the bureaucratic apparatus to position political militants in public administration posts, as well as to guarantee that procedures and policies are applied according to the Executive branch’s desires. Alongside this, an increase in public spending is frequently observed for the same purpose.

The co-optation of government institutions is vital for autocracies. This is not reduced to the bureaucracy and other branches of government, but also involves another central institution required to sustain power: the security forces. Both the army and the police, or similar institutions, are a key element to sustain the regime. Hence, their co-optation is paramount to bending other powers or institutions in the future. For example, if a president decides to confront the Legislative branch and militarize Congress, they must have the support of the Armed Forces. Without them, they could not materialize their advance against the legislature.

The transition toward a polyarchy, a concept used to designate liberal democracies in their minimal state, requires, according to Robert Dahl (1989), certain conditions, among them, civilian control of the Armed Forces. In this sense, it is possible to think in the inverse direction, where autocratic control of the security forces is a symptom of democratic

Strategic Vector	Specific Mechanisms of Normative Erosion	Systemic Impact on the Regime
1. Accountability and Checks & Balances	Systematic dismantling of public auditing agencies. Factious colonization of the Judiciary through the expansion of the number of aligned magistrates (court-packing) or the arbitrary removal of independent judges. Discretionary blocking of legislative oversight requests.	Nullification of horizontal controls and imposition of an absolute hegemony of the Executive's will over the state framework.
2. Rules of the Game and Electoral Competition	Unilateral modification of voting laws and electoral districts. Institutional co-optation of electoral justice tribunals. Asymmetric use of state resources in campaigns. Administrative disqualification of highly competitive opposition candidates through the selective application of the law (Murillo, Levitsky, and Brinks).	Drastic rupture of equity in the contest, transforming competitive comitia into predictable "electoral facades."
3. Contestation and the Public Space	Financial asphyxia of media outlets through the arbitrary management of official advertising funds. State-sponsored campaigns of verbal abuse and demonization targeting independent journalists. Legal criminalization of social protest and judicial persecution of civil society organizations and opposition political parties.	Neutralization of the institutional and social channels capable of articulating public dissidence and structuring alternatives for alternation.
4. Constitutional Powers and State of Exception	Routine and disproportionate abuse of the Executive's legislative powers (Decrees of Necessity and Urgency) to bypass parliamentary debate. Indefinite prolongation of states of exception to suspend fundamental civil guarantees. Constitutional reforms oriented to enable cycles of indefinite presidential re-election.	Institutionalization of normative arbitrariness and subordination of the republican order to the ruler's permanence needs.

Table 1. Strategic vectors, mechanisms of normative erosion, and their systemic impact on democratic regimes.

regression. Although military-led coups d'état are no longer the primary cause of democratic breakdown today, their co-optation remains fundamental for autocratization processes. Likewise, control of the repressive apparatuses is vital to manage social protest, control the opposition, and remain in power.

Comparative experience allows for the systematization of the instruments used by autocratic rulers to erode institutions from within. This "toolkit" is articulated across four strategic vectors defined analytically below:

The end of this instrumental path is the consolidation of an autocratic order where the law loses its universal character and transforms into a weapon of political faction: it is applied with implacable rigor to punish enemies of the administration and is fully flexibilized to shield adepts of the regime.

Polarization, Radicalization, and the Role of Elites

The stability of a democratic system does not depend exclusively on its formal constitutional engineering, but on the behavioral and normative adherence of political elites to the rules of the game. In this sense, *polarization* and *radicalization* operate as accelerators of democratic erosion. Morlino distinguishes analytically between both phenomena: polarization is the aggregation of mass preferences on distant ideological poles; whereas radicalization implies an increase in the distance among political elites over substantive issues,

which translates into behaviors of hostility or active disregard toward the institutions of the regime.

When political elites abandon centrist positions and undergo abrupt ideological shifts toward extremes, competition alters its intrinsic nature. Levitsky and Ziblatt identify two informal norms that sustain any healthy democracy, *mutual tolerance* (the recognition that political rivals are legitimate actors) and *institutional forbearance* (the decision not to use legal prerogatives to their absolute limits if doing so undermines the spirit of the system). In contexts of acute polarization, these informal norms break down. Leaders systematically resort to the delegativization of the opposition, labeling them "anti-patriotic" or "traitors". By stripping the adversary of their existential legitimacy, the ruling elite finds the moral justification before its base to break constitutional rules, colonize state powers, and exclude minorities, assuming that any method is valid to prevent the opposition from regaining power. Politics transforms into a zero-sum game of an existential nature.

Corruption and Opaque Institutionalism

There is a direct and bidirectional correlation between levels of structural corruption and autocratization processes. Corruption must not be understood merely as a set of individual ethical deviations, but as a structured pattern of impunity and opacity that distorts the essential functions of the Rule of Law. In regimes with low transparency, corruption erodes citizen trust in traditional institutions (political parties, parliaments,

and courts), generating a fertile ground for the emergence of anti-establishment populist discourses.

At the same time, systemic corruption weakens horizontal state regulatory and oversight capacities. When auditing bodies and prosecutor offices are captured by patronage networks or financially co-opted by political power, they completely lose their counterweight function. An Executive branch operating in an environment of widespread corruption possesses the incentives and informal resources to buy legislative loyalties, finance clientelistic social containment networks, and subject private economic actors through extortive mechanisms of selective regulation. Opacity in public management and the diversion of state resources act as the indispensable financial fuel for the ruling elite to consolidate its hegemony and finance the propaganda machinery necessary to close public debate.

The Geopolitical Threat: Authoritarian Influence of China, Russia, and Iran

Processes of democratic erosion in Latin America do not occur in an isolated geopolitical vacuum. The region suffers the direct impact of an exogenous vector, the strategic penetration and influence of extra-regional authoritarian powers, specifically the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, and Iran. Endemic regional factors, such as macroeconomic instability, fiscal crises, high levels of external debt, and chronic institutional weakness, convert Latin American democracies into the ideal host for the advancement of these autocratic capitals and narratives.

Each of these international actors deploys differentiated but complementary strategies that weaken regional democratic standards:

- **China and the “Elite Capture” Strategy:** Unlike 20th-century interventions, China operates primarily through economic and financial vectors. Through massive investments in critical infrastructure (ports, 5G telecommunications networks, energy and mining complexes) and opaque financing contracts, it generates asymmetric dependencies that politically subordinate recipient States. Elite capture occurs when former officials, legislators, businesspeople, and academics are incorporated into networks of benefit and exchange promoted by Beijing, neutralizing any capacity for criticism or institutional control over these agreements. China exports a model of “authoritarian development” where the market coexists with an all-powerful State and a hegemonic party that monitors and intervenes in public life, undermining the Western narrative of development tied to civil liberties and human rights.

- **Russia and Information Warfare:** The Kremlin focuses its strategy on destabilizing public opinion and undermining institutional trust through state-owned multimedia apparatuses and digital disinformation farms. Its goal is to deepen lines of social fracture and internal polarization in Western democracies, tactically supporting outsider or anti-system leaderships that break traditional alignments in international security.
- **Iran and Asymmetric Networks:** Iranian influence is woven through alliances with the most radicalized regimes in the region, providing logistical, military, and intelligence support that strengthens the repressive apparatuses of consolidated autocracies and expands non-state networks of influence that challenge sovereignty and the rule of law in weakened border zones.

The articulation of these external vectors provides local autocrats with international diplomatic and financial shielding, allowing them to resist Western economic sanctions, severely decreasing the costs of violating human rights and breaking the internal democratic order.

The Boiling Frog Paradox

The biological metaphor of the frog in the pot precisely illustrates the cognitive and temporal dimension of contemporary democratic erosions. If a frog is thrown directly into a pot of boiling water, its nervous system reacts immediately to the thermal trauma and it leaps to save its life; this is equivalent to the unanimous social reaction against a classic military coup d'état in the 20th century. In contrast, if the frog is placed in a pot of cold water and the temperature is raised gradually, one degree at a time, the animal adjusts its body temperature to the environment without perceiving the imminent danger, until the water reaches the boiling point and the frog dies boiled due to its inability to detect cumulative changes.

In 21st-century politics, citizens and democratic institutions operate like the frog inside the pot. Because autocratization processes present themselves in a fragmentary, sequential manner and are coated in procedural legality, civil society tends to normalize each regressive measure in isolation. Labeling a verbal attack on journalism, the reform of a Congressional regulation, or the discretionary appointment of a judge as the “end of democracy” can be dismissed as exaggeration or alarmism by the official administration. However, it is the *accumulation and synchronization* of these isolated measures that qualitatively alters the political regime. The danger lies in the “slippery slope” phenomenon, each institutional concession reduces the capacity for resistance in the subsequent stage. When citizens finally awaken to the reality that their substantial freedoms have disappeared, the water temperature has destroyed

institutional defense mechanisms, and it is tragically too late to react through ordinary democratic means.

Conclusions: Posits for Democratic Resilience

Faced with the bleak regional outlook, where democracies of high institutional resistance coexist with closed autocracies and competitive authoritarianisms in full expansion, political science and civil society must abandon passive diagnosis and structure strategies for resilience and democratic strengthening. We propose three strategic axes of action oriented toward building an impregnable institutional infrastructure against autocratic advancement:

1) Institutional Shielding and Limits on the Executive Power:

- Guarantee transparent, meritocratic, and depoliticized mechanisms for the selection of judicial magistrates, attorneys general, and directors of auditing agencies, preventing government colonization strategies.
- Institutionalize rules of the game that penalize the undue abuse of Decrees of Necessity and Urgency and states of exception, requiring that any delegation of faculties demand qualified parliamentary majorities and automatic judicial reviews within peremptory deadlines.
- Eliminate figures of indefinite presidential re-election or consecutive mandates throughout the region, closing the capacity of incumbent rulers to usufruct state resources for electoral and patrimonial ends.

2) Radical Transparency and Early Warning Networks:

- Implement advanced open government policies, full digitalization of public procurement processes, and unrestricted access to public management information to dissolve the opacity that feeds structural corruption.
- Design, from academia and think tanks, independent early monitoring systems (“institutional thermometers”) that measure minimal alterations in freedom of the press and electoral equity before the drift becomes irreversible.

3) Civil Society Activism and Private Sector Responsibility:

- Weave international networks of solidarity and legal defense to protect journalists, academics, and community leaders persecuted by the political power of hybrid regimes.

- Demand an explicit commitment from the business and corporate sector in defense of the liberal and republican infrastructure of their nations, recognizing that long-term judicial security and open markets are incompatible with the discretion and arbitrariness of autocratic regimes.

The definitive lesson offered by the frog paradox is that democracy does not possess a survival mechanism guaranteed by the laws of history. There is no other force of resistance than the *demos* itself, an active, conscious, and articulated citizenship is the only one with the political capacity to make the leap out of the pot before the water begins to boil.

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