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The Return of Dictatorship

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Abstract

In recent years, significant academic attention has been devoted to the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, understood as a creeping assault on the rule of law and the fairness of elections, combined with efforts to capture the judicial system and state agencies to subjugate them to the executive power. Yet, at the same time, there has been a parallel political development affecting hybrid and authoritarian regimes that has been more consequential yet by and large neglected. Identified in this article as dictatorial drift, this process implies the transition from “soft” forms of authoritarian rule to hard core authoritarian policies, characterized by the emergence of unconstrained leaders with dictatorial ambitions; an extreme concentration of executive power; the marginalization of parliaments and the elimination of political opposition; the end of competitive elections; a takeover or destruction of the judiciary, independent media, and autonomous civil society organizations; and worsening political repressions. This paper documents such drift as a global phenomenon and probes its causes and consequences. We note the exhaustion of mechanisms that constrained shifts towards dictatorship in the past and highlight the way in which autocratic hegemonies today drive regime change in much the same way as Western liberal democracies once did in the early post-Cold War era.

A version of this paper will appear in the *Journal of Democracy*.

If the 20th century was the story of slow, uneven progress toward the victory of liberal democracy over other ideologies—communism, fascism, virulent nationalism—the 21st century is, so far, a story of the reverse.

(Anne Applebaum, November 15, 2021)

Contemporary research on the state of global freedom and democracy consistently demonstrates a steady erosion of the quality of democratic institutions and declining respect for political freedoms and civil rights. Public opinion polls register failing trust in governments, representative institutions, and political parties. Long-established political party systems in old democracies are falling apart. Traditional centrist political parties are losing ground, while populist and extremist parties and movements on both the right and left continue to emerge and gain support. Political polarization worsens across the world and autocratic leaders subvert existing political and electoral institutions, increasingly breaking the rule of law and using all available means to stay in power. Civil societies are ever more divided and pillarized along political cleavages. State-controlled media are often weaponized in political conflicts, and independent media are subject to multiple and growing restrictions. Since the start of the 21st century, this growing “democratic deficit,” or as it is more commonly referred, democratic backsliding, has affected both old and new democracies, including many established Western ones.¹

Yet, the worldwide erosion of democracy has been paralleled by another political trend that is less widely noted but equally significant and potentially more pernicious—what we call “dictatorial drift.” While backsliding countries may halt democratic deterioration through electoral means, dictatorial drift marks the final stop on the road to full autocracy. It is characterized by the emergence of autocratic leaders who are only weakly constrained; an extreme concentration of executive power that cannot be undone procedurally; the absolute marginalization of legislatures and collapse of the rule of law; and the destruction, not merely the degradation, of the fundamental institutions of democracy: competitive elections, separation of powers, an independent judiciary, opposition parties, independent media and civil society organizations. Dictatorial drift is also fundamentally intertwined with physical repression and the use of force against the political opposition and protest movements. Opposition leaders and government critics are violently assaulted, jailed, or outright assassinated. Moreover, whereas democratic backsliding seems to have recently stabilized—with several key defeats of authoritarian parties in national or local elections and with fewer democratic countries declining

¹ See, for example: Foa, Roberto Stefan, and Yascha Mounk. "The Democratic Disconnect." *Journal of Democracy* 27 (2016): 5; Diamond, Larry. "Democracy's Arc: From Resurgent to Imperiled." *Journal of Democracy* 33, (2022): 163-179; and Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (2018): 93-113.

in various rankings of political freedom and the quality of democracy—dictatorial drift continues unabated.²

Dictatorial drift also brings the use of force back to international relations, as evidenced by Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Azerbaijani assault on Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh, the Turkish war against the Kurds, civil wars in both Myanmar and Sudan, and China's military blackmail of Taiwan and other countries surrounding the South China Sea. While democracies do not wage war with one another,³ dictatorially drifting countries are not afraid to do so. Threats of invasion and shows of force have become a more credible means of neighborhood intimidation, backed by this renewed practice of warfare. New dictatorships reject established forms of international cooperation and procedures of conflict resolution that rely on respect for the sovereignty of states, negotiations, arbitration, and the acceptance of the decisions of international tribunals. This dictatorial creep impacts not only post-Cold War hybrid regimes but also other "soft" authoritarian systems that maintained a semblance of pluralism and possessed some mechanisms of constraining authority. In short, dictatorial drift entails the resurgence of old-fashioned forms of dictatorship, along with their familiar domestic and international repercussions.

The distinction between democratic backsliding and dictatorial drift is unambiguous. In backsliding countries, electoral institutions and political competition typically remain viable enough that the opposition can credibly challenge ruling parties, with elections still offering the possibility of reversing course. Such was the case for Poland in 2023. Conversely, recovering from dictatorial drift through electoral contestation is highly unlikely, if not impossible. Evidence of democratic backsliding might include hints of anomalous election results or undue campaign spending, as in Hungary, or candidates refusing to recognize the legitimacy of their defeat, as in the United States or Brazil. On the other hand, elections that become fully uncompetitive, where the primary opposition candidates are disqualified from running, jailed, or go into hiding; their staff are detained; their supporters are arrested; and the reported tallies are rejected by international organizations are instead markers of dictatorial drift. Here, protests against an incumbent win margin of 70 percentage points are met with tens of thousands of arrests, mysterious disappearances, and rumors of torture. Indeed, the dictatorial drift of Belarus, where all these events characterize the recent presidential election, has been among the worst.

Despite their substantial differences, we do acknowledge the existence of a "demand side" in both democratic backsliding and dictatorial drift. Recent public opinion polls across the world have registered not only dissatisfaction with democracy but also a growing popular demand for

² Little, Andrew T., and Anne Meng. "Measuring Democratic Backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* (2023): 1-13.

³ De Mesquita, Bruce Bueno, James D. Morrow, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alastair Smith. "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace." *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (1999): 791-807.

the defense of traditional and illiberal values and support for authoritarian leaders.⁴ In response, populist politicians have increased their appeal to illiberal constituencies, traditional conservative political actors, and religious institutions, achieving unprecedented election results in the process. Their success speaks for itself: in Russia, for instance, the independent and well-trusted Levada Center reports a current approval rating of 87 percent for Vladimir Putin, up from a low of 71 percent just prior to the invasion of Ukraine. Such “demand-side” actors represent a core driver of democratic backsliding, as policy changes enacted by authoritarian-minded leaders, once elected, are well-supported. Institutional reversion that takes place in this way—that is, driven not only by illiberal state actors but also supported in elections by a popular majority—is especially difficult to counteract.⁵

Despite this often-shared feature, unlike democratic backsliding, dictatorial drift is nevertheless largely engineered from above by authoritarian leaders who, after winning often unfair and manipulated elections, strive to eliminate political competition and concentrate executive power to stay in office indefinitely. To achieve their goals, drifting authoritarians actively mobilize illiberal forces and incite social and political violence. They engineer widespread political cynicism and pursue clientelist strategies designed to buy quiescence and political support. Drifting rulers eliminate political opposition and marginalize representative institutions, capture the state apparatus and non-majoritarian institutions, instrumentalize the judicial system, and manipulate electoral institutions to escape constitutional and political constraints. They openly seek to destroy independent media and civil society organizations, eliminate any forms of checks and balances, and suppress independent opinions. At the same time, they facilitate the emergence of conservative and reactionary civil societies which are used to marshal and channel demand-side illiberal and authoritarian preferences.⁶ The citizens of dictatorially drifting states like Russia, El Salvador, and China may on average express support for their autocratic leaders, but if they changed their minds, it is unlikely any would readily lose power. Meanwhile, in countries that have experienced backsliding, like India, Poland, or even the United States, would-be “authoritarians” have received democratically inflicted defeats and been forced to accede to them.

Do these two global trends arise from the same causes? Are they both responses to a common set of factors? Moreover, are the mechanisms that drive the erosion of democracy the same as those behind dictatorial drift? We argue that while democratic backsliding is mostly driven by a combination of demand- and supply-side factors, dictatorial drift is largely engineered from above. We also claim that the mechanisms that forced restraint on authoritarian rulers after the Cold War have become exhausted, and drifting authoritarian regimes are no longer credibly

⁴ Inglehart, Ronald, and Pippa Norris. "Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: The Silent Revolution in Reverse." *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 2 (2017): 443-454.

⁵ Bermeo, Nancy. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27 (2016): 5.

⁶ See Youngs, Richard, ed. *The Mobilization of Conservative Civil Society*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018. Also: Ekiert, Grzegorz. "Civil Society as a Threat to Democracy." *The Power of Populism and People: Resistance and Protest in the Modern World* (2021): 53-71.

constrained by international norms and institutions. Finally, above all else, we emphasize that the “linkage” and “leverage” mechanisms that Western countries once used to pressure nascent regimes to democratize are increasingly employed by the autocratic hegemons of today in reverse. Rather than compete as they once did, drifting dictators instead support one another politically, economically, and militarily, leveraging the old Western playbook to drive further autocratization.

Transformations of Authoritarian Rule after the Cold War

The collapse of communist regimes in 1989-91 not only facilitated the emergence of new democracies but also led to the arrival of new forms of non-democratic regimes that Levitsky and Way⁷ termed “competitive authoritarianism.” They argued that this hybrid regime type was the consequence of a post-Cold War international environment defined by the hegemony of liberal values and in which “full-scale dictatorship” could not be tolerated. This resulted in the emergence of softer forms of autocratic rule characterized by real, but fundamentally unfair, political competition. Under this transformed world order, fake democratic institutions (commonly referred to as “window dressing”) and a strategy of disguised autocratization became necessary for satisfying popular demands for democracy while simultaneously accruing social and economic benefits from abroad for doing so.

In their original work, Levitsky and Way examined 36 regimes across the globe with hybrid characteristics, including Russia, Serbia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia, as well as several current members of the European Union—Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Slovakia. Today, this list of “hybrid” regimes appears incoherent: Russia and Belarus, with Serbia trailing behind, have fully devolved into autocracy; members of the European Union, on the other hand, have by and large become democratic. Despite this, and despite their original doubts about whether competitive authoritarian regimes can be characterized as a stable institutional equilibrium, the authors have since affirmed their belief that the regime type persists today.⁸

Contrary to this claim, the evidence suggests that competitive authoritarianism has *not* become the predominant form of authoritarian rule. As Huntington predicted, “liberalized” authoritarianism “is not a stable equilibrium; the halfway house does not stand.”⁹ Of the nearly 40 regimes characterized as competitive authoritarian by the start of the 21st century, the vast

⁷ Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. “Elections without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism.” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 51–65.

⁸ Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. “The New Competitive Authoritarianism.” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): 51–65.

⁹ Huntington, Samuel P. “How Countries Democratize.” *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (1991): 579-616.

majority have either fully democratized or drifted towards dictatorship.¹⁰¹¹ The shrinking number of competitive authoritarian regimes is especially visible in Central and Eastern Europe. The success of many of these post-communist countries in establishing working democracies can be mostly attributed to political pressures and economic incentives from the European Union embedded in the accession process and the requirements for membership.¹² Those that did not, namely Belarus and Russia, are not competitive but fully authoritarian. Post-communist countries elsewhere have also gradually drifted towards authoritarianism, and consolidated authoritarian regimes have become the norm.

Together, these dictatorially drifting regimes reveal that what Guriev and Triesman call “spin dictatorships”¹³ are, in fact, becoming real dictatorships characterized by abandoning their democratic façade, building highly repressive central state apparatuses, and unleashing mass political repression to destroy any real or potential opposition. Though undeniably different in scale from the policies and crimes of Stalin, Hitler, or Mao, the Russian invasion of and war crimes in Ukraine, China’s mass incarceration of its Uyghur minority, and the torture of opposition activists in Belarus demonstrates that many of these regimes are either willing to, or already have, become systematically brutal and murderous. Indeed, like those regimes of old, the so-called strongman leadership style increasingly characterizes both dictators and elected “rulers” in countries from Venezuela to Belarus, Iran, and China.¹⁴

This trend is fundamentally altering global geo-politics and signals the onset of dictatorial drift globally. However, the common attribution of dictatorial drift to the return of strongmen is misconceived; they are themselves merely symptoms of deeper problems. These root causes include the 2008 financial crisis and rising inequality since, which has undermined faith in the liberal economic model; deepening social and cultural cleavages and worsened political polarization in Western democracies, which contest the notion of liberal democracy as key to “social peace”; and failed military efforts in the Middle East and Afghanistan that signal the

¹⁰ Brownlee, Jason. *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Also, Carothers, Christopher. "The Surprising Instability of Competitive Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 29 (2018): 129.

¹¹ While there certainly remain stable partial autocracies, such as those referenced in Figure 2, they exceedingly represent but a minority of regime types.

¹² See Ekiert, Grzegorz, Jan Kubik, and Milada Vachudova. “Democracy in Postcommunist World: An Unending Quest.” *East European Politics and Societies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 1–24.

¹³ Guriev, Sergei, and Daniel Triesman. *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*. Princeton University Press, 2022.

¹⁴ See, for example, Rachman, Gideon. *The Age of Strongman: How the Cult of the Leader Threatens Democracy around the World*. Bodley Head, 2022; Carothers, Thomas, and Benjamin Press. "Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2022); Friedman, Thomas L. 2022. Xi, Putin and Trump: The Strongmen Follies. *New York Times*, March 22.

decline of Western might. Why choose to democratize when democracies everywhere appear to be decaying? Conversely, the ascendance of China—authoritarian yet politically stable with strong economic development—has offered newfound promise to the enemies of liberalism. Indeed, though some argue that the state is most easily captured by authoritarian leaders when it is weak, the most spectacular cases of dictatorial drift have taken place in highly institutionalized and efficacious states like Russia, Turkey, and China, where strong state capacity facilitates the reach of these new autocrats.¹⁵

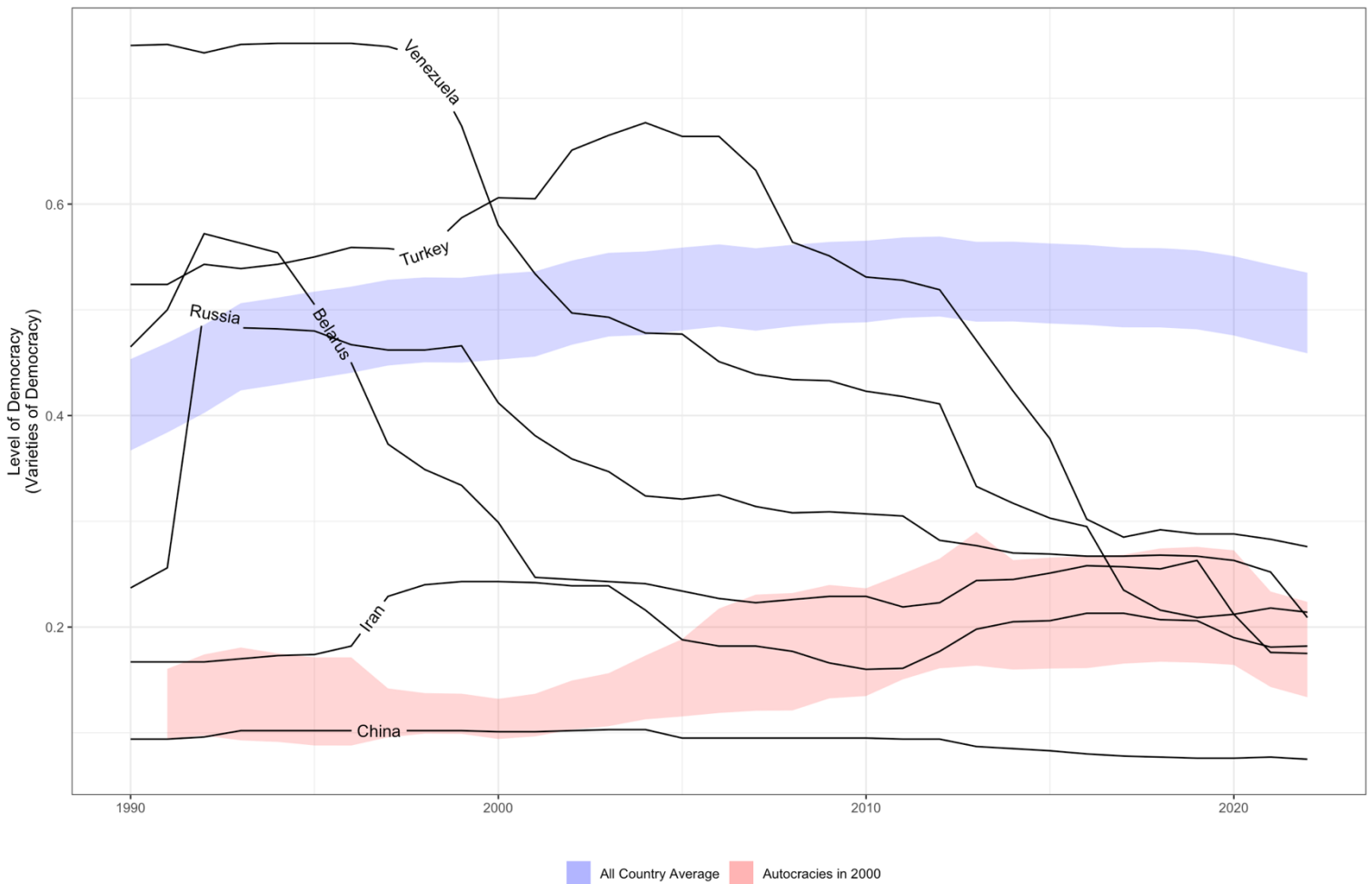
What the Data Tell Us

Does our description of dictatorial drift align with empirical reality? Indeed, data from a variety of sources support our identification of dictatorial drift as a widely pervasive phenomenon. In Figure 1, we draw on data from the Varieties of Democracy project, which assigns countries “democracy scores” in each year based on expert surveys. To examine whether dictatorial drift is indeed taking place, we graph the annual democracy score of several regimes alongside two cross-country averages: one of all countries, and one of the countries that scored in the bottom half by the start of the 21st century.

Several trends are immediately noticeable. One, countries that were heavily autocratic by the year 2000 experienced a brief period of regime change that might be deemed as competitive authoritarian—marginal democratization without full commitment to institutional change—but in recent years have drifted back to dictatorship. Two, dictatorial drift as a gradually paced phenomenon characterizes not only countries like China, where national-level democracy has *never* existed, to those such as Russia or Venezuela where legitimately contested democracy did exist albeit only in passing.

¹⁵ Svoboda, Milan W. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

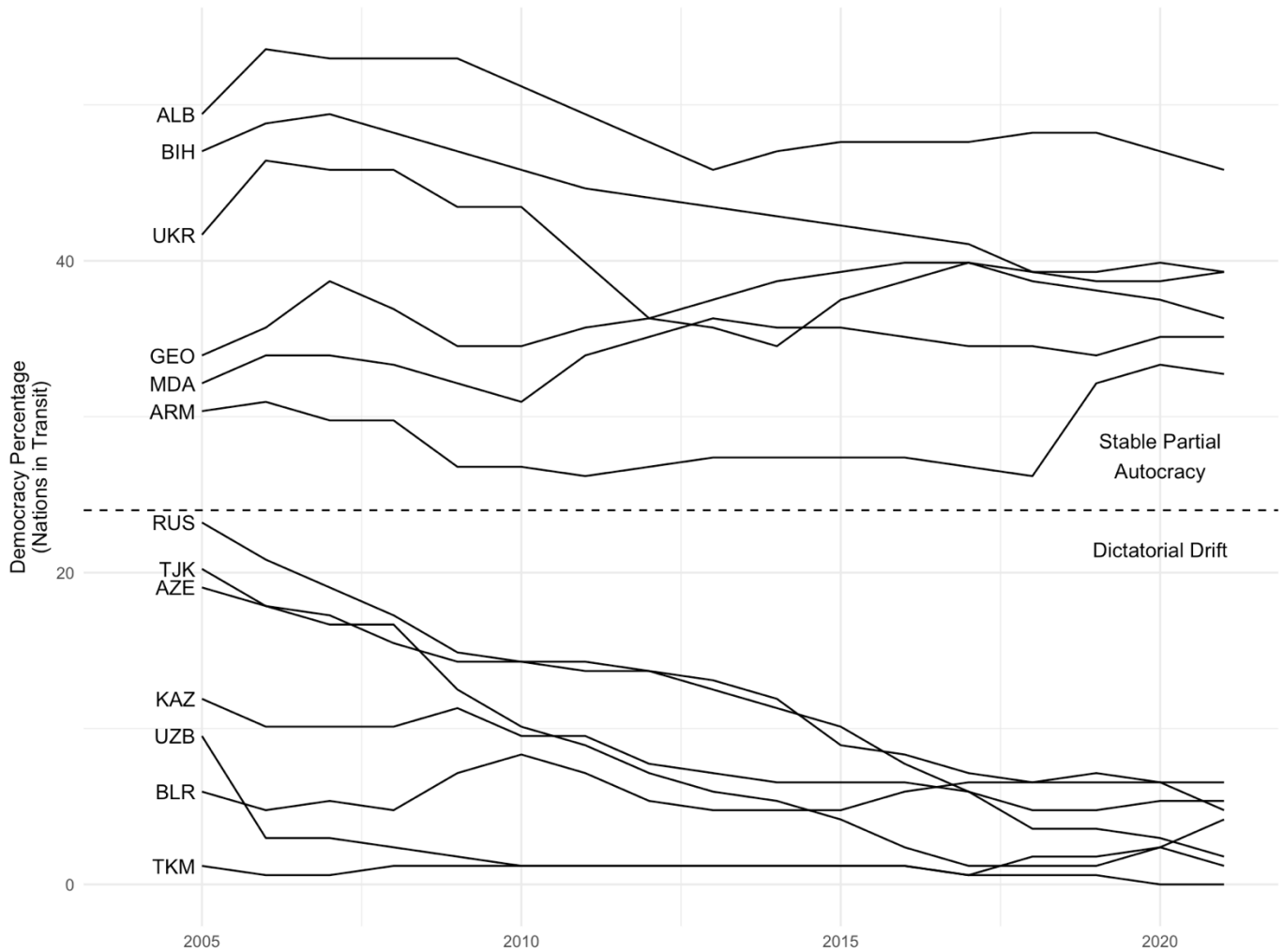
Figure 1. The Rise and Fall of Competitive Authoritarianism



Note: Data from the Varieties of Democracy project.

Dictatorial drift has proven especially pernicious in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Of the fifteen countries classified as competitive or fully authoritarian in 2005, eight are absolute dictatorships today. Figure 2, which draws on democracy data from Freedom House, demonstrates this bifurcation between stable partial autocracies and those experiencing dictatorial drift. A common thread among the former countries—specifically Armenia, Georgia, Kosovo, and Moldova—is their shared existential geo-political threat from Russia and Serbia, which necessitates Western support and in turn induces greater democratizing leverage.

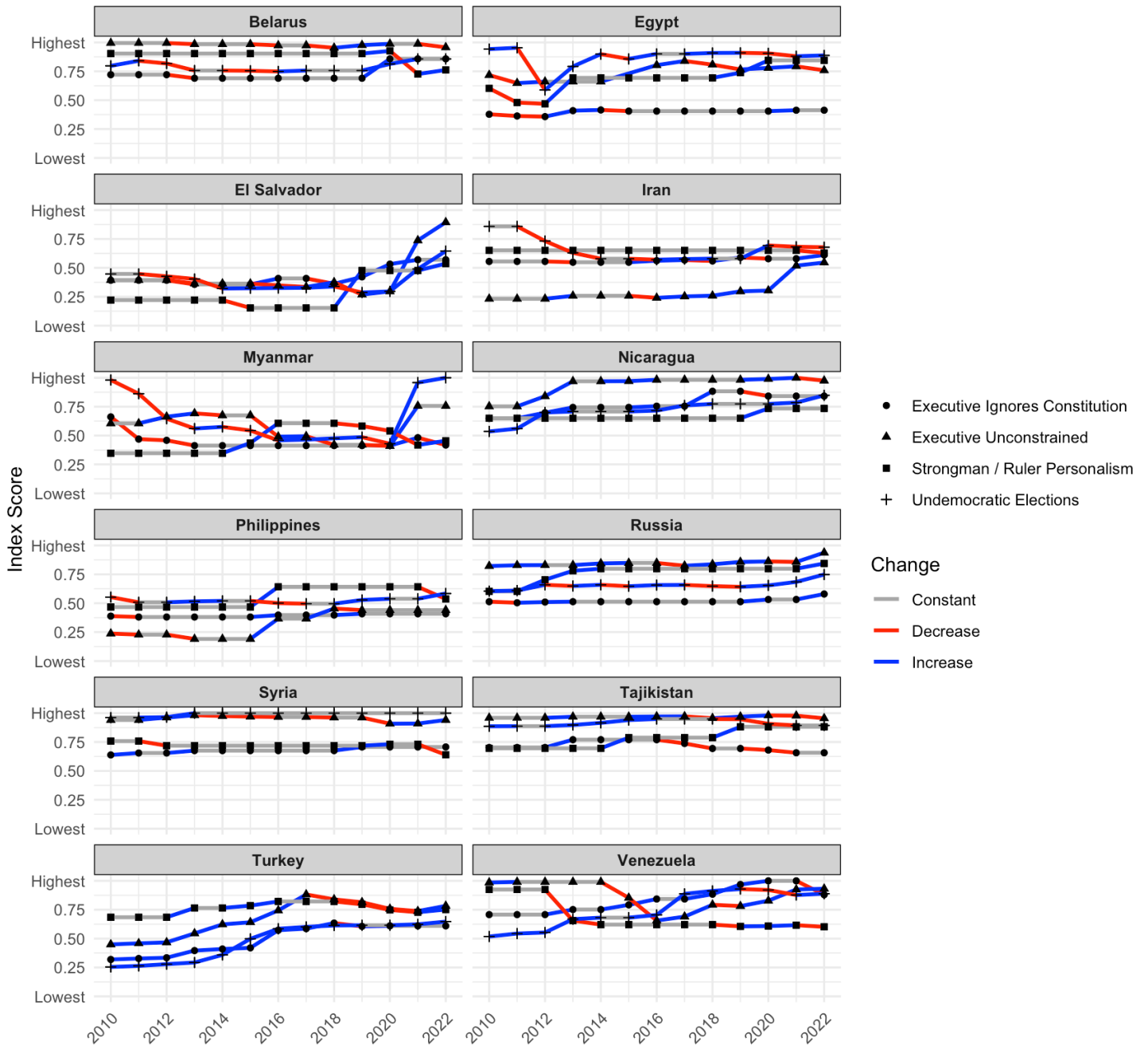
Figure 2. The Evolution of Hybrid and Authoritarian Regimes



Note: Data are obtained from the Freedom House Nations in Transition data indices. Scores correspond to the “democracy percentage” out of 100, where higher-scoring countries are deemed more democratic.

Finally, we provide time-series data showcasing several key dimensions of the drift. We select several variables from the Varieties of Democracy project that align with our operationalization of the phenomenon: these include legitimization of the ruler as being “endowed with extraordinary personal characteristics”; the elimination of legislative constraints on the executive, and the extent to which the executive ignores the constitution; and the degradation of elections. To highlight the full geographic scope of dictatorial drift, which characterizes regimes around the world, we take a sample of countries among those with the greatest absolute decline in their level of democracy over the past two decades.

Figure 3. Highlighting the Dimensions of Dictatorial Drift



Note: Data from the Varieties of Democracy project. The results for each country are an averaged expert ranking which takes values from 0 to 1. A higher score in each indicator indicates more of a dictatorial trend.

Nearly all the countries sampled evince the expected changes in outcomes over time, either remaining autocratic in their qualities or gradually becoming more so. Globally, and especially in the previous decade, drifting dictatorial regimes have drastically consolidated executive rule, dispelled with the presumption of free and fair elections or

legislative autonomy, and constructed or maintained personalistic images of ruler impregnability. Some are especially striking—the drastic rise of personalism in El Salvador, for instance, or the gradual, drifting decline of constitutional legitimacy in Nicaragua. The data also reveal that drift occurs even in countries that are *already* strongly authoritarian, like Syria. The gradual change across all indices for Russia, Turkey, and Nicaragua demonstrates the creeping threat of dictatorial drift as democratic institutions are dismantled piecemeal, while the sudden shift in Myanmar emphasizes the vulnerability of new and weak democracies to authoritarian reversals.

Importantly, many regimes have drifted in similar fashions to their neighbors. Dictatorial drift can only occur as dictators support each other economically, especially in violation of sanctions imposed by Western countries or international institutions. In their opposition to the West, they coordinate their campaigns of disinformation and draw on one another to mobilize legitimizing popular support. In attacking any opposition to their rule, their internal security agencies not only exchange information but also actively cooperate. As evidenced in the recent Ukrainian conflict, they directly provide one another with the means for war-making and oppression. As they drift together, dictators also learn together, acquiring successful practices from each other and realizing the permissibility of select behaviors in the current international order.

What is New about New Dictatorships?

Newly emerging dictatorships share many characteristics. They no longer trend towards convergence with the West with respect to political institutions or economic policy. They openly reject free societies, liberal capitalism, and democratic ideals. They are pragmatic, cynical, and nihilistic. Their legitimation strategy is based on an aggressive nationalism manipulated by intense propaganda and justified by historical grievances. They are narrowly focused on pursuing their specific economic, military, and political interests. They are non-ideological and share a sense of victimization vis-à-vis the West. They also have neo-imperial and irredentist ambitions. They strive to insulate themselves and their citizens from Western influence and pressures and seek to redefine the global liberal order. They actively try to silence any criticism of their policies both at home and abroad. They reject global norms and liberal values and wage hybrid, or even active, warfare against Western democracies. Legions of state-sponsored hackers penetrate military, governmental, and corporate entities in the West, stealing industrial and military technologies and individual data. Troll farms manipulate elections and provoke discontent on social media.¹⁶ How are such regimes able to do so now, despite bending to democratizing pressures in earlier decades?

Although the return of dictatorships can be attributed to country-specific combinations of contextual and systemic factors, several general trends are unmistakable. First, dictatorial drift is caused by a perceived crisis of democracy, the declining hegemony of liberal values, and the exhaustion of Western tools and strategies for promoting liberal democracy and discouraging

¹⁶ Hao, Karen. "Troll farms reached 140 million Americans a month on Facebook before 2020 election, internal report shows." *MIT Technology Review*, September 16 (2021): 2021.

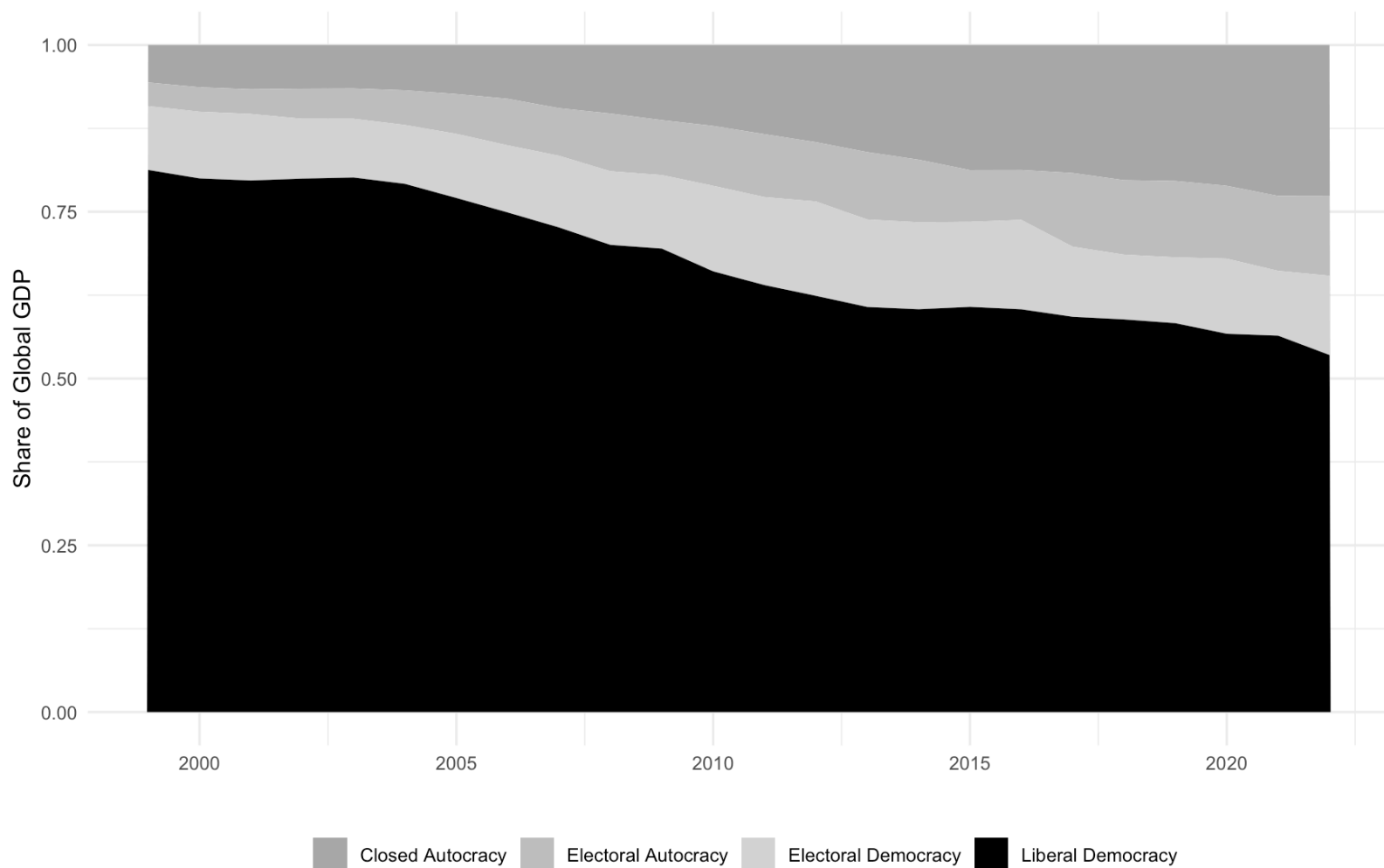
overt or covert aggression, political repression, and abuses of human rights. Levitsky and Way attribute the success of post-Cold War democratic transformations to Western “linkage and leverage.”¹⁷ To these scholars, linkage describes the intensity of the connections and cross-border relationships between a country and the West, while leverage refers to a level of vulnerability to Western democratizing pressure including a threat of diplomatic and economic sanctions. With the weakening of the West’s economic position and the perception that democracy, with its severe partisan polarization, is in crisis, the leverage Western democracies used to maintain is much weaker today than it was at the end of the Cold War—and with it, any feeling of needing to hide authoritarian ambitions.¹⁸

But dictatorial drift is not simply a byproduct of Western political recession. Notably, contemporary dictatorships are more powerful economically than ever before. First, they control critical natural resources—oil, gas, rare earth minerals—and increasingly are the sole exporters of environmentally destructive products such as uranium. Moreover, they are becoming technologically advanced through domestic production, manufacturing, and innovation rather than relying solely on imports and technology transfers (either legal or otherwise). As Figure 3 reveals, autocracies together represented no more than 10 percent of the global GDP in 2000, a number that has more than tripled to 35 percent today. Such a shift of economic power comes at the expense of liberal democracies, making the latter’s economic leverage less effective and their economic model less attractive. This result is not simply a byproduct of inevitable “catching up”: the decline in democracy’s relative economic power holds even controlling for population growth.

¹⁷ Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

¹⁸ Mounk, Yascha. "The Danger is Real." *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 4 (2022): 150-154.

Figure 4. The Growing Economic Power of Autocratic Regimes



Note: Data calculated using annual World Bank GDP figures.

Authoritarian hegemonies today are capable of not only enticing but also politically and economically supporting movements and countries in opposition to the West. The opposite pathway always implied but not seriously considered by Levitsky and Way—not Western but rather *autocratic* “linkage” and “leverage” influencing regime type—has fully taken hold. In this way, the mechanisms theorized by the literature on post-Cold War democratization remain much the same, only now the hegemonic actors have reversed, and so too have the political and economic consequences.

Drifting dictators across the world benefit from closely integrated networks with the current autocratic hegemonies of China and Russia. Membership in these networks does not necessarily preclude positive diplomatic relations with Western democracies. More broadly, inter-autocratic relations facilitate business partnerships, spurring domestic growth; they facilitate the exchange and sale of natural resources, diminishing the effect of sanctions; they enable sharing of the technologies of repression and imply ever closer military cooperation as the recent military exercises of Russian, Belarusian, and Chinese troops show; and they collectively benefit from

orchestrated propaganda messages that denounce the weakness of democracy and an ailing West.¹⁹ These should sound familiar because they are similar to the means by which the United States promoted political and economic liberalism globally after the end of World War II.²⁰

This combination of close collaboration among dictatorial regimes and their growing global economic clout is perhaps the most important asset in their confrontation with the liberal West. It is unlikely that dictatorial drift would pose the same threat to democracy without the formidable military, political, security and economic cooperation characterizing today's autocratic regimes. This cooperation is further enhanced by the formation of formal regional alliances led by authoritarian states—for instance, the goal of the Belt and Road Initiative—that could potentially provide alternatives to liberal regional institutions.²¹ Indeed, autocracy today is a lovefest above old historical and ideological divisions. Russia and Iran wage war together in Syria; China, North Korea, and Iran provide Russia the means to do so in Ukraine; and both China and Russia prop up the regime in Venezuela. The common feature underlying this cooperation is an extreme dislike of, and opposition to, the West.

As a result of this close autocratic cooperation, an alternative vision of political and economic order and international relations emerges. First, dictatorships promote a state capitalism that combines full political control of the economy with selective market mechanisms, as with China's realization of its socialist market economy. Monopolistic state companies are guided by the state's political and economic priorities. Their activities are not transparent or controlled by shareholders or independent institutions; neither are they bound by the rules of fair competition or respect for intellectual property. Second, new dictatorships build a closed society isolated from the free flow of information through digital walls and a state-controlled "sovereign" internet. This characterizes not just China but those with whom it has begun sharing the technological means to do so, including Cuba, Iran, and Belarus. These regimes exert full control over domestic media consumption and leverage it to shape public opinion, proactively suppressing discontent both in the country and abroad.

Third, authoritarian rule is promoted as a "natural" system of government claimed to reflect the traditional culture and values of non-Western regions of the world. The philosophers after whom Putin models his behavior, Ivan Ilyin and Aleksandr Dugin, not only advocate[d] fascism but claim that the Russian political system must reflect the country's autocratic and religious heritage. According to this perspective, authoritarian rule not only offers stronger law and order but also better realizes social and national interests. Finally, the existing liberal world order is replaced by a system based on the principle of spheres of influence, the limited sovereignty of

¹⁹ Applebaum, Anne. "The Bad Guys Are Winning." *The Atlantic*, Nov. 15, 2021.

²⁰ Simmons, Beth A., Frank Dobbin, and Geoffrey Garrett. "Introduction: The International Diffusion of Liberalism." *International Organization* 60, no. 4 (2006): 781-810.

²¹ Libman, Alexander, and Anastassia Obydenkova. "Understanding Authoritarian Regionalism." *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018): 151–165. Hillman, Jonathan, *The Emperor's New Road: China and the Project of the Century*, Yale University Press. 2020.

neighboring countries, and the dominance of specific national and political interests.²² Western conceptions of universal rights and individualism are rejected, and in the new multipolar global order, the actions of sovereign countries cannot be judged or questioned.

Simmons and Elkins theorized democratization and liberal policy diffusion more broadly as a downstream consequence of Western economic dominance.²³ Today, dictatorial regimes have strongly integrated themselves in global trade and supply chains to achieve the same diffusion in reverse. Where conditional IMF loans once induced liberal policy shifts, lending from Russia and China supports their illiberal political agendas abroad. This economically driven autocratic linkage and leverage is exemplified by the case of Belarus, to which both countries have loaned billions of USD. In September of 2020, for instance, Russia provided a loan of \$1.5 billion USD amidst ongoing mass protests against claims of electoral fraud in the presidential election.²⁴ During the COVID-19 pandemic, after Belarus refused to join a European Union-funded initiative that saw vaccine distribution to participating countries, China donated several million doses of their own vaccine.²⁵ Russia was able to leverage its relations with Belarus in using the country for military drills as well as a launching ground in the earlier stages of its invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, 8.1 percent of Belarusian imports are from China, more than double the next-highest (Germany, 3.6 percent), and Russian imports reached upwards of 28 percent. According to the Chinese government, it's planned special economic zone in Belarus, an industrial park located just outside the capital, represents the country's "largest overseas economic and trade cooperation zone in terms of planned area and the level of collaboration."²⁶ Such encompassing support for the regime of Alexander Lukashenko has limited the consequences of several years of continually strengthened EU sanctions against the regime and has undoubtedly enabled his continued hold on power.

In addition to economic and political linkage, Levitsky and Way²⁷ identify social, communication, and civil society linkages with the West as supporting democratization in the post-Cold War era. But autocratic hegemonies have likewise increasingly leveraged these

²² Dugin, Aleksandr. *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia*. 1997.

²³ Simmons, Beth A., and Zachary Elkins. "The Globalization of Liberalization: Policy Diffusion in the International Political Economy." *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 1 (2004): 171-189.

²⁴ Soldatkin, Vladimir. "Putin Throws \$1.5 Billion Lifeline to Embattled Belarus Leader." *Reuters*. September 15, 2020.

²⁵ Blablova, Veronika. "Assessing China's Vaccine Diplomacy." *China Observers*. September 29, 2022.

²⁶ According to the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, http://en.sasac.gov.cn/2023/10/13/c_16026.htm.

²⁷ Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. "Linkage versus Leverage: Rethinking the International Dimension of Regime Change." *Comparative Politics* (2006): 379-400.

mechanisms towards their own ends. Russia's foreign agent law of 2012, designed for repressing and controlling civil society organizations, was adopted by Belarus and the autocratic Central Asian regimes.²⁸ Recent evidence shows that migration between autocracies has outpaced that between autocracies and democracies.²⁹ According to the Belarusian government, 87.8 percent of annual immigrants come from a fellow CIS country (primarily Russia).³⁰ Tourist exchanges between autocracies are also on the rise: Chinese nationals currently account for half of the tourists in Russia and mutual tourist flows have exceeded 1.2 million visits.³¹ Turkey has become the favorite destination for Russians with 6.3 million visits, a 21 percentage point increase compared to 2022;³² concomitantly, visits of Russians to China rose by 420 percentage points and to Cuba by 240 percentage points.³³³⁴

Another distinctive feature of new dictatorships is their unprecedented surveillance and repression capacity. Domestically, contemporary dictatorships benefit from the expanding technical capacities for mass population surveillance and for controlling access to information. As many observers have noted, the initial promise of the internet as a driver of liberation quickly faded away as the "sovereign internet" transformed itself into an efficient tool for political control and repression. The state-of-the-art Chinese model, for instance, integrates cutting-edge tracking technology with local neighborhood monitoring by cadres.³⁵ Meanwhile, the Russian and Chinese agencies responsible for domestic internet and mass media censorship—Roskomnadzor and the Cyberspace Administration of China, respectively—closely collaborate in the exchange of surveillance technology, reportedly even more so after the invasion of

²⁸ "Briefing: The Proliferation of Russian-Style Foreign Agents Laws". *Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe*. June 20, 2024.

²⁹ Tansey, Oisín, Kevin Koehler, and Alexander Schmotz. "Ties to the Rest: Autocratic Linkages and Regime Survival." *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 9 (2017): 1221-1254.

³⁰ "The 2019 Census of Population of the Republic of Belarus: Migration and Ethno-cultural Characteristics." *Economic Commission for Europe: Conference of European Statisticians*. May 8, 2024.

³¹ "Russia and China plan to increase mutual tourist flow to 2 mln trips." *Tass*. May 16, 2024.

³² "Meeting with President of Turkiye Ereceip Tayyip Erdogan." *Kremlin*. July 3, 2024.

³³ "Record Number of Russian Tourists Visit Cuba in 2023." *Interfax*. January 12, 2024.

³⁴ Daye, Chu. "30% more Chinese tourists expected to visit Russian capital in 2024: Moscow tourism official." *Global Times*. May 25, 2024.

³⁵ Gardels, Nathan. "'Autocratic Connectivity' In China and India." *Noema Magazine*, 2024.

Ukraine.³⁶ Various sources report that the regimes in Belarus, Cuba, and Iran, among others, have also received censorship technology from Beijing.³⁷

None of these strategies emerged overnight, but rather are the result of long processes of political learning, as dictatorial states experiment with different strategies and solutions that are then copied by other autocrats in their global network.³⁸ Strategies invented in Russia and China for controlling media and internet communications, restricting civil society organizations, preventing access to external funding for human rights organizations, the training and exchange of security police, and silencing foreign and domestic critics of the government are emulated and copied by the members of a growing authoritarian club.

Conclusion

Dictatorial drift and increasing cooperation between authoritarian regimes seeking to challenge the Western liberal hegemony has created a new, much more dangerous world. The recent unprovoked aggression by Russia on its neighbor, with tacit backing from China and military hardware supplied by Iran and North Korea, is the most striking example of what may happen if dictatorial ambitions and unconstrained leaders are not kept in check by the global community of liberal democracies. Diamond was right—and, indeed prescient, as he wrote before the Russian invasion of Ukraine—that:

[t]he dictatorships in Russia and China could destroy world peace before they destroy themselves. As they face the deep contradictions of their stultifying models, the authoritarian rulers of Russia and China will find their legitimacy waning. If they do not embrace political reform—a prospect that fills them with dread, given the fate of Gorbachev—they will have to rely increasingly on the exercise of raw power at home and abroad to preserve their rule. This is likely to propel them on a fascistic path, in which relentless repression of internal pluralism becomes inseparably bound up with ultranationalism, expansionism, and intense ideological hostility to all liberal and democratic values and rivals.³⁹

This article makes a simple point. Despite widely held beliefs that the era of brutal authoritarian politics is over and that gentler forms of authoritarian rule—characterized most of all by limited competition and constrained political pluralism—became the norm after the demise of the Soviet bloc, we are instead witnessing the return of assertive and highly repressive dictatorships.

³⁶ Belovodyev, Daniil, Andrei Soshnikov, Reid Standish, and Systema. "Exclusive: Leaked Files Show China and Russia Sharing Tactics on Internet Control, Censorship." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 5, 2023.

³⁷ Warf, Barney. "Geographies of Global Internet Censorship." *GeoJournal* 76 (2011): 1-23.

³⁸ Dobson, William. *The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy*. NY Doubleday, 2012.

³⁹ Diamond, Larry. "Democracy's Arc: From Resurgent to Imperiled." *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 1 (2022): 163-179.

The concept of dictatorial drift describes the ongoing transition from “soft” forms of authoritarian rule to hard core authoritarian policies in many countries once characterized as electoral autocracies. Dictatorial drift occurs via a gradual process that Laszlo Rajk, the infamous Stalinist Interior Minister of Hungary, described as “salami tactics”—a strategy that involves destroying liberal political institutions and opposition parties, independent media, and civil society organizations one thin slice at a time. The result is the destruction of alternative sources of power and of checks and balances, individual freedoms, and civil rights. In short, dictatorial drift is driven from above by autocratic leaders who in the process of accumulating unconstrained power gradually destroy independent political and regulatory institutions and other potential checks on their authority.

We argue that growing leverage and linkage among members of the “dictators club” has reduced the West’s ability to constrain the excesses of dictatorial powers. These countries have mastered strategies for shielding themselves from Western economic sanctions; through learning and cooperation, for instance, strategies of sanction avoidance developed by North Korea and Iran are today used successfully by Russia. More broadly, the weakening hegemonic ideational position of the West and its declining global economic clout is reinforced by the emergence of what Applebaum calls “Autocracy Inc.”—global networks of support among autocracies combining economic, political and security cooperation designed to undermine Western sanction regimes, supply critical resources, and offer political support to its members in the international arena. Additionally, developing cyber technologies offer the opportunity to engage in stealthy confrontation with the West to endanger the stability of its political and economic systems.

In contrast to competitive authoritarianism, this combination of domestic and international factors has a much better chance of producing a stable authoritarian equilibrium that rests on three pillars: economic security, lies, and fear.⁴⁰ Today, economic cooperation among dictatorships provides them with a greater degree of security and the capacity to survive economic sanctions. Sanction avoidance strategies are invented and diffused, allowing inputs and resources to be freely transferred with the network. Control of the media and of communications as well as collaboration between propaganda systems and troll farms allows an unchallenged pervasion of lies in the public space. Expanding military and internal security cooperation provides the necessary level of fear to prevent domestic challenges to dictatorial rule. At the same time, internationally coordinated retaliation for domestic autocratization becomes increasingly unlikely, as polarized liberal democracies in turn become less willing to pay the price of retaliatory policies and economic de-coupling. Declining support for Ukraine in the face of brutal Russian aggression both in the United States and Europe offers a worrying illustration of this point.

Finally, institutional path dependency and the long-time horizons of these dictators makes further autocratization in the absence of credible opposition and effective international pressure inevitable. Often enjoying strong popular support and legitimacy, able to circumvent economic sanction via autocratic support networks, and without threat of international retaliation, there is little reason to expect voluntary movement to the contrary. As the literature on authoritarianism

⁴⁰ Gerschewski, Johannes. “The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimacy, Repression and Co-Optation in Authoritarian Regimes.” *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 13–38.

argues, the institutionalization of power in effectively single-party regimes all but ensures long-term survival and the co-optation of competitors.⁴¹ Moreover, in contrast to the Cold War era, modern dictators have become much more pragmatic and cynical and less invested in ideological projects.

The threat to dictatorships, and to dictatorial drift, comes from two sources. First, consolidating dictatorship is no easy task: many budding authoritarian regimes with weak institutions and state capacity linger in a semi-consolidated state for years, during which they are vulnerable to political challenges from below.⁴² To establish a stable authoritarian regime, rulers need to actively mobilize illiberal groups, build coalitions of anti-democratic actors, and cultivate relationships with illiberal organizations abroad. They also need to provoke conflicts and polarize the electorate to keep their supporters emotionally committed and mobilized. This in turn deepens political chaos and creates a lingering sense of instability, which facilitates support for autocratic policies among elites. Moreover, dictatorships face a fundamental problem of leadership transition. Efforts to institutionalize changes in leadership introduced in the Soviet Union and communist China were ignored by modern dictators in both countries.

While economic stagnation and material deprivation tend to breed political extremism, many contemporary countries drifting in the dictatorial direction are economically stable. Thus, the increased mobilization of non-economic cleavages and grievance politics drives regime-legitimizing mass support in autocratic legislatures and votes for autocrats. Support is further engineered through populist economic policies, clientelism, and corrupt practices.⁴³ Finally, autocrats intimidate and repress those who refuse to be bought. Drifting dictators constantly search for internal and external enemies. Using relentless propaganda from state-controlled media, they manipulate the public and hide their own misdeeds and failures. As the prospect for global convergence on liberal values has drastically declined, it remains to be seen whether newly emerging dictatorships can be constrained and persuaded to step back from aggression abroad and repressions at home.

The second source of threat to dictatorial regimes comes from abroad. International resolve and cooperation in countering aggression, intimidation, and efforts to subvert democratic politics and the rules of the market economy can yet prove effective. Democratic states must acknowledge that dictatorial drift is not a random process affecting a select few countries but a global trend with staying power. To survive confrontation with these new dictatorships, the West needs to

⁴¹ Geddes, Barbara. "What Do We Know about Democratization After Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 115-144.

⁴² Way, Lucan. "The Real Causes of the Color Revolutions." *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 4 (2008): 55-69.

⁴³ See Slater, Dan. *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. Also, see: Orenstein, Mitchell A., and Bojan Bugarič. "Work, Family, Fatherland: The Political Economy of Populism in Central and Eastern Europe." *Journal of European Public Policy* 29, no. 2 (2022): 176-195.

develop new strategies—not simply Cold War-residuals—with the aim of defending democracy and liberal values both at home and abroad. This ranges from a more credible commitment to the military defense of our allies to a reduced reliance on dictator-controlled foreign resources. To counteract extreme polarization, which increasingly markets democracy as a failed experiment, politicians should use language that unifies, to the benefit of our institutions and of good governance, rather than intentionally divides, to the advantage only of themselves.