

Not the Exception, but the Pattern: Autocratization from Within in Hungary and Turkey

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Abstract— Contemporary democracies rarely die through coups d'état or abrupt ruptures. Today they erode gradually, through legal and electoral mechanisms used by democratically elected leaders who concentrate power while dismantling institutional checks. This article analyzes that process, and examines the way in which autocratization from within manifests itself through the cases of Hungary under Viktor Orbán and Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Nancy Bermeo, Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt, and Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg, the article identifies three central mechanisms through which democratic backsliding operates, including institutional capture, discursive resignification, and the legalization of incumbent advantage. The central argument is that what makes these cases significant is not their exceptionality but their replicability. The dynamic of autocratization from within has spread beyond Hungary and Turkey, and represents a systemic threat to contemporary democratic governance.

Keywords— Autocratization, democratic backsliding, institutional capture, competitive authoritarianism, illiberal democracy, Hungary, and Turkey.

Introduction

Twenty-first-century democracies do not die the way twentieth-century ones did. Nancy Bermeo (2016) documented this shift with precision, if the democratic ruptures of the past century tended to take the form of military coups or foreign invasions, those of the present occur predominantly from within, through what came to be called “executive aggrandizement”. The gradual concentration of power by elected leaders who erode institutions of oversight without formally violating the constitution. The result is regimes that retain the appearance of democracy through elections, parliaments, and constitutions, while simultaneously emptying them of their substantive content.

Hungary and Turkey are among the most representative and best-documented cases of this phenomenon. Both countries underwent processes of autocratization driven by leaders with solid electoral backing. Viktor Orbán since 2010 and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan since 2002 used parliamentary majorities, constitutional reforms, and controls over the judiciary to consolidate their dominance without needing to suspend democratic institutions. In both cases, legality and legitimacy were the instrument of dismantlement.

This article analyzes how that process operated in each context, what mechanisms made it possible, and why its logic transcends national particularities. The central argument is that autocratization from within is not an anomaly, but a form of regime change that exploits the very rules of the democratic system, and whose understanding is indispensable for assessing the risks facing contemporary democracies.

Processes of autocratization within democratic institutions and systems

Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) coined the concept of a “third wave of autocratization” to describe a global pattern in which democratic erosion occurs incrementally, without visible institutional ruptures. Unlike classic coups, this modality operates from within the system, where the elected leader uses the instruments of the rule of law, constitutional reforms, judicial appointments, and even electoral legislation, to progressively dismantle mechanisms of oversight. Elections continue, but the playing field tilts systematically in favor of the incumbent.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) identified four warning signs that characterize leaders who erode democracies, the implicit or explicit rejection of the democratic rules of the game, the denial of the legitimacy of opponents, the toleration or encouragement of violence, and the willingness to curtail civil liberties. None of these signs necessarily implies a formal rupture; in fact, the danger lies precisely in the fact that they manifest gradually and within seemingly legal frameworks. When countervailing institutions are strong enough, these impulses can be contained, but if they are not, the accumulation of small transgressions can transform a democratic system into a regime of competitive authoritarianism.

This concept of “competitive authoritarianism”, developed by Levitsky and Way (2002), precisely describes the outcome of that process, a hybrid regime in which elections and other formally democratic institutions persist, but no longer guarantee equitable conditions of competition. That is, a regime in which elections are genuine but not equitable, because the incumbent controls resources, institutions, and media in ways that make alternation extremely difficult. This type of regime is not a failed democracy in transit toward consolidation; it is a distinct

category, lasting in its own right, whose permanence depends precisely on maintaining the appearance of competition while guaranteeing the continuity of power.

Populism: Facilitator of Democratic Backsliding

Now, populism understood as a political logic that divides social space between “the people” and the corrupt “elite” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) does not produce autocratization by itself. What turns it into a facilitator of democratic backsliding is its tendency toward anti-pluralism, that is, the claim that the leader exclusively and totally embodies the popular will (Müller, 2016). This claim has direct institutional consequences, since if the leader is the voice of the people, then the judges who limit his decisions, the media that question them, and the parties that challenge them are not legitimate counterweights but illegitimate obstacles placed between the people and their representative.

This discourse is the point of articulation between populism and autocratization. It allows the capture of the judiciary to be presented as “independence from elitist judges”, the colonization of public media as “recovering the voice of the people”, and the modification of electoral rules as a pretext for “correcting structural flaws in the system”. In both cases, Hungary and Turkey, this narrative shift was a central component of the erosion process, given that what was presented in the name of democracy actually constituted a concentration of power.

Hungary and Turkey: Two Cases and One Common Pattern

In Hungary, the process of autocratization accelerated after the electoral victory of Fidesz, the center-right party led by Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s prime minister since 2010, in that year’s legislative elections, when Orbán obtained a two-thirds parliamentary majority. That supermajority was the instrument that made everything else possible. In 2011, Fidesz passed a new constitution without consensus with the opposition and in record time. The new constitution reduced the jurisdiction of the Constitutional Court, modified the electoral system’s rules to benefit the ruling party, lowered the retirement age of Supreme Court judges to force their renewal with loyal magistrates, and entrenched certain policies so that future majorities could not change them. All of this was legal.

Likewise, from 2010 onward, Fidesz systematically colonized oversight institutions. The electoral authority, the ombudsman, the court of auditors, and the central bank were progressively occupied by people linked to the party. The media system

was transformed through a combination of regulatory pressure, purchases by the government’s business allies, and the selective allocation of state advertising. The result was an information environment in which formal plurality coexisted with real dominance by the ruling party. Freedom House downgraded Hungary from “free” to “partly free” in 2019, and the European Union activated Article 7 of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2018 over rule-of-law violations.

In Turkey, the trajectory differed in its chronology but was identical in its logic. Erdoğan’s AKP came to power in 2002 amid a deep crisis of the secular Kemalist establishment, that is, the political order founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on the principles of secularism and civilian control of the state, which had dominated Turkish public life since the founding of the Republic in 1923. During its first decade, the government pursued democratizing reforms and drew closer to the European Union. However, the direction shifted decisively from 2013 onward, with the rupture between the AKP and the Gülen movement. From then on, the government adopted an increasingly restrictive stance toward dissent, the press, and the judiciary.

The attempted coup of July 2016 was the turning point. Erdoğan used the coup’s failure to declare a state of emergency that lasted two years, under which more than 150,000 public officials, military personnel, judges, and academics were purged through executive decrees. In 2017, a constitutional referendum, held under a state of emergency, with unequal media access and international observers reporting irregularities, narrowly approved the shift to a presidential system that eliminated the office of prime minister, concentrated control over the judiciary and the executive in the presidency, and reduced mechanisms of parliamentary accountability. As in Hungary, each step was formally legal, and together they formed a process of an autocratic nature.

The Autocratization Toolkit: Three Common Mechanisms

The comparative analysis of both cases makes it possible to identify three central mechanisms that characterize autocratization from within. The first is institutional capture, the progressive colonization of counterweight institutions, constitutional courts, prosecutor’s offices, electoral bodies, public media, and others, through the appointment of loyalists. This process does not require eliminating institutions; it is enough to control who runs them. A constitutional court staffed by aligned magistrates does not cease to be formally a constitutional court, but it does cease to fulfill its function of limiting executive power. In Hungary, for example, the 2011 judicial reform lowered the retirement age of judges, prosecutors, and notaries

from 70 to 62, forcing the immediate retirement of hundreds of magistrates and opening their posts to appointees aligned with Fidesz, a measure the Court of Justice of the European Union declared discriminatory in 2012 (Scheppelle, 2018). In Turkey, the 2017 constitutional referendum eliminated the office of prime minister and transferred to the president the power to directly appoint most members of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors, the body responsible for appointing and removing judges (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016).

The second mechanism is discursive resignification, the redefinition of the process of power concentration as democratization. The erosion of judicial independence is presented as the recovery of popular sovereignty from unelected judges; control over the media is presented as the defense of the nation against foreign interests; the modification of electoral rules is presented as the correction of dynamics that favored elites. This resignification is functional because it allows democratic institutions to be dismantled in the name of democracy.

The third mechanism is the legalization of incumbent advantage, the modification of constitutional, electoral, and media rules so that subsequent elections take place under conditions that structurally favor the ruling party. The result is what Lüthmann and Lindberg (2019) termed “electoral autocracy”, a regime in which elections remain real but are not equitable because the incumbent has tilted the playing field in its favor. Electoral competition is preserved as a source of legitimacy, while the inequality of conditions guarantees its outcome.

A Script That Replicates: From Budapest and Ankara to the Rest of the World

Hungary and Turkey are not isolated cases; they are the clearest and most consistent real-world evidence of how the mechanisms of autocratization from within have been executed, and the model that defines them has been replicated in Poland, India, Brazil, and several countries in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. This suggests that these are not national pathologies tied to specific political cultures, but a cross-border political dynamic whose success lies precisely in the fact that it operates within the language of democracy.

The analytical and political challenge posed by this logic is considerable. Conceptual tools designed to detect abrupt democratic ruptures are poorly suited to gradual processes. By the time democracy indices register the deterioration, the process is already advanced and the institutional instruments for reversing it have in part been captured. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argued that the defense of democracy depends less on constitutions than on unwritten norms, such as mutual toleration

and institutional forbearance, that political actors respect. If those norms erode, the formal structure becomes insufficient.

The tension between legality and democratic legitimacy revealed by both cases is not a technical problem of institutional design, but a first-order political problem. How can the legitimate use of democratic majorities be distinguished from the strategic use of those majorities to erode democracy? The distinction cannot be resolved by appeal to formal procedures alone, because it is precisely those mechanisms that have been instrumentalized to consolidate the incumbent’s power under the appearance of legality. This requires substantive criteria, such as judicial independence, media pluralism, and electoral fairness, criteria essential to liberal democracy that tend to be overlooked until it becomes necessary to defend them.

Conclusions

The cases of Hungary and Turkey reveal that the most serious threat to contemporary democracy does not come from its external enemies but from its own internal mechanisms once they are operated without the restraints that institutional designers took for granted. Orbán and Erdoğan did not invent autocratization from within; they simply systematized it, refined it, and demonstrated its electoral viability. This demonstration has consequences that transcend their national contexts.

The question these cases leave open is not whether democracy can survive authoritarian leaders, but whether it can survive authoritarian leaders who act with full legality and sustained electoral backing. The conventional answer of strengthening institutions, protecting judicial independence, and guaranteeing media plurality is good, but insufficient unless accompanied by a more uncomfortable question: what makes significant segments of the electorate accept and actively support the dismantling of democratic checks?

Asking this question points to a tension that comparative political science has under-theorized, since the difference between democracies that resist the pressures of competitive authoritarianism and democracies that facilitate them lies not only in institutional design but in the system’s capacity to produce outcomes that citizens judge legitimate. If that capacity fails, authoritarian populism does not need to break the rules; it is enough to convince a majority that the existing rules are the problem. That is the hardest lesson of the Hungarian and Turkish cases.

There remain, moreover, questions that comparative analysis cannot answer on its own. Can international institutions act as effective guarantors of democracy when their own rules are exploited by the very actors eroding national systems? What thresholds of democratic deterioration must be crossed

for the international community to intervene without invoking sovereignty as an argument? Is it possible to reverse a gradual process of autocratization without that reversal requiring, paradoxically, a temporary concentration of power?

Looking ahead, the autocratization processes that Hungary and Turkey have undergone reveal the importance of preventing their models from being replicated in other countries in the region, in Colombia, for example, where, heading into 2026, the electoral landscape is one in which populism is no longer the exception but the common denominator of the main political forces. It is therefore worth asking how solid the informal norms and institutional checks are that, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt, are ultimately what separates a democracy that resists from one that yields.

These questions remain open. What is truly worrying is not the absence of answers, but that the countries that urgently needed them did not have them either, and by the time they tried to formulate them, it was already too late. That Hungary and Turkey make them unavoidable is, perhaps, their most lasting contribution to contemporary democratic debate.

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