

THE STATE OF AUTOCRATISATION IN THE EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD & CASE-SELECTION

WORKING PAPER



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FOREWORD

The Horizon Europe research project (2023-2025) RED-SPINEL (Respond to Emerging Dissensus: Supranational Instruments and Norms of European democracy) seeks to shed light on the growing dissensus surrounding liberal democracy and the rule of law within and beyond the European Union (EU). RED-SPINEL examines how policy instruments and legal mechanisms at the EU level have evolved in response to dissensus surrounding liberal democracy and its constitutive dimensions. Bringing together academics and researchers from seven universities (Université libre de Bruxelles, University of Amsterdam, Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli, Babes- Bolyai University, University of Warwick, Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu, and HEC Paris) and four non-academic institutions (Peace Action Training and Research Institute in Romania, Milieu Consulting, Magyar Helsinki Bizottság / Hungarian Helsinki Committee and Stichting Nederlands Instituut voor Internationale Betrekkingen Clingendael), the project addresses key transversal questions:

1. What is the nature of the current dissensus and how disruptive is it to the EU?
2. How have EU institutional actors and instruments contributed and responded to this increased dissensus?
3. What are the implications of this dissensus for policy instruments at EU and Member State levels?

These are the main questions of the project that will be explored empirically in relation to the following topics:

- Instruments relating to the promotion of democracy and the rule of law within the EU (Work package 2)
- Instruments relating to the promotion of democracy and the rule of law within the EU's neighbourhood (Work package 3)
- Legal mechanisms and technocratic instruments fostering citizen participation, defending fundamental rights and promoting climate justice (Work package 4)
- Instruments relating to EU economic governance, notably the European Semester (Work package 5):

The present report is produced in the framework of RED-SPINEL's Work package 3 (WP3), which focuses on analysing 'EU instruments and the autocratisation challenge in a dissensus stricken neighbourhood', which deals with the external dimension of the EU's actions and strategies seeking to tackle authoritarian challenges in the EU neighbourhood. Autocratisation is defined here as a movement away from democracy toward autocracy, occurring either as a transition between regimes or within a regime as a loss of democratic quality.

The geographical scope of WP3 includes EU interactions with countries covered either by the enlargement agenda (Western Balkans and Turkey) or the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In order to achieve our goals, WP3 will undertake the following tasks:

1. Assess the autocratisation processes in the Western Balkans and the 16 bilateral ENP partners.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the EU's Enlargement and Eastern Partnership instruments in terms of electoral monitoring and assistance, support for civil society, counter-autocratisation, anti-corruption efforts, and the protection of judicial independence.
3. Study the impact of anti-liberal democracy campaigns (and of corollaries such as misinformation and polarization) run by third parties on the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU instruments.

The present report contributes to the work undertaken under WP3 by identifying and mapping autocratisation trends in the EU's neighbourhood, particularly after 2008. The analysis uses the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) V-Dem to track democracy evolution in the EU neighbourhood states. The report includes detailed case studies of various countries in the EU's Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods and EU enlargement countries, including Israel, Tunisia, Ukraine, Armenia, Serbia, North Macedonia and Turkey. The analyses map developments happening between 2013 and 2022 in the political life of each of these case studies and cover changes in regime types, economic profiles, popular mobilization and opposition, independence of the judiciary, freedom of expression, and the context of the international support networks. Hence, the report maps the developments of democracy in the European neighborhood, the implications and ramifications for EU politics and the impact of EU politics in the neighborhood, highlighting the challenges posed by autocratisation trends, and how they manifest in each country.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report maps autocratisation trends in the European Union (EU) neighbourhood over the last decades, particularly concerning the contestations of global democracies after 2008. Autocratisation, understood as the opposite of democratisation, has been defined [1] as a movement away from democracy and toward autocracy, that can occur both as a between-regime transition (i.e. from democracy to autocracy) and within-regime transition (in the form of a loss of democratic quality of a democracy regime, or as the deepening of authoritarianism in an already autocratic regime). The EU neighbourhood is defined as the region targeted by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), plus the countries negotiating for the EU accession. The region comprises the Southern neighbourhood, including Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia; the Eastern neighbourhood, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine; and finally, the countries currently negotiating the EU membership, including Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Although the EU's accession negotiations with Turkey are practically frozen, this country features in this report because of the many implications that Turkish politics have for the entire region as such and, more generally, for the processes of EU enlargement and not only because it is officially recognised as an EU Candidate State.

The graphs used for the analysis track the evolution of democracy in the EU neighbourhood states using the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) of the V-Dem (v2x_polyarchy). According to the V-Dem codebook, this index reflects the electoral democracy as defined by Robert Dahl: “The electoral principle of democracy seeks to embody the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens, achieved through electoral competition for the electorate’s approval under circumstances when suffrage is extensive; political and civil society organisations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; and elections affect the composition of the chief executive of the country. Between elections, there is freedom of expression and an independent media capable of presenting alternative views on matters of political relevance” [2]. Consequently, the analysis aggregates indicators measuring freedom of association, freedom of expression, elected officials, and voting. The index ranges from 0 to 1.

Moreover, following the approach by Maerz et al., the identification of episodes of autocratisation, that is, a process of years during which sustained declines in the quality of democracy take place, we used the R package “ERT” (Episodes of Regime Transformation) [3] to produce the graphs used in this report. The red section of each line shows the autocratisation episode, with the beginning and ending year.

[1] Andrea Cassani, Luca Tomini, *Autocratization in post-Cold War Political Regimes* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2017); Anna Lüthmann, Staffan I. Lindberg “A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?”, *Democratization*, 26 (7), 2019, 1095-1113, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029.; Lars Pelke, Aurel Croissant, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Autocratization Episodes”, *Political Science Perspective*, 27, (2) 2021, 434-448.

[2] Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971 qtd. In V-Dem codebook <https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/img/refs/codebookv12.pdf>

[3] S. F Maerz, A. B Edgell, M. C., Wilson, Hellmeier, S., & Lindberg, S. “Episodes of regime transformation”. *Journal of Peace Research*, 0(0) (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433231168192>.

Table 1 summarises all cases, considering the starting and ending types of political regimes before and after an autocratisation episode, using a four-fold classification between liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, and closed autocracy. Both liberal democracy and electoral democracies are inclusive regimes that allow contestation, but the executive is effectively constrained only in the former [4]. Electoral autocracies hold inclusive multiparty elections but restrict contestation through a combination of formal and informal limitations to political rights and violations of election integrity [5]. Closed autocracies do not allow people to choose who governs in practice, even if they often organise façade elections. They are typically headed by a king, a military junta or a dictator, who is usually but not always the leader of a political party [6].

Following these models, one sees that each country included in the analysis has undergone several autocratisation episodes, some with a distinct change in the political system at the end of this episode, some without this systemic shift. For the purpose of this analysis, we have chosen to approach the more recent episodes of autocratisation, following two main rationales. First, in all these cases, the EU integration policies or EU agreements have played an essential role in the political landscape. Since the methodology of the Red Spinel project considers dissensus from within and from external factors, the dynamics of discourses about the EU and how policy tools are used and absorbed into the political landscape are essential for understanding dissensus. Second, the last episodes of autocratisation respond and are part of a global demise of trust in liberal democracy and the liberal consensus. This makes these latest episodes crucial for understanding how autocratisation exists against the background of contestations of liberal democracy [7]. Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg (2019) argue that we are witnessing a third wave of autocratisation that affects democracies with gradual setbacks, although they keep a legal façade [8]. In this sense, autocratisation is best put on a degree between democracies and autocracies and conceptualise autocratisation – the antipode of democratisation – as a matter of degree that can occur both in democracies and autocracies. Democracies can lose democratic traits to varying degrees without entirely and long before breaking down.

[4]Wolfgang Merkel, “Embedded and Defective Democracies”, *Democratization*, 11,(5), 2004, pp.33–58.

[5] Andreas Schedler, ed., *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*. First Forum Press. 2018.

[6] Hans Lueders, “Electoral Responsiveness in Closed Autocracies: Evidence from Petitions in the Former German Democratic Republic.” *American Political Science Review*, 116, (3), 2022, pp. 827–842, doi:10.1017/S0003055421001386.

[7] Julian Waller, “Distinctions With a Difference: Illiberalism and Authoritarianism in Scholarly Study”. *Political Studies Review*, o(o) 2023,. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299231159253>

[8] Lührmann, Lindberg “A third wave of autocratization”.

Table 1 - Regime change by country, based on V-Dem, generated in November 2023.

Country	Episodes of autocratisation	Regime type, beginning	Regime type, ending
Algeria	1992-1993 2016-2022	Closed autocracy Electoral autocracy	Closed autocracy Electoral autocracy
Egypt	2013-2014	Electoral autocracy	Closed autocracy
Israel	2013-2022	Liberal democracy	Liberal democracy
Jordan	2000 2016	Closed autocracy Closed autocracy	Closed autocracy Closed autocracy
Lebanon	1993 2018-2022	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy
Libya	2014 2022	Electoral democracy Closed autocracy	Closed autocracy Closed autocracy
Morocco	n/a	Closed autocracy	Closed autocracy
Palestine/Wesr Bank	2006-2008 2015-2022	Electoral democracy Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy
Syria	2011	Electoral autocracy	Closed autocracy
Tunisia	2014-2022	Electoral autocracy	Closed autocracy
Armenia	1994-1997 2003-2008 2020-2022	Electoral democracy Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy Electoral democracy

Azerbaijan	1993-1996 2004	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy
Belarus	1995-2001 2011 2020-2022	Electoral democracy Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy
Georgia	1992 1997-1998 2018-2022	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy
Moldova	1998-2005 2013-2017	Electoral democracy Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral democracy
Ukraine	1996-2004 2010-2014 2021-2022	Electoral democracy Electoral democracy Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy
Albania	1996-1997 2013-2022	Electoral autocracy Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1994 2004-2007 2013-2022	Closed autocracy Electoral democracy Electoral democracy	Closed autocracy Electoral democracy Electoral democracy
Kosovo	2011 2017 2020-2022	Electoral democracy Electoral democracy Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral democracy Electoral democracy
Montenegro	2013-2017	Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy
North Macedonia	2000 2005-2012/2017	Electoral autocracy Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy Electoral autocracy
Serbia	1991 2016-2022	Closed autocracy Liberal democracy	Closed autocracy Electoral autocracy
Turkey	2017-2023	Electoral democracy	Electoral autocracy

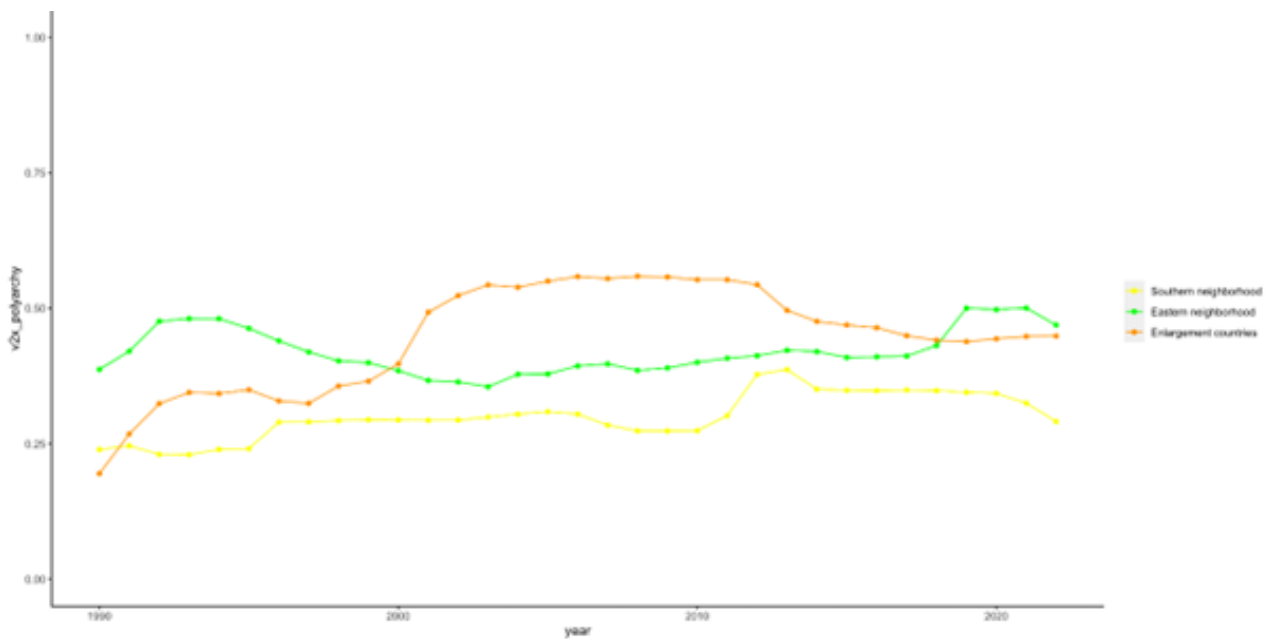


Figure 1 - Level of democracy in the three macro-areas, average index based on V-Dem, generated November 2023.

The graph above shows the evolution of the Democracy Index scores from 1990 to 2022 for three different regions: the Eastern Neighbourhood, the Southern Neighbourhood and the Enlargement Countries. The index score measures various aspects of democratic health, such as electoral processes, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation and political culture. Higher scores on the y-axis indicate a higher level of democracy. The green line, representing trends in democracy in the Eastern neighbourhood, shows a steady decline in democracy scores after the recovery from the political and economic crises of 1990, following the global moment of 1989, but also a relative consolidation of democratic processes, with some fluctuations. This points to existing autocratic tendencies and the fragility of democratic institutions in the region. The yellow line, representing democratic trends in the southern neighbourhood, shows a more volatile environment in terms of democratic capacity. Periods of political instability, reform or conflict and social movements are a symptom of the volatile state of democracy in the region, and may also have seen a steep rise, but also an abrupt fall, in autocratic practices in governance. The orange line for the enlargement countries shows an upward trend in democratic processes until the late 2000s, followed by a sharp downward trend from the early 2010s onwards, although less steep than in the Eastern neighbourhood [9]. From the 1990s until around the mid-2000s, all three regions show an improvement or stabilisation in democracy scores. After the mid-2000s, however, the trend appears to have reversed, with all regions experiencing a decline in democracy to varying degrees.

[9] The countries considered for the EU Enlargement group are the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) and Turkey, the Association Trio (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and Turkey.

This period reflects broader regional trends, such as the impact of the global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the rise of nationalist and populist movements and geopolitical tensions affecting these regions. The Eastern Neighbourhood and Enlargement countries show a more continuous decline in recent years, which could be related to internal and external pressures on democratic institutions. The Southern Neighbourhood, while experiencing volatility, does not show such a clear trend and may be influenced by events in individual countries rather than a regional pattern. Overall, this graph suggests that the state of democracy in the EU's neighbourhood has faced significant challenges over the past three decades, with trends since the 2000s giving particular cause for concern.

2. SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

The EU's Southern Neighbourhood area is confronted with the prevalence of non-democratic regimes, be they traditional monarchies (Morocco or Jordan), military dictatorships (Egypt), or electoral autocracies (Algeria, Lebanon, and Palestine) [10]. Moreover, the post-Arab Spring uprisings and civil wars have particularly affected the integrity of statehood in some countries (Libya and Syria) [11]. Israel remains one of the few democratic countries in the region despite worrying attacks on its democratic system in 2022-2023 [12]. However, Israel's territorial policy and politics have consistently provoked criticism and internal opposition against the Netanyahu government much earlier [13]. Morocco, Jordan, and Algeria appear to have been relatively stable since the 1990s, albeit with systemic concerns about democratic practices while Libya and Syria have been affected by civil wars and the dissolution of statehood, following the end of autocratic regimes that had enjoyed stability. Taken together, the graphs produced based on the V-Dem data (see below) collectively illustrate a region with diverse developments. Some countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt, show significant political changes in relatively short periods, reflecting the impact of revolutions and political crises, but leading to autocratisation. Others, such as Jordan and Morocco, show stability but with the persistent reality of autocratisation. In the case of Libya and Syria, the graphs reflect the severe instability and conflict in these states. Israel stands out as a country with a high level of democratic measures but with recent trends indicating potential challenges to its democratic fabric.

With this in mind, we have found that Israel and Tunisia are the most interesting cases because their established democratic practices are being eroded, contested and attacked. This is happening in very different ways, and the two case studies represent the range of processes at play. The two countries provide an opportunity to chart quite different dynamics of democratic development and challenges, in distinctly different contexts provided by their geographical and cultural specificities but dealing with the same vulnerability of democracy in the face of internal and external pressures.

Tunisia is a key case of the Arab Spring and its aftermath, as it shows increased autocratisation despite a very different potential back in 2010. As the birthplace of the Arab Spring, Tunisia was seen as a beacon of hope in the region and had embarked on a path towards democracy, but political developments, particularly the autocratic turn of President Kais Saied, which has curtailed freedom of expression and representation, have raised significant concerns about the reversal of democratic gains.

[10] World Report, Human Rights Watch, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018>

[11] El-Hussari, Ibrahim "Yet another version of the Arab Spring: ramification of the Syrian armed conflict for the existing Arab order and beyond", *Central European Journal of International & Security Studies*, 8, (3), 2014.

[12] Noam Gidron, "Why Israeli Democracy Is in Crisis", *Journal of Democracy*, 34 (3) 2023, 33-45.

[13] Dani Filc, "Political radicalization in Israel: From a populist habitus to radical right populism in government." In: Steiner, K., Önerfors, A. (eds) *Expressions of Radicalization*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65566-6_5.

This shift offers crucial insights into how domestic political dynamics and economic challenges can affect the trajectory of transformation. Moreover, Tunisia has also been at the centre of the European Union's controversial position on migration, and the dissensus over migration and creeping autocratisation in Europe has also had an impact on Tunisia's domestic politics.

In contrast, **Israel**, as an established democracy in a region struggling with lawlessness, state failure, economic hardship and autocratic governance, presents a different set of challenges and dynamics. While Israel undoubtedly enjoys strong democratic institutions, it faces internal tensions from various new actors that test the resilience of its democratic fabric. Recent controversies over judicial reforms enabled by the governing bodies and the toll that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is taking on domestic politics highlight the complexities of maintaining democratic norms in a socio-politically charged environment veering towards the radical right.

The juxtaposition of Tunisia and Israel in our study allows us to explore the fragility and durability of democratic systems. Tunisia's experience provides a window into the challenges faced by emerging democracies in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in balancing between democratic aspirations and changes triggered by popular will. The case of Israel, on the other hand, sheds light on how established democracies can live with internal divisions (and often be destabilized by them) while striving to uphold democratic values. While Tunisia struggles to consolidate its democratic gains amidst instability, Israel faces the challenges of sustaining democratic governance and institutions in the face of rising internal authoritarianism and dissensus. Taken together, these case studies enrich our understanding of the complexities of democratic transitions and sustainability by focusing on the trajectories of democracies in the Mediterranean region.

Figure 2 - Autocratisation episodes per decade – Algeria, based on V-Dem, generated November 2023.

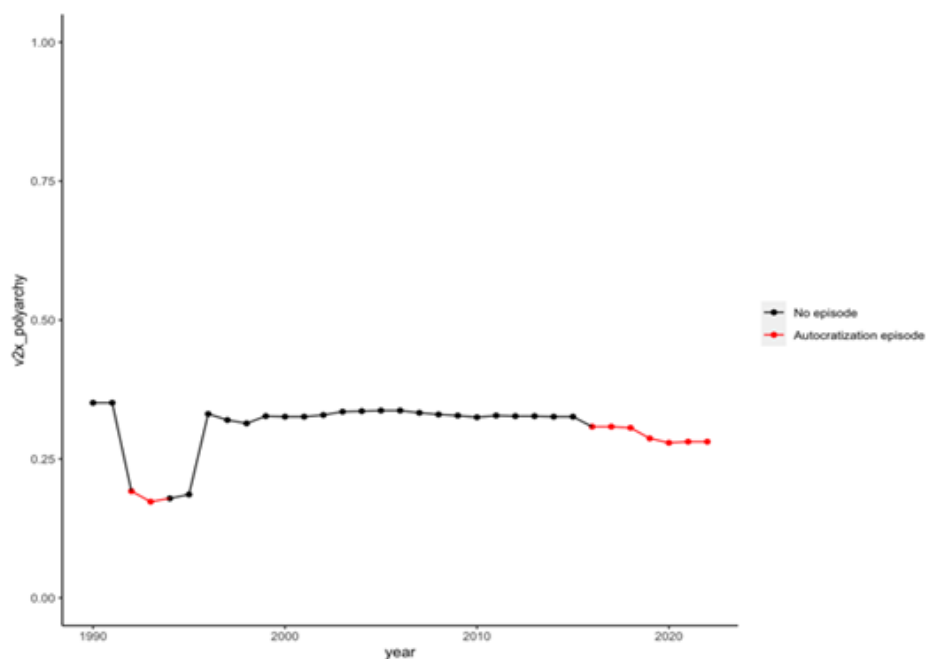


Figure 3 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Egypt based on V-Dem, generated November 2023.

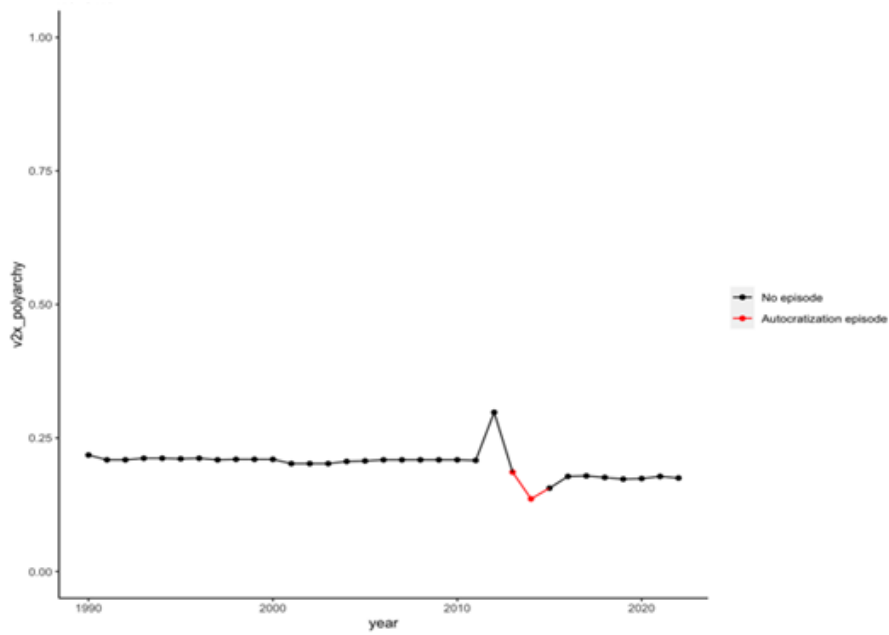


Figure 4 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Israel based on V-Dem, generated November 2023.

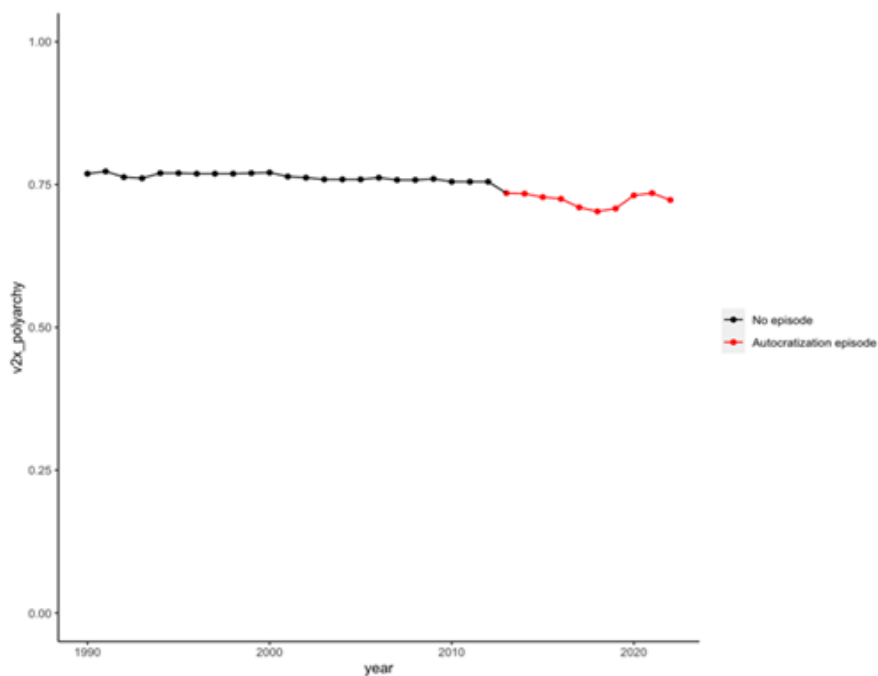


Figure 5 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Jordan based on V-Dem, generated November 2023.

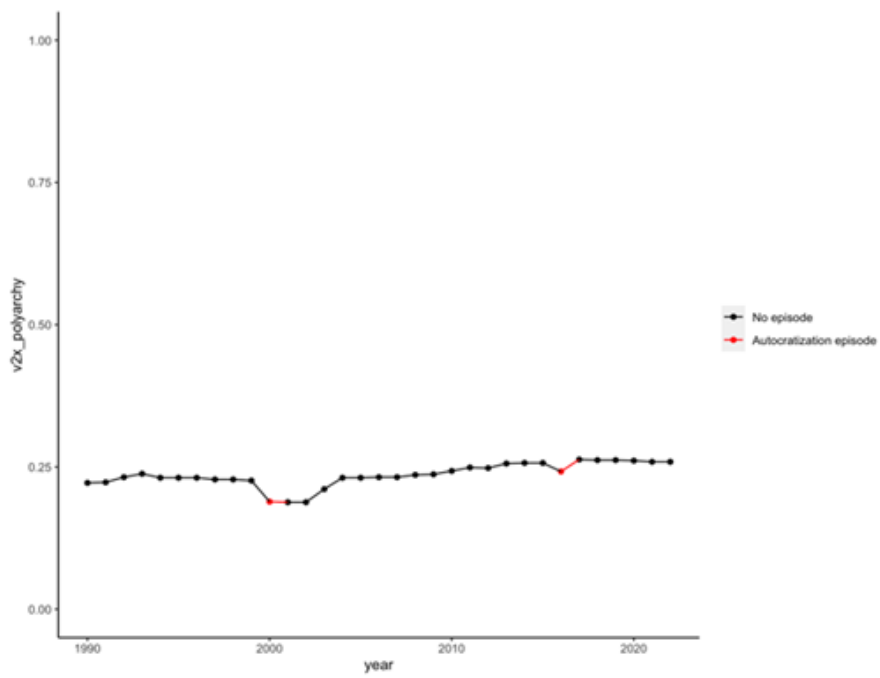


Figure 6 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Lebanon based on V-Dem, generated November 2023.

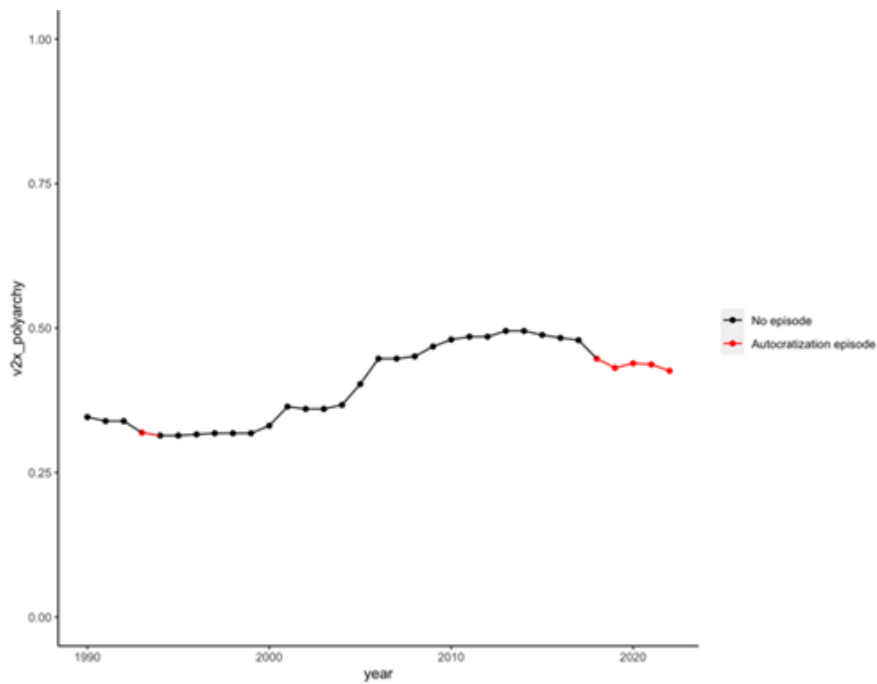


Figure 7 – Autocratisation episodes per decade in Libya based on V-Dem, generated November 2023.

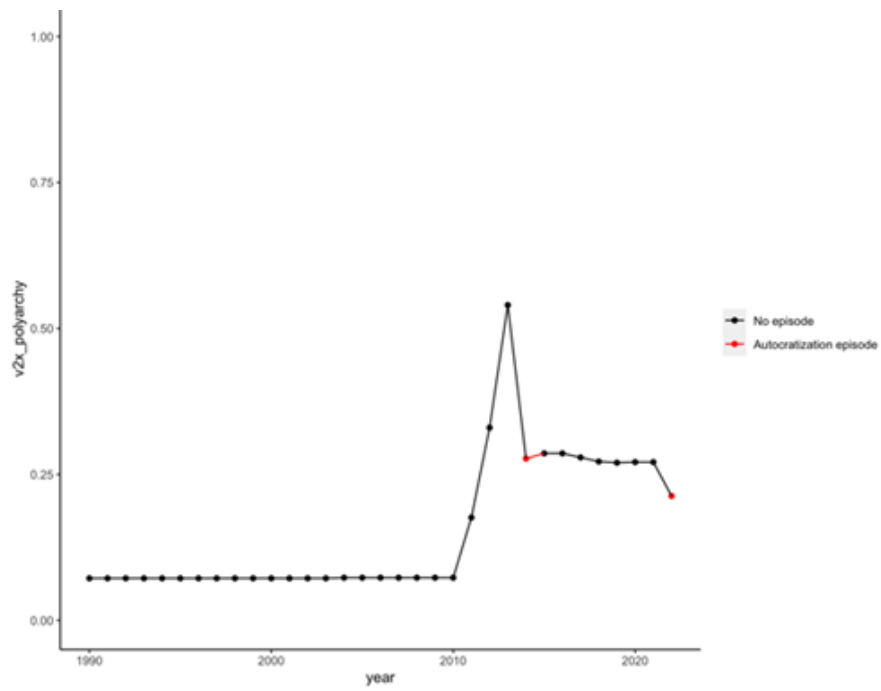


Figure 8 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Morocco, based on V-Dem, generated November 2023.

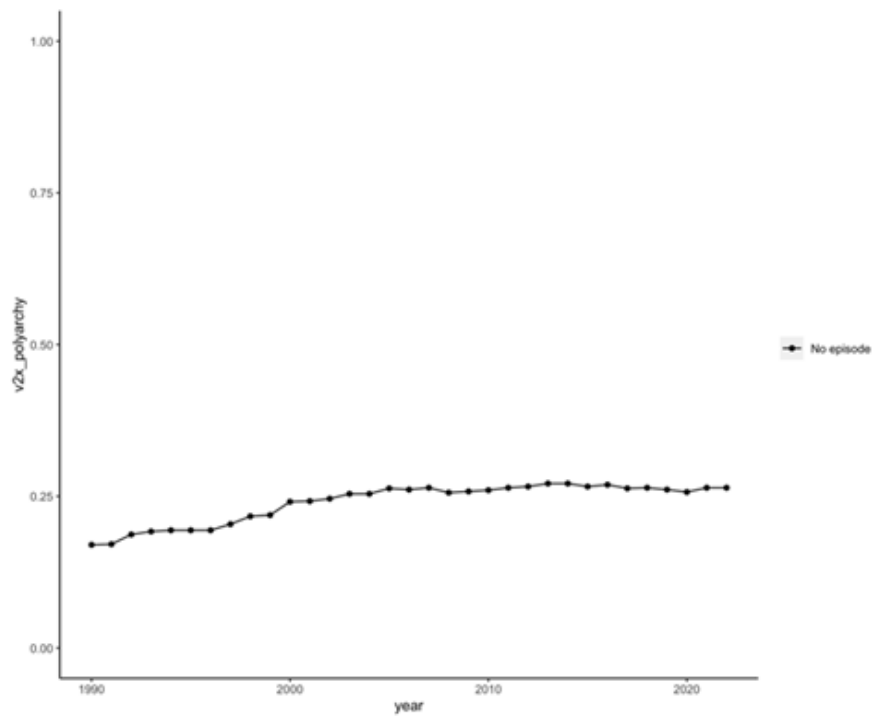


Figure 9 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Morocco based on V-Dem, generated November 2023.

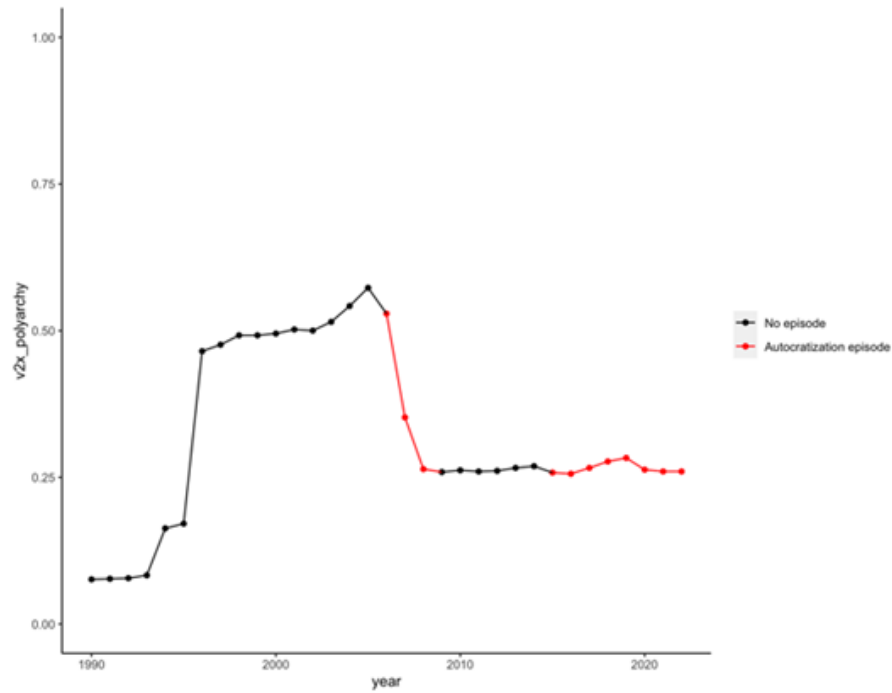


Figure 10 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Syria based on V-Dem, generated November 2023.

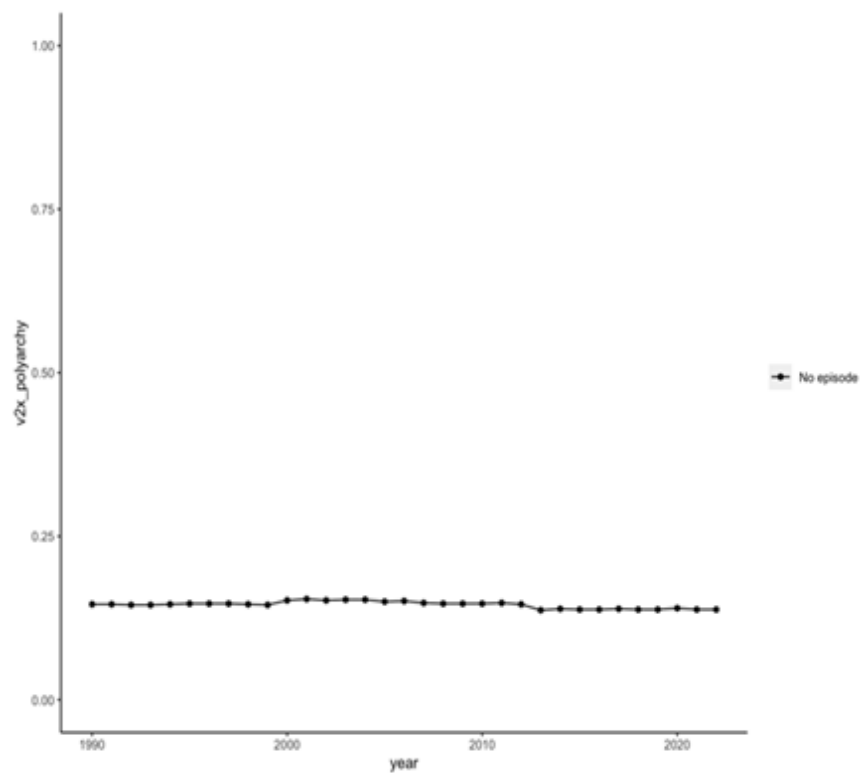
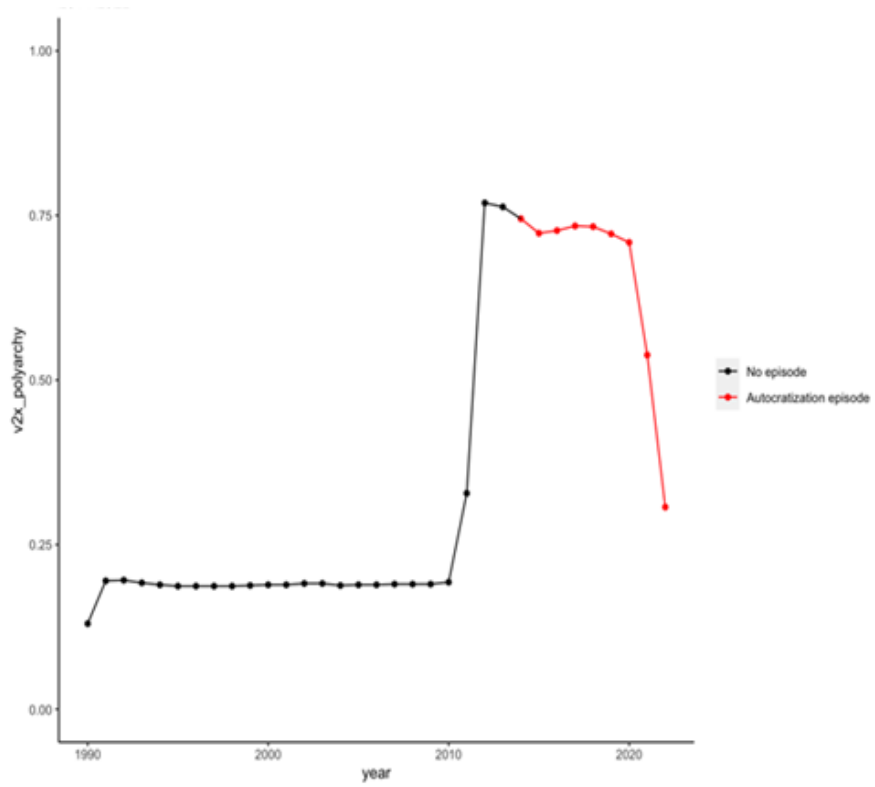


Figure 11 - Figure 10-Autocratisation episodes per decade in Tunisia based on V-Dem, generated November 2023



CASE STUDY: ISRAEL

(Ana Pantea & Şerban Văetişi)

TIMESPAN OF ANALYSIS: 2013-2022

TYPE OF REGIME: Liberal Democracy [14]

CHANGES DURING THAT TIMESPAN

According to the country graph showing the level of democracy based on the V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) (v2x_polyarchy), a slight decline towards autocratisation could be observed in Israel in 2022, but overall, the country enjoys a relatively high democratic score, fluctuating slightly around 0.75. Recent developments, particularly Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition proposals for judicial reform (see below), may indicate a continuation of this decline.

ECONOMIC PROFILE

Israel is an OECD member country with a strong free-market economy and a technologically advanced manufacturing sector. Its main trading partner - for both imports and exports - is the European Union (EU), which signed a free trade agreement with Israel in 2004 Israel [15]. Israel also has strong trade links with the United States. Israel's economic competitiveness is underpinned by strong protection of property rights protection and relatively low levels of corruption, which have been the cornerstones of long-term economic dynamism [16]. However, these have recently been challenged by the financial dealings of parties and people in power. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his family and associates have been the cause of protests and accusations of impunity. Labour shortages exist, and the employment of third-country nationals and migrant workers (including from Palestine) has filled some of the gaps in certain sectors of the economy [17]. However, their presence has led to discrimination and further unrest. The wide productivity gap between the vibrant high-tech sector and more traditional and sheltered sectors is also an economic-societal challenge reflecting the divisions within Israeli society and the potentially heightened risks of social unrest [18].

POPULAR MOBILIZATION AND OPPOSITION WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

Over the past two decades Israel has witnessed new forms of protest and new actors joining popular mobilisations for various causes. For example, in September 2023, an otherwise "silent minority", the Druze, an Arabic-speaking ethnic and religious minority group living in a transnational area (the mountainous parts of Syria, Lebanon, northern Israel and northern Jordan), began to speak out

[14] Anna Lührmann, Marcus Tannenberg, & Staffan I. Lindberg. "Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes." *Politics and Governance*, 6, (1) 2018, 60-77. It is important to flag that, despite negative assessments of the democratic performance of Israel, and rising encroachment of liberal institutions, the regime type has not formally changed throughout the Netanyahu government. See Dr. Assaf Shapira, "Israel is Still a Free Country – But Now With a Warning Sign", The Israel Democracy Institute, <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/48366>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[15] "Israel", World Bank, 2023. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/IL>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[16] V Dem, Corruption Perception Index Rank 60, 2022.

[17] Rebeca Rajzman, "Foreigners and Outsiders: Exclusionist Attitudes towards Labour Migrants in Israel". *International Migration*, (2013), 51: 136-151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2011.00719>.

[18] Israel, a Frágile Democracy, Interview with Samy Cohen, 16.03.2021. <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/en/content/israel-fragile-democracy-interview-samy-cohen>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

against a governmental clean energy programme for wind turbine projects in the Golan Heights, which has been seen as encroaching on lands that traditionally belong to this community and threatening their rural way of life [19]. This case is a good illustration of how different causes (economic, socio-cultural, environmental) and actors (ethnic-religious minorities, NGOs) can mobilise for or against different cases and at other times gain widespread support. The Druze protest mentioned above was seen as a potential element of further tension in the region if it received wider popular mobilisation. In the case of the Israeli Druze, for example, their mobilisation may be linked to the sentiment of their disenfranchisement and discrimination brought about by the “Nationality Law” of 2018 [20].

The most powerful popular mobilisation in recent times has been the protests between January and May 2023, when tens of thousands of Israelis gather every weekend, mainly in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, to protest against the legislative activity of the unicameral parliament (the Knesset) and the government’s plan to overhaul the judicial system, in the so-called Israeli judicial reform protests of 2023. The demonstrators reflect the political and social fabric of the country – members of the opposition parties and their leaders, civil society, but also representatives of the business community, financial entrepreneurs, computer scientists, lawyers and conscientious objectors who refuse to participate in the national military draft. The aim of these protests and demonstrations is to stop the far-right coalition cabinet led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from reforming of the country’s judicial system, which, according to these opponents, would undermine the democratic character of the country (by limiting the prerogatives of the Supreme Court in passing laws, to the detriment of the right-wing, far-right and religious parties that dominate the Knesset).

Between 2013-2022 major popular mobilisations also included [21].

- the Bedouin protest against the forced relocation of 40,000-70.000 Bedouin citizens to move into townships planned by the Israeli government in 2013[22];
- the Haredi protest against the plan to draft ultra-Orthodox Jewish men into military service in 2013[23];
- the Israeli LGBT strike in 2018, a protest against the discrimination of the LGBT community in the Israeli Surrogacy Law, and the ongoing violence towards the Israeli trans community

[19] Yusri Hazran, “The Druze in Israel: A Silent Minority Begins to Speak Out”, The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune, September 2023, <https://jstribune.com/hazran-the-druze-in-israel/>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[20] Ramzy Baroud, “Balancing act is over: Israel protests are not about democracy, but ideology”, Middle Eastern Monitor, 31.07.2023. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230731-balancing-act-is-over-israel-protests-are-not-about-democracy-but-ideology/>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[21] Elisabeth Marteu, ed., Civil Organizations and Protest Movements in Israel: Mobilization around the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Mahmood Monshipouri, “Digital Activism in Perspective: Palestinian Resistance via Social Media”, International Studies Journal, 14 (4), 2018, 37-57; Nina Schlager, Karsten Donnay, Hyunjung Kim, Ravi Bhavnani, “Drivers of COVID-19 Protest across Localities in Israel: A Machine-Learning Approach”, Political Research Exchange, 5(1) 2022, DOI: 10.1080/2474736X.2023.2257368.

[22] It 24, Israel’s Bedouins: ‘We want equal rights. We want our land’, 15.02.2022, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/society/1642251640-israel-s-bedouins-we-want-equal-rights-we-want-our-land>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[23] Gadi Hitman, “Haredi Anti-Zionist Ideology as the Driving Force Behind the Ultraorthodox Protests in Israel” Contemporary Review of the Middle East, 9(4) 2022, 426-443. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989221115293>

[24] Stuart Winer, “LGBTs call nationwide strike in protest of surrogacy law excluding gays”, The Times of Israel, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/lgbts-call-nationwide-strike-in-protest-of-surrogacy-law-excluding-gays/>.

- the Ethiopian Jews protest in 2019, a period of unrest that mobilised tens of thousands of people in response to the shooting death of an 18-year-old Ethiopian Jew by an Israeli police officer in Haifa [25]
- the COVID-19 anti-governmental demonstrations against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's handling of the coronavirus crisis and over allegations of corruption in 2020;
- the 2021 protest, when Palestinians in East Jerusalem began protesting against an expected Supreme Court decision on the eviction of six Palestinian families. These led to confrontations that left hundreds dead, thousands injured, and tens of thousands displaced.

INDEPENDENCE OF THE JUDICIARY

Throughout this period, Israel's judiciary has functioned as an independent branch of the government, co-existing with the executive and legislative branches. The judiciary is central to upholding the rule of law and protecting human rights. The Supreme Court of Israel is the highest judicial authority. It has the power to review the activities undertaken by other levels of government to ensure that they comply with the law and the Constitution. The appointment of judges in Israel involves the involvement of the Judicial Selection Committee. The committee consists of representatives of the judiciary, the Knesset (Israel's legislative body), and the Bar Association. The committee is responsible for selecting and appointing judges to various courts, including the Supreme Court [26].

The Supreme Court in Israel has become a controversial institution due to its power of judicial review over legislation [27], decisions affecting the ultra-Orthodox community, interference in government decisions that violate human rights, and the perception that it prevents the government from governing. Despite the criticism, the Court has proved to be a solid institution, promoting fundamental rights, providing individuals with remedies against arbitrary government decisions, and curbing government corruption [28]. Changes to the appointment process for judges, including a purely political process, increasing the number of political committee members, or subjecting candidates to parliamentary hearings and approval, are also being considered. However, in January 2023, shortly after the inauguration of Israel's sixth government, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initiated a comprehensive set of judicial reforms that would significantly alter the dynamics between the judiciary and other branches of the government. The reforms have the potential to benefit Netanyahu politically and legally, particularly in light of his ongoing trial on corruption and other criminal charges [29]. The reforms have triggered a significant domestic crisis in Israel, leading to a widespread mobilisation of many segments of society towards a newly formed activist, liberal-centrist movement. This development has the potential for significant political repercussions [30].

[25] David M. Halbfinger and Isabel Kershner, "After a Police Shooting, Ethiopian Israelis Seek a 'Black Lives Matter' Reckoning", *New York Times*, 13.07.2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/13/world/middleeast/ethiopian-israeli-protests-racism.html>

[26] David Kretzmer, 'Israel's political and constitutional crisis', *IACL-AIDC Blog*, 23.12.2022, <https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/new-blog-3/2022/12/23/israels-political-and-constitutional-crisis>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[27] Zack Beauchamp, "How Israel's court became so controversial", *Vox*, 2023. <https://www.vox.com/world-politics/23864407/israel-judicial-overhaul-supreme-court-hearing-netanyahu>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[28] Avital Sicron, "An Activist Court? Reassessing the Decline In Trust In the Israeli Supreme Court", *Currents*, (7), 2023, <https://www.international.ucla.edu/israel/currents/article/268576>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[29] Tia Goldenberger, "What is the latest on Netanyahu's corruption trial?", 12.03.2020, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-netanyahu-corruption-trial-courts-4e18ed8f34e65707bd47e37696d244705>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[30] Alan Shatter, "Undermining the Credibility of Israel's Legal System is No Way to Celebrate Israel's Seventy-Fifth Anniversary", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 17:1, (2023) 12-16, DOI: [10.1080/23739770.2023.2194116](https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2023.2194116), Alan Shatter "The severe political storm in Israel", *Strategic Comments*, 29:2, x-xii, DOI: [10.1080/13567888.2023.2208468](https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2023.2208468)

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court, protects the freedom of expression in Israel through a system of fundamental laws and rights, that have semi-constitutional status [31]. According to Freedom House, Israel guarantees political rights and civil liberties to most of its population and has a global status of “free” (right to expression). However, “although the judiciary is comparatively active in protecting minority rights, the political leadership and many in society have discriminated against Arab and other ethnic or religious minority populations, resulting in systemic disparities in areas including political representation, criminal justice, education, and economic opportunity” [32]. The 2022 Freedom House report gave Israel a global freedom score of 76 (out of 100)[33]. This score declined slightly and steadily from 80 (in 2017) to 79 (in 2018), to 78 (in 2019), to 76 (in 2020 and 2021), reflecting the slight trend towards autocratisation. Shinar also points to this regression, particularly in terms of how security considerations are the overriding and legitimate restrictions on speech. For example, several analysts suggest that the Israeli government uses laws and sanctions to restrict certain narratives related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [34]. Over the past year, the Association for Civil Rights of Israel has documented the following violations, restrictions or harassment of freedom of expression driven by either political authorities or civil institutions [35].

- Harassment of demonstrators at the climate protest (17 January 2022) [36]
- Use of Pegasus spyware against civilians (19 January 2022) [37]
- Restrictive police documentation at demonstrations (24 July 2022) [38]
- Refusal by the Rehovot Municipality to authorise a protest event in public space (21 September 2022) [39]
- Violation of students' freedom of expression by Ben-Gurion University (8 January 2023) [40].
- Ministerial Committee for Legislation flooded with racist and anti-democratic bills submitted for government approval (29 May 2023) [41]
- Use of means to disperse demonstrations, such as tear gas, stun grenades, and rubber bullets against civilians exercising their right to protest and dissent (11 July 2023) [42]

[31] Israel's Constitution, https://knesset.gov.il/constitution/ConstIntro_eng.htm. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[32] “Freedom in the World — Israel Country Report”, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/israel>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[33] “Freedom of the World 2022”, Freedom House, 12.02.2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/israel/freedom-world/2022>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[34] Omar Shakir, “A Threshold Crossed Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution”. 27.04.2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[35] “Freedom of Expression”, The Association of Civil Rights in Israel, <https://www.english.acri.org.il/freedom-of-expression>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[36] “Harassment of Demonstrators at Climate Protest”, The Association of Civil Rights in Israel https://www.english.acri.org.il/post/_404. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[37] “Stop the Use of Pegasus Spyware Against Civilians”, The Association of Civil Rights in Israel https://www.english.acri.org.il/post/_378. Last accessed November 13th. 2023

[38] “Restrict and Regulate Police Documentation at Demonstrations”, The Association of Civil Rights in Israel, <https://www.english.acri.org.il/post/restrict-and-regulate-police-documentation-at-demonstrations>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[39] “Rehovot Municipality's Refusal to Approve a Protest Event in Public Space”, The Association of Civil Rights in Israel, <https://www.english.acri.org.il/post/rehovot-municipality-s-refusal-to-approve-a-protest-event-in-public-space>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[40] “Ben Gurion University Violates Student's Freedom of Expression”, The Association of Civil Rights in Israel, <https://www.english.acri.org.il/post/ben-gurion-university-violates-student-s-freedom-of-expression>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

The report entitled “The Attack on Democracy”, published by the Association for Civil Rights of Israel in April 2023, mentions, among other things, restrictions on freedom of expression and protest and attacks on freedom of religion and women’s rights [43].

CRITICAL ELECTIONS AND KEY EVENTS

Between 2013 and 2022, Israel experienced a series of significant elections and pivotal events that played a crucial role in shaping its political environment.

1. The Israeli General Election that took place in January 2013:

The Likud-Beiteinu Alliance, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, was formed through a political collaboration between the Likud party and the Yisrael Beiteinu party. Although the political alliance won the largest number of seats in the Knesset, amounting to 31 out of 120, this figure represents a decline compared to the combined number of seats held by the two parties in the previous Knesset. The mixed electoral ticket received 23.34% of the total vote. Yesh Atid, led by Yair Lapid, has a remarkable electoral performance as a centrist political party. Once considered a political newcomer, Yesh Atid outperformed initial projections to become the second largest party in the Knesset with 19 members. The 2013 parliamentary elections marked a remarkable shift in the country's political sphere, as centrist and secular parties gained significant support, indicating a widespread aspiration for a change in the prevailing political environment. This coalition government included several political parties, such as Yesh Atid, Habayit Hayehudi, and Hatnuah.

2. Operation Protective Edge or the 2014 Gaza War [44]

The 50-day-long military confrontation between Israel and Hamas culminated in a ceasefire. Israel launched a crackdown on Hamas in the West Bank after the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers sparked hostilities in the Gaza Strip. The war caused heavy casualties, with more than 2,200 killed and 12,600 homes destroyed, including a large proportion of the Palestinian civilians, and strained relations between Israel and several Middle Eastern states [45]. Israel did not seek a final victory in the Gaza Strip. Although Israel possesses the military capability to achieve victory over Hamas, it faces the challenge of avoiding the possible emergence of a more extremist governing body in Gaza if it attempts to oust Hamas [46]. It also faces accusations of violence in an area under its effective control [47].

[41] A Tsunami of Anti-Democratic and Racist Bills”, <https://www.english.acri.org.il/post/a-tsunami-of-anti-democratic-and-racist-bills>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[42] “Use of Means to Disperse Demonstrations: Guiding Principles and Recommendation”, The Association of Civil Rights in Israel, <https://www.english.acri.org.il/post/use-of-means-to-disperse-demonstrations-guiding-principles-and-recommendations>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[43] The Attack on Democracy: Monitoring Initiatives that Damage Human Rights and Democracy”, The Association of Civil Rights in Israel, <https://www.english.acri.org.il/post/the-attack-on-democracy>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[44] UN Human Rights Council, “Report of the detailed findings of the independent commission of inquiry established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-21/1 (A/HRC/29/CRP.4)”, 2015, <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/report-detailed-findings-independent-commission-inquiry>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023

[45] Jean-Pierre Filiu, Gaza: A History, London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2014; Shadi Abu-Ayyash, “The Palestine Solidarity Movement, Human Rights, and Twitter”, Networking Knowledge 8, 2015: 1–18, 15.

[46] Jon B. Alterman, “Israel Could Lose”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/israel-could-lose>. 7.11.2023. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[47] Peter Maurer, “Challenges to international humanitarian law: Israel's occupation policy”, International Review of the Red Cross, 94, 2012.

The US administration has expressed solidarity with Israel while expressing criticism against Hamas. The BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China) have called for restraint by all parties involved and the resumption of peace negotiations in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative. The European Union condemned the violations of international humanitarian law committed by both parties involved in the conflict. The EU also stressed the inherent instability of the current situation and called for a resolution based on the principle of a two-state solution. Following the 2014 fighting in Gaza, Hamas retained its authority over the Gaza Strip. Hamas has faced various political and military obstacles in the years since. Hamas has also been involved in efforts to reconcile with its rival faction, Fatah, which governs the West Bank and the Palestinian Authority. Efforts have been made to create a cohesive Palestinian governing body, but progress has been hampered by a variety of political, ideological and territorial complexities.

3. The Israeli general elections held in March 2015:

Under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu, the Likud party won an unexpected victory, defying the predictions of pre-election polls. Prime Minister Netanyahu formed a coalition government that included various right-wing and religious groups.

4. The 2017 Jerusalem Crisis:

The implementation of security measures on the Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa Mosque compound led to an escalation of tensions, followed by demonstrations and violence in Jerusalem and the West Bank [48]

5. 2018–2022 Israeli political crisis:

The period from 2018 to 2022 in Israel was marked by a protracted political crisis, characterised by prolonged political instability and uncertainty. The period can be seen as a succession of general elections, unsuccessful attempts to form coalitions, and a continued failure to establish a permanent governmental structure [49].

The crisis began with the core split between the parties and the public, Benjamin Netanyahu, caused by the refusal of the liberal wing of parliament to form a coalition with Benjamin Netanyahu. The Likud party, the conservative wing party, refused to remove Netanyahu from its leadership. The first two elections failed to produce a governing coalition, and the third election in March 2020 resulted in a unity government led by Netanyahu and Benny Gantz. The 2021 election produced the thirty-sixth government, led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, but it was dissolved in June 2022. The right-wing bloc won the fifth election in November, with Netanyahu again leading the thirty-seventh government [50].

[48] Ian Lee, Abeer Salman, Kareem Khadder, Amir Tal, "3 Israelis Killed in Stabbing; 3 Palestinians Killed in Clashes", CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/21/middleeast/old-city-prayer-restrictions-imposed/index.html>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[49] Yossi David, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Racializing Human Rights: Political Orientation, Racial Beliefs, and Media Use as Predictors of Support for Human Rights Violations – A Case Study of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46 (10), 2023: 1947-1971, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2023.2166792

[50] David Kretzmer, 'Israel's political and constitutional crisis' IACL-AIDC Blog 23.12.2022. <https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/new-blog-3/2022/12/23/israels-political-and-constitutional-crisis>.) Last accessed November 13th. 2023, "Netanyahu's hard-line new government takes office in Israel". 12.02.2022, BBC. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

In April 2019, the electoral process resulted in a state of impasse, as neither the Likud party nor the Blue and White alliance, led by Benny Gantz, managed to achieve a sufficient majority. The electoral process in September 2019 again resulted in a state of impasse, prolonging the period of political ambiguity. The Yisrael Beiteinu party, led by Avigdor Lieberman, exerted significant influence in the political deadlock, primarily pursuing his right-wing nationalist agenda. In March 2021, Israel, like other nations, faced the multifaceted difficulties posed by the COVID-19 epidemic. The election results resulted in a deadlock, with no single political party or alliance winning an outright majority. As a result, a coalition government was formed under the leadership of Naftali Bennett, followed by Yair Lapid as Prime Minister on a rotating basis.

6. The May 2021 Israel-Gaza crisis or Operation Guardian of the Walls:

The violent escalation of the conflict as Palestinians in East Jerusalem protest against an expected decision by the Israeli Supreme Court to evict six Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in a long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This area is Palestinian under international law. The cessation of hostilities was achieved on 21 May through a ceasefire brokered by Egypt. The conflict attracted considerable international attention and allegations of war crimes on both sides. International public opinion was incredibly attentive to the conflict. International actors, including Egypt, Qatar and the United Nations, undertook to initiate and promote a ceasefire.

7. The removal of Benjamin Netanyahu from office in June 2021 and reinstatement:

The general elections held in Israel on 1 November 2022 to elect the 120 members of the 25th Knesset were a major political event in Israel's democratic process. Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party remained the largest, but coalition-building challenges remained. After 12 years in office, Benjamin Netanyahu was succeeded by a coalition government led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid. However, the election resulted in a politically divided landscape, with the Bennett-Lapid coalition formed in June 2021 by Naftali Bennett, leader of the right-wing Yamina party, and Yair Lapid of the centrist Yesh Atid party. The alliance was diverse, comprising parties with different ideologies, including right-wing, centrist, left-wing and an Arab party. It managed to retain the government by a narrow margin. In December 2022, Benjamin Netanyahu returned to power, legitimised by the Likud's majority in parliament. Controversially, the party joined the coalition of national and far-right parties that dominated the political mainstream from 2022.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Israel is widely recognised as a valued friend and ally of the United States. Countries such as Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, India and various Gulf states (UAE, Bahrain, Sudan), Egypt and Jordan have all supported Israel. Over the years, the United States has remained steadfast in its alliance with Israel, maintaining strong political, military and trade ties. Canada has also been consistently positive towards Israel, recognising its independence and working to ensure its security. Germany has a significant bond with the country stemming from the historical trauma of the Holocaust. France has consistently maintained diplomatic relations with Israel despite a complex historical background.

By contrast, the United Kingdom has typically maintained positive relations with Israel. India has developed robust economic and diplomatic ties with Israel, while Australia has consistently demonstrated its support for the nation. The 'normalisation' of relations between Israel and the Arab world (UAE, Qatar) has strengthened Netanyahu's regime and contributed to his gradual move towards autocratisation. The EU is one of Israel's most important trading partners. Israel is associated with the EU's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, which allows Israeli institutions to participate in EU-funded projects. In addition, the EU-Israel Association Agreement, in force since 2000, promotes economic cooperation and facilitates trade relations. The EU is one of Israel's most important trading partners. Israel is associated with the EU's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, which allows Israeli entities to participate in EU-funded projects. In addition, the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which has been in force since 2000, promotes economic cooperation and facilitates trade relations.

CONCLUSION

Compared to the prevalence of non-democratic regimes in the region - traditional monarchies (Morocco, Jordan), military dictatorship (Egypt), electoral autocracies (Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine) - and uprisings and civil wars (Libya, Syria), Israel remains one of the few democratic countries in the EU's southern neighbourhood. However, the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a constant source of potential instability, while recent developments in judicial reform raise concerns about the strength of Israeli democracy.

[48] Ian Lee, Abeer Salman, Kareem Khadder, Amir Tal, "3 Israelis Killed in Stabbing; 3 Palestinians Killed in Clashes", CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/21/middleeast/old-city-prayer-restrictions-imposed/index.html>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[49] Yossi David, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, "Racializing Human Rights: Political Orientation, Racial Beliefs, and Media Use as Predictors of Support for Human Rights Violations – A Case Study of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46 (10), 2023: 1947-1971, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2023.2166792

[50] David Kretzmer, 'Israel's political and constitutional crisis' IACL-AIDC Blog 23.12.2022. <https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/new-blog-3/2022/12/23/israels-political-and-constitutional-crisis>.) Last accessed November 13th. 2023, "Netanyahu's hard-line new government takes office in Israel". 12.02.2022, BBC. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

CASE STUDY: TUNISIA

(Nienke van Heukelingen)

TIMESPAN OF ANALYSIS: mid-2021-ongoing

TYPE OF REGIME CHANGE: From Electoral Autocracy to Closed Autocracy

CHANGES DURING THAT TIMESPAN

Tunisia recently experienced a remarkably rapid transformation in terms of autocratisation. In the V-Dem Democracy report 2021, Tunisia was hailed as ‘the most prominent case of a successful transition to democracy’ over the past decade, while a year later, the country found itself listed among the top ten autocratising countries [51].

The main reason for the shift was the self-coup (autogolpe) initiated by President Kais Saied on 25 July 2021. Following the script that some had already predicted, on this day Saied declared a state of emergency, dismissed the prime minister, suspended the Tunisian Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) for 30 days and lifted the immunity of members of parliament (MPs) [52]. Initially, Saied’s actions received wide popular support [53]. Tunisia was facing multiple crises and many Tunisians were inclined to temporarily overlook the antidemocratic nature of Saied’s actions, hoping that it would put him in a position to reinstate order and put the country back on a path of stability [54]. However, the opposite happened. In the following year, Saied codified his actions in a series of decrees, and major reforms to pull the country out of its economic and political doldrums failed to materialise. Tunisia was left with an all-powerful president who stripped important institutions of their independence and effectively reversed a decade of democratic progress [55]. In this section, we will look at different aspects of Tunisia’s path towards autocratisation from mid-2021 up until today.

ECONOMIC PROFILE

The economy in Tunisia has been struggling over the past decade. To be more precise: since the 2011 Arab Spring protests, the economy has been sluggish and plagued by corruption, terrorist attacks on tourists, growing disappointment in politics and politicians in particular, and more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine [56]. This is clear from gross domestic product (GDP) growth figures. According to the World Bank, GDP growth averaged only 1.7% between 2011 and 2019, and showed a sharp contraction (-8.8%) in 2020 due to the pandemic [57]. There was a moderate rebound in 2021 (4.4%), but GDP growth slowed again (2.5%) in 2022 [58].

[51] V-Dem Institute, “Democracy Report 2022: Autocratization Changing Nature?”, March 2022, https://v-dem.net/documents/19/dr_2022_ipyOpLP.pdf, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[52] Bernabé López, “Tunisia 2021: Anatomy of a Coup Foretold”, European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), no date, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/tunisia-2021-anatomy-of-a-coup-foretold/>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[53] See for instance: Shirli Sitbon, “Tunisian president sacks PM, suspends parliament after violent protests”, France 24, July 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210725-tunisian-president-saied-sacks-prime-minister-mechichi-suspends-parliament>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[54] Sarah Yerkes and Maha Alhomoud, “One Year Later, Tunisia’s President has Reversed Nearly a Decade of Democratic Gains”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/07/22/one-year-later-tunisia-s-president-has-reversed-nearly-decade-of-democratic-gains-pub-87555>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Sharan Grewal, “Kais Saied’s power grab in Tunisia”, Brookings, July 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/kais-saieds-power-grab-in-tunisia/>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[57] The World Bank, “The World Bank in Tunisia”, The World Bank, no date, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/overview>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[58] Ibid.

Other factors that illustrate the poor state of the Tunisian economy are: its high sovereign and external debt; a lack of quality job opportunities, particularly for young Tunisians; and inflation rates hovering around 11%. The OECD struck an alarming tone in its Economic Surveys Tunisia of April 2022, stating that ‘poverty is rising again’ and ‘unless swift action is taken soon, the [economic] crisis will have a lasting effect [,,,] [59].

A failing economy, along with pledges for change, contributed to Saied’s rise in 2021. However, the prospects of tangible economic improvement under his rule appear to be highly uncertain. The economy has continued to decline, and no new economic strategies or legislative amendments have been announced. Furthermore, in April 2023, Saied refused the terms of a much-needed IMF bailout (1.9 billion dollars), saying that ‘diktats from abroad’ that would increase poverty were ‘unacceptable’ [60]. He believes – or says he believes – that Western powers are trying to impose market reforms to enrich the corrupt elite, and he is determined to not let that happen. Saied emphasises self-reliance for Tunisians instead. It is not uncommon for autocratic leaders to exploit national sentiments to divert attention from domestic issues and bolster their own authority.

POPULAR MOBILIZATION

As stated in the introduction, many Tunisians were willing to (temporarily) overlook the antidemocratic nature of Saied’s actions, hoping he would bring change. However, just a few months later the first wave of protesters took to the streets of Tunis and other major cities. Along with concerns regarding Saied’s decision to rule by decree, confidence in his ability to address the failing economy had been waning – leading to a shift in public opinion. Since then, protests have continued and centred around one priority: the fall of the regime. This has prompted authorities to deploy heavy police presence during protests and ban large gatherings, although security forces have generally refrained from violently suppressing large anti-government public rallies. In contrast, authorities have resorted to violent arrests of high-profile critics and opposition figures, such as opposition leaders, judges, journalists and activists. According to Human Rights Watch, in February 2023, at least 12 public figures were detained [61]. Shortly afterwards, some 20 high-profile political and business figures were arrested, marking the country’s largest wave of arrests in recent times [62]. Saied has referred to those arrested as ‘terrorists’ and ‘traitors’ [63].

INDEPENDENCE OF JUDICIARY

When examining cases of autocratisation, experts often argue that dismantling the judicial system – and the capture of constitutional courts in particular – is a crucial, and often irreversible, moment in the slide towards authoritarian governance [64].

[59] OECD, “OECD Economic Surveys: Tunisia 2022, OECD, <https://www.oecd.org/countries/tunisia/oecd-economic-surveys-tunisia-2022-7f9459cf-en.htm>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[60] Financial Times, “The slow coup taking Tunisia back to autocracy”, Financial Times, <https://www.ft.com/content/993bfo45-a2fo-45fc-855b-4588dc300a5c>, Last accessed 1 August 2023.

[61] Human Rights Watch (HRW), “Tunisia: Wave of Arrests Targets Critics and Opposition Figures”, HRW, last update: 24 February 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/24/tunisia-wave-arrests-targets-critics-and-opposition-figures>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[62] Mondher Tounsi, “Tunisia’s Increasing Restrictions on Freedom of Expression”, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), April 2023, <https://timep.org/2023/04/10/tunisias-increasing-restrictions-on-freedom-of-expression/>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[63] Lina Khatib, “In Tunisia, Critizing Saied is Now a Crime”, World Politics Review (WPR), February 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/kais-saied-tunisia-democracy-human-rights-protests-migration/?one-time-read-code=192003169175559584854>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[64] See for instance: Professor Aníbal Pérez-Linán, “The role of Justice in the face of authoritarianism”, Blog de la Fundación para el Debido Proceso (DPLF), May 2021, <https://dplfblog.com/2021/05/26/the-role-of-justice-in-the-face-of-authoritarianism/>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

This seems to apply to Tunisia. Since President Saied's autogolpe in mid-2021, the judicial system has been consistently subjected to attacks, which has contributed to the current absence of checks and balances in the country. Two events have played a critical role. First, on the 12 February 2022, Saied dissolved the High Judicial Council (HJC), Tunisia's highest judicial body and mandated to guarantee the judiciary independence. It was replaced by a provisional council, half of whose members were appointed directly by the president [65]. Shortly afterwards, Saied dismissed 57 judges through Decree Law no. 2022-35. Second, in July of that same year, the government approved a new constitution in which the judiciary is no longer considered a separate independent branch of the state. For instance, the new constitution dictates that judges are appointed by order from the president (upon the recommendation of the Supreme Judicial Council) [66]. That means the executive has largely taken control over the judiciary, which violates, for example, the right to a fair trial by an independent and impartial court.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Freedom of expression is currently under pressure in Tunisia. Amnesty International has stated that since 25 July 2021 it has documented the cases of at least 39 individuals who have faced investigation or prosecution for exercising their right to freedom of expression – regularly dealt with in military courts, which lack independence as defined by international human rights law [67]. Charges on the table included insulting the authorities or spreading fake news [68]. It is important to mention in this section the new 'Cybercrime Law'. This decree-law was adopted in September 2022 and states that anyone found to have spread false information and rumours online to target the rights of others or harm public security, could face up to five years in prison and a fine of 50,000 Tunisian dinars (16,000 euros) [69]. Since this decree-law was adopted, the authorities have used it to initiate many investigations [70].

Journalists and freedom of the press are equally affected, with frequent attempts made to intimidate journalists [71]. Reporters Without Borders emphasised that 'a threshold was crossed on 14 January 2022, when a correspondent of several international media outlets was beaten and ten reporters were roughed up while covering a protest' [72]. In their most recent global ranking in media freedoms, Reporters Without Borders placed Tunisia in 121st place out of 180 countries. This marked a significant decline from the year before when Tunisia held the 94th position [73].

[65] HRW, "Tunisia: It is Essential to End Attacks on Judicial Independence", HRW, May 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/22/tunisia-it-essential-end-attacks-judicial-independence/>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[66] Reuters, "What's in Tunisia's new constitution?", Reuters, July 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/whats-tunisias-new-constitution-2022-07-25/> Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[67] Amnesty, "Tunisia: Human Rights at risk two years after President Saied's power grab", Amnesty International, July 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/07/tunisia-human-rights-at-risk-two-years-after-president-saieds-power-grab/> Last accessed 26 October 2023; Amnesty, "Tunisia: A year of Human Rights Regression Since President's Powergrab", Amnesty International, July 2022, <https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2022/07/TUNISIA-Brfg-July-2022.pdf?x14195>, Last accessed 27 October 2023.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Amnesty, "Tunisia: Cybercrime law investigations expose new threats to freedom of expression", Amnesty International, December 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/tunisia-cybercrime-law-investigations-expose-new-threats-to-freedom-of-expression/> Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[70] Amnesty, "Tunisia: Human Rights at risk two years after President Saied's power grab", Amnesty International, July 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/07/tunisia-human-rights-at-risk-two-years-after-president-saieds-power-grab/> Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[71] Reporters Without Borders, "Tunisia", Reporters Without Borders, no date, <https://rsf.org/en/country/tunisia>, Last accessed 26 October 2023.

[72] Ibid

[73] Ibid

OPPOSITION WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

The evolution of civil society in Tunisia has been characterised by turbulence. Before the 2011 revolution, civil society primarily consisted of organisations closely aligned with the authorities, and those few opposing the government had limited room to manoeuvre [74]. However, this landscape underwent a significant transformation following the 2011 uprising, with civil society organisations gaining an important role (and newfound freedom) to operate as part of Tunisia’s democratic transition.

In the aftermath of the 2021 self-coup, civil society continued to exert its influence by opposing protests and sit-ins, contesting President Saied’s governing style [75]. But just as with the freedom of expression and independence of the judiciary, there are worrying signs that authorities are attempting to curtail civil society organisations’ ability to operate freely in Tunisia [76]. Instances of harassment and intimidation of activists are on the rise, and legislative changes seem to be upcoming. Notably, in February 2022, President Saied stated that civil society organisations serve the interests of foreign powers and declared his intention to ban foreign funding [77]. The authorities leaked a draft of the amendment text (Decree-law 2011-88) not much later.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

In the hours and days following Saied’s self-coup, several countries chose to adopt a wait-and-see approach, while expressing their concerns and advocating for dialogue. The United States and the EU, for instance, issued statements in which they asked Saied to ‘adhere to the principles of democracy and human rights’ (Anthony Blinken, US Secretary of State) and called for a ‘return to stability in the country as soon as possible’ (Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) [78]. The Presidency’s Director of Communications in Turkey, Fahrettin Altun, used a similar wording, saying that Turkey ‘always stands with democracy’ [79]. The Greek Foreign Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nikos Dendias, on the other hand, supported Saied’s moves – ‘I [...] support the efforts undertaken in the context of democratic transition by the president’, as had influential voices in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates [80].

As President Saied continued to govern by decree, criticism from abroad grew louder, although tangible consequences failed to materialise. In fact, during this period, some international actors even strengthened their cooperation with Tunisia – with the EU serving as a prime example.

[74] Emna Ben Arab, “In Tunisia, Civil Society is Back in the Trenches”, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), June 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/in-tunisia-civil-society-is-back-in-the-trenches-132035>, Last Accessed on 26 October 2023.

[75] Ibid.

[76] EuroMed Rights, “Human rights and the rule of law in Tunisia: the slide continues”, EuroMed Rights, May 2023, <https://euromedrights.org/publication/human-rights-and-the-rule-of-law-in-tunisia-the-slide-continues/>, Last Accessed on 26 October 2023.

[77] Amnesty, “Tunisia: Human Rights at risk two years after President Saied’s power grab”, Amnesty International, July 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/07/tunisia-human-rights-at-risk-two-years-after-president-saieds-power-grab/> Last Accessed on 26 October 2023.

[78] Deutsche Welle, “Tunisia: EU’s Borrell calls for quick return to stability”, Deutsche Welle, July 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/tunisia-eus-borrell-calls-for-quick-return-to-stability/a-58657296>, Last accessed 26 October 2023; and US Department of State, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Tunisian President Kais Saied”, US Department of State, July 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-tunisian-president-kais-saied/>, Last accessed 24 October 2023.

[79] Seda Sevencan, “Worrisome, illegitimate: Turkey condemns coup in Tunisia”, Anadolu Agency (AA), July 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/worrisome-illegitimate-turkey-condemns-coup-in-tunisia/2314298>, Last accessed 30 October 2023.

[80] Officially, there was no government reaction from Egypt and the UAE.

The two blocs signed a ‘Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)’ in July 2023, in which the EU promised a comprehensive economic and security package to enable Tunisia to reduce irregular migration both to and from the country [81]. Tunisia had become the primary departure point for migrants and refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean into Europe [82], and, as European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, phrased it, ‘in times of geopolitical certainties, it is important to deepen cooperation with our strategic partners’ [83].

All of the factors in Part #1 challenge the partnership between the EU and Tunisia, and have a (potential) impact on the use of EU’s mechanisms. A notable example is the cooperation in the field of human rights and the rule of law. Since 2014, Tunisia has consistently ranked as the top beneficiary of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) – later transformed into the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) –, owing to commendable progress in these fields. However, the instrument operates on an incentive-based approach, and applies the ‘more for more’ principle, which rewards advancements in democratic reforms. For that reason, Tunisia’s recent decline in democratic principles may prompt the EU to consider adjustments in their NDICI-support to Tunisia in the future. The official mid-term evaluation of NDICI is scheduled for the end of 2024, and “shall inform decisions on the renewal, modification or suspension of actions implemented under the Instrument” [84].

The main challenges for the EU concerning Tunisia, however, seem to be concentrated around i) regional stability and ii) migration – two areas susceptible to the recent turn towards autocracy under Saied. Does this also imply that the most significant impact on EU mechanisms is therefore concentrated in these domains?

Beginning with (i) regional stability, the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 triggered a complex transformation in North Africa, characterized by disillusionment, political opportunism, authoritarianism, violence, and civil war. Tunisia, however, stood out as an exception, taking (fragile) steps towards institutional democracy and political freedoms – and therefore, earning recognition as the sole democratic partner for the EU in North Africa for several years. The recent shift towards an electoral autocracy in Tunisia has resulted in the EU losing this value-based partnership and has been raising concerns in Brussels that this situation may provide opportunities for other regional powers to exploit instability in Europe’s backyard. Such developments have the potential to severely impact the EU’s efforts to promote stability in the region. Nonetheless, the EU appears hesitant in resorting to robust measures, like sanctions, and adopts a somewhat wait-and-see approach. This stance may potentially change following the mid-evaluation of NDICI, considering that ‘promoting stability’ is a key pillar of the NDICI instrument, though it is premature to draw firm conclusions at this stage.

That brings us to the second challenge, namely (ii) migration. Over the past decade, the EU has been actively enhancing its cooperation with Tunisia on migration. It signed a Mobility Partnership with Tunisia in 2014, and funded migration related projects for a total of 68 million euros between 2012 and 2017 alone [85].

[81] Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, “The European Union and Tunisia: political agreement on a comprehensive partnership package”, European Commission, July 2023, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-union-and-tunisia-political-agreement-comprehensive-partnership-package-2023-07-16_en, Last accessed 27 October 2023.

[82] Amnesty International, “From Development to Deterrence”, Amnesty International, Last accessed on 14 January 2024.

[83] Ursula von der Leyen, “Press Statement by President Von der Leyen with Tunisian President Saied, Dutch Prime Minister Rutte and Italian Prime Minister Meloni”, European Commission, July 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/statement_23_3870, Last accessed 30 October 2023.

[84] Regulations (EU) 2021/947 of the European Parliament and the Council of 9 June 2021, Official Journal of the European Union, Last Accessed on 20 January 2024

[85] Tasnim Abderrahim e.a., “Walking a tightrope in Tunisia”, German Council on Foreign Relations, Last accessed on 6 January 2024.

This cooperation continued after Saied's power grab in 2021, and – as previously mentioned in part 1 – the EU and Tunisia signed an MoU in July 2023. Migration cooperation with Tunisia is thus not new. What is new is the way Saied approaches the issue of migration compared to his predecessors. In essence, Saied has transformed migration into a policy tool, in which he exploits anti-immigration rhetoric for his own political gains. How? Refugees and migrants have been singled out as scapegoats for broader societal challenges, including the economic downturn. On 21 February, Saied delivered a speech in front of the National Security Council in which he claimed that “there is a criminal plan to change the composition of the demographic landscape in Tunisia and some individuals have received large sums of money to give the residence to sub-Saharan migrants [86]. This speech triggered unprecedented xenophobic violence and racial tensions across Tunisia and the government illegally expelled thousands of refugees and migrants to desert and border areas – including asylum seekers holding UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) documents.

Despite all this, the EU has made migration cooperation the focal point of EU-Tunisia relations, thereby prioritizing migration at the expense of supporting democracy. For the MoU signed in July 2023, Team Europe [87], as well-described by academic Katharina Natter, employed ‘informal, soft law policy tools’ [88] – instead of using already existing foreign policy instruments – and promised Tunisia a wide-ranging financial package. By assisting in stemming migrant departures from Tunisia to Europe, Tunisia would get around 1 billion euros in financial assistance in exchange [89]. Not long after, in October 2023, Saied rejected financial support, stating that the amount offered was insufficient and did not align with the terms specified in the agreement [90].

This rejection serves as a telling example of the impact on the EU's mechanisms in migration cooperation. With the rise of Saied, Tunisia has witnessed the emergence of an erratic leader attempting to position himself as the country's strongman. One that agitates against foreign forces, the Tunisian elite, as well as refugees and migrants. Consequently, the latter group is now uncertain about their lives in Tunisia, intensifying their willingness and urgency to seek refuge elsewhere. In this, an MoU – which, moreover, seems to be put on hold right now – does not provide an answer to that. Rather the opposite. That means that despite the EU's greater willingness to engage in migration cooperation compared to regional stability, there is relatively little to hold onto at this point in time.

CONCLUSION

Tunisia has experienced a rapid and stark transformation towards an electoral autocracy in a relatively short period. Once celebrated for its democratic transition, the nation now ranks among the top autocratising countries – with President Kais Saied at the helm. As shown in this chapter, there are significant concerns about the separation of powers, especially concerning the judiciary and civil society, as well as the challenging economic situation and increasing constraints on freedom of expression. Unlike other cases in this report, Tunisia's decline is relatively recent, indicating that significant developments are still unfolding. Therefore, the upcoming elections in 2024 will be pivotal for the nation's future.

[86] Katharina Natter, Reinventing a Broken Wheel, *Verfassungsblog*, September 2023, <https://verfassungsblog.de/reinventing-a-broken-wheel/#:~:text=The%20most%20recent%202014%20Mobility,and%20of%20facilitating%20limited%20legal%20migration>, Last accessed on 23 January 2024.

[87] President Von der Leyen, Italian Prime Minister Meloni and Dutch Prime Minister Rutte visited President Saied to negotiate the MoU. They called themselves 'Team Europe'. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/press-statement-president-von-der-leyen-italian-prime-minister-meloni-dutch-prime-minister-rutte-and-2023-06-11_en

[88] Ibid.

[89] An economic and security package (900 million euros), 150 million euros to develop a wider business partnership and 105 million euros for border management. Source: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/751467/EPRS_ATA\(2023\)751467_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/751467/EPRS_ATA(2023)751467_EN.pdf)

[90] Tarek Amara, “Tunisia rejects EU financial aid, casting doubt on an immigration deal”, Reuters, October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/tunisia-rejects-eu-financial-aid-casting-doubt-an-immigration-deal-2023-10-02/>, Last Accessed on 30 October 2023

3. EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

The Eastern Neighbourhood shows a variety of post-communist developments after 2008, the influence of the Europeanization process, and the relation with international alliances, except for Belarus (that underwent a process of autocratisation already in the mid-1990) and Azerbaijan (that transitioned from communism to electoral autocracy and then remained stable), all other cases oscillate between electoral democracy and electoral autocracy. In the last fifteen years, political candidates who distinctly pro-European, have changed the landscape of the political space and shifted it towards democratisation. Still, there have been a consistent wave of a distinct nationalist and far-right landscape at play, denying the gains of liberal democracy. Nationalist and populist groups have challenged democratic institutions and used gaps in government transparency and representation to their benefit. The graphs we produced based on V-DEM data (see below) provide a visual representation of the democratic trajectories and potential episodes of autocratisation in each country.

Georgia's graph suggests initial democratic gains may be under threat. Azerbaijan and Belarus display more entrenched autocratic tendencies, while Moldova shows a volatile but generally positive trend towards democracy, punctuated by occasional backsliding. Ukraine and Armenia demonstrate more recent challenges to their democratic processes.

Considering the dynamics in this region, we believe that Ukraine and Armenia are the most interesting cases for this analysis, given their struggle to stabilise their democracy between opposing external influence (EU and Russia) and persistent domestic problems (i.e. corruption, rule of law). The selection of Ukraine and Armenia for this analysis offers a compelling parallel perspective on the complex dynamics of democratic evolution and autocratisation in the EU neighbourhood. Both countries, emerging from Soviet influence, present unique yet interrelated narratives of democratic aspirations amidst challenging geopolitical landscapes. Ukraine stands as a critical example of a state grappling with the delicate balance between European integration and Russian influence. Its post-2014 political landscape, shaped by the annexation of Crimea and conflict in Eastern Ukraine, underscores the profound impact of external aggression on a country's democratic journey. The resilience of Ukraine's civil society, particularly evident in movements like the Euromaidan, highlights the significant role of popular mobilization in steering the country towards democratic reforms.

Parallely, Armenia's experience, especially post-Velvet Revolution, provides an insightful case of peaceful, citizen-led transition towards democracy. The Velvet Revolution marked a significant shift away from entrenched authoritarianism, reflecting the power of civic engagement in driving political change. However, Armenia's challenges with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict demonstrate the intricate interplay between regional disputes and internal democratic development. Like Ukraine, Armenia too navigates complex relationships with external powers, balancing its aspirations for democratic autonomy with the realities of regional geopolitics.

The juxtaposition of these two countries in our study allows us to delve into the nuanced ways in which former Soviet states are charting their paths in the post-Soviet era. Both countries, despite their distinct historical trajectories and current challenges, exemplify the struggle for democratic integrity in the face of internal and external pressures. Ukraine and Armenia, with their rich histories of civic activism and current geopolitical challenges, provide invaluable insights into the broader patterns of democratic development and autocratisation in the region. Their stories are not just about the struggle for democracy within their borders but also about the broader contestation between democratic ideals and autocratic tendencies in a rapidly changing world.

Figure 12 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Ukraine based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

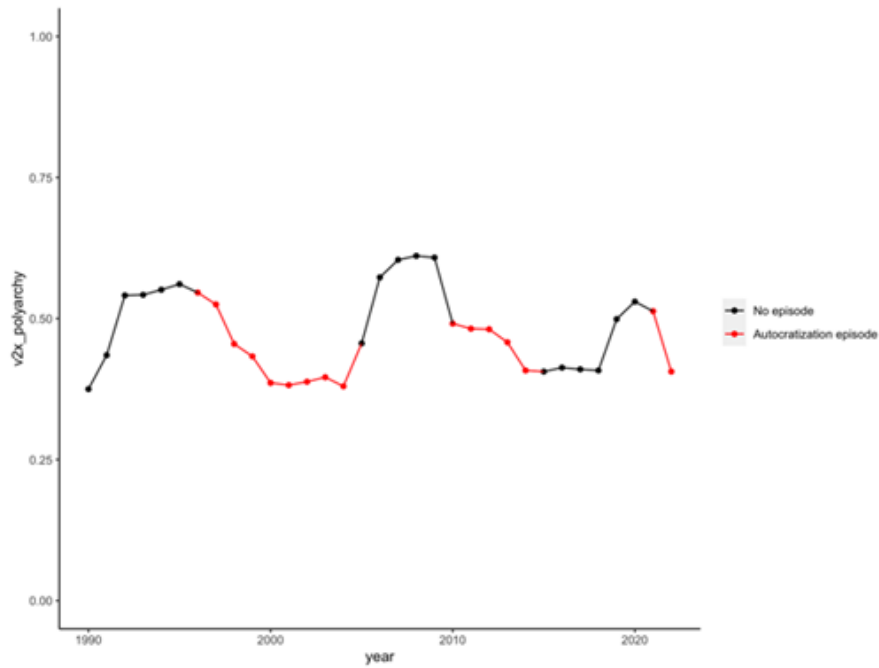


Figure 13 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Armenia based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

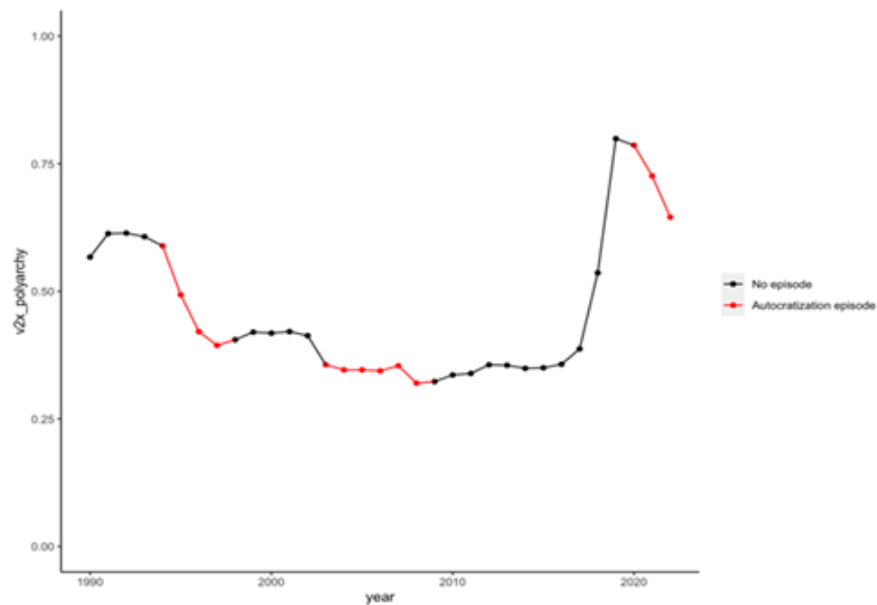


Figure 14 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Georgia based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

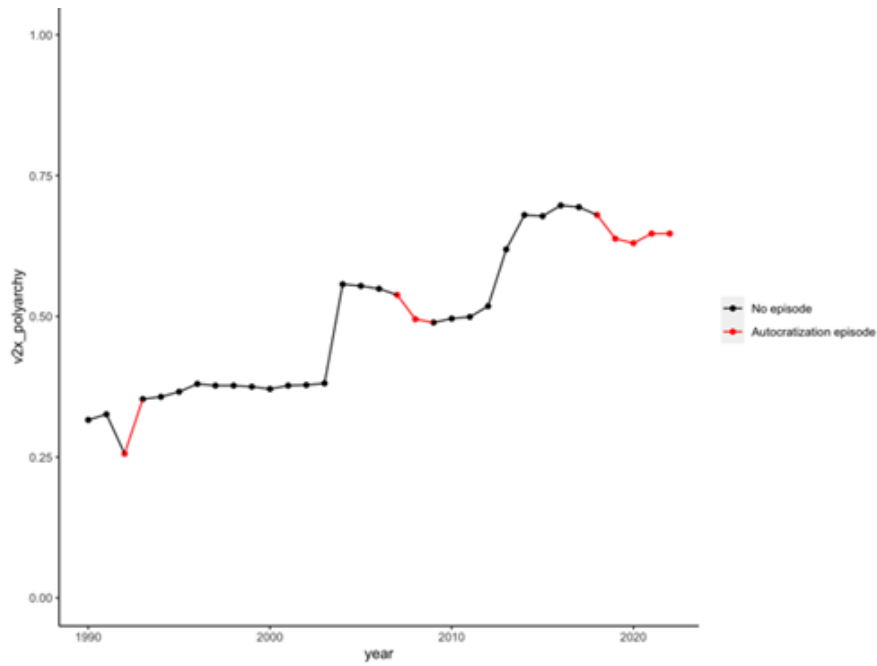


Figure 15 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Azerbaijan based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

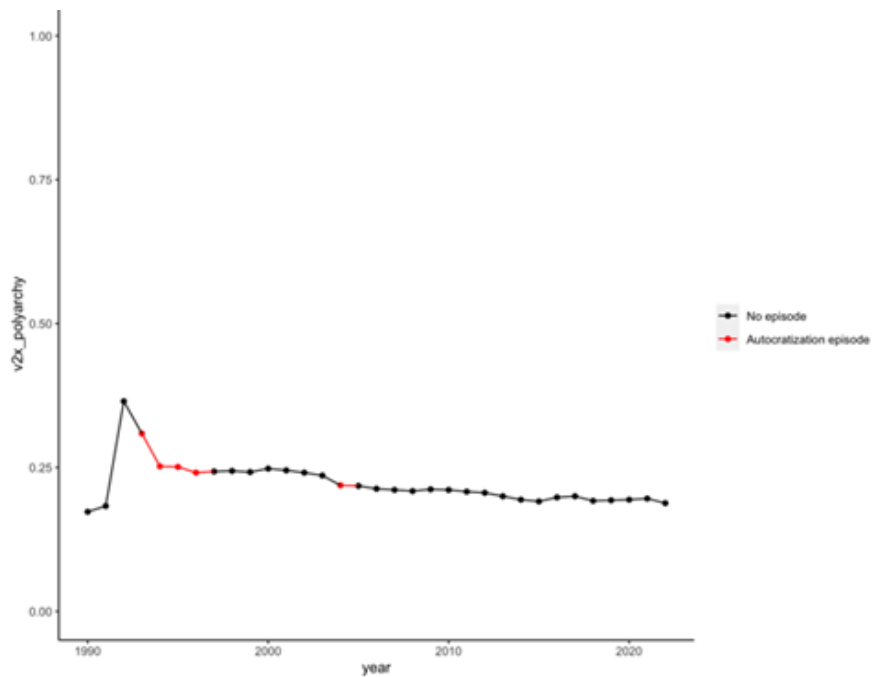


Figure 16 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Belarus based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

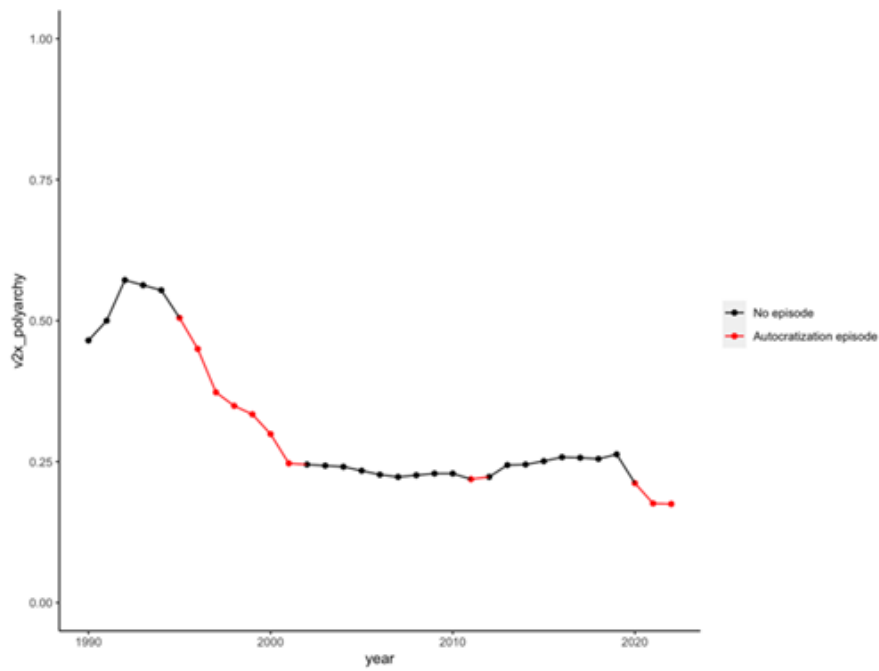
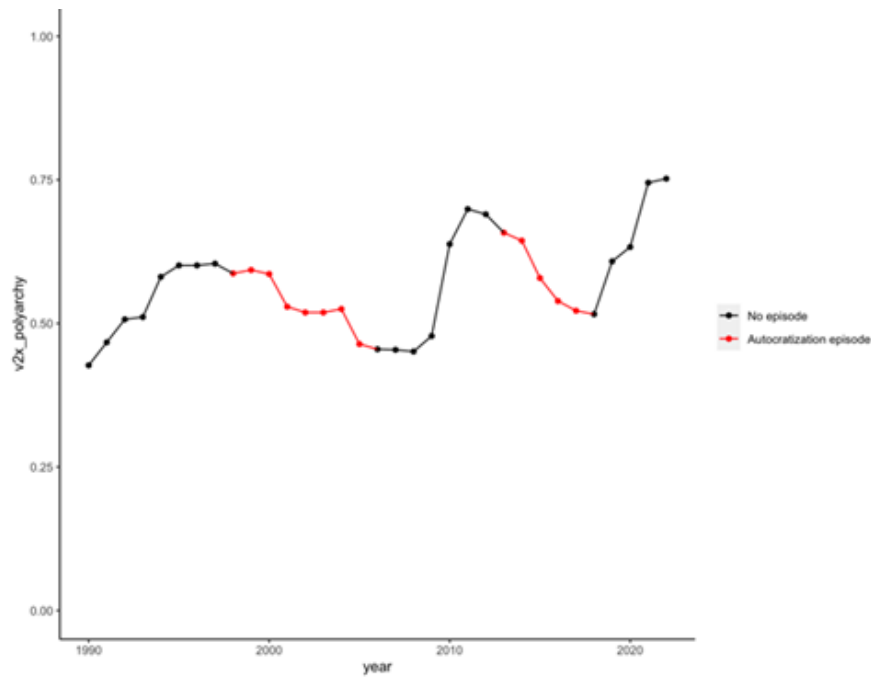


Figure 17 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Moldova based on V-Dem, generated November 2023



CASE STUDY: UKRAINE

(Dana Dolghin & Karoline Tolsrup)

TIMESPAN OF ANALYSIS: 2010-2014 (and aftermath)

TYPE OF REGIME CHANGE: Electoral Democracy to Electoral Autocracy

CHANGES DURING THAT TIMESPAN

After February 2014, Ukrainian democracy experiences its most dynamic phase, with the Maidan revolution, which was triggered by considerable dissatisfaction with the Yanukovich government's rapprochement with Russia rather than the EU (debated in the competing perspectives on a free trade agreement). The Euromaidan protests began in late 2013, triggered by the Ukrainian government's decision to suspend an association agreement with the European Union in favour of closer ties with Russia. The situation escalated in February 2014, leading to the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich. The protests catalysed civil opposition and a diversification of political options and candidates. They also galvanised nationalist and ultra-nationalist groups and radical right-wing factions, which have grown in popularity [91]. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea following a controversial referendum. This event had profound geopolitical and economic consequences for Ukraine. Russian narratives and the political influence of Russia have strengthened the nationalist and far-right movements. The annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, particularly in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, led to economic disruption and a decline in investor confidence. The conflict also resulted in the displacement of populations and damage to infrastructure, which further burdened the economy. Since 2014, European integration has been a driving force for reform [92], and the Verkhovna Rada (the Ukrainian Parliament) has increasingly aligned itself with the European Parliament and European priorities. The 2019 elections were a first for Ukraine, with a landslide victory of the current president, Volodymyr Zelensky, winning a landslide victory, which included winning 24 of the 25 regions where elections were held [93]. The country has taken direct steps to move away from autocratic tendencies. However, doubts about its performance remain, as the following overview shows.

ECONOMIC PROFILE

Ukraine experienced moderate economic growth between 2010 and 2013, GDP growth rates ranged from around 4% to 5% per year [94]. However, the country faced challenges such as high levels of corruption, inefficient state enterprises, and an unstable political environment, which also affected the equitable distribution of these resources or access to these resources. Throughout this period, Ukraine maintained close economic ties with Russia during this period. The two countries had extensive trade relations, and Ukraine was dependent on Russian natural gas supplies. Overall, Ukraine's fiscal profile in 2010-2014 was characterised by a mix of growth, challenges, and significant political and geopolitical events that had a lasting impact on the country's economic trajectory.

[91] Vyacheslav Likhachev, "Far-right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy", Freedom House, 2019. Last accessed November 13th. 2023.

[92] Supporting Ukraine's Democracy After the War: Key Issues, Comparative Experience and Best Practices, THE GLOBAL STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN FOCUS, IDEA, No. 14, October 2022. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/supporting-ukraines-democracy-after-the-war.pdf>. Last accessed November 13th. 2023

[93] "Geography of the Presidential Elections in Ukraine", Eurasian Research Institute, 2019.

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea contributed to a complex economic situation that required both domestic reforms and international assistance. In 2010, Ukraine negotiated with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial assistance. The IMF provided support in exchange for economic reforms, including fiscal consolidation and changes to the energy sector. The Ukrainian government implemented economic reforms, including austerity measures and efforts to combat corruption. Due to enduring ties with Russia and the dynamics of these internal politics, the rise in the standard of living did not necessarily resolve tendencies of autocratisation.

POPULAR MOBILIZATION

2014 was a turning point for the civic movement. Growing popular discontent and civil society activism were a cornerstone against the authoritarian government of Viktor Yanukovich [95]. The Ukrainian government has struggled with fundamental rights, freedom of expression, power-sharing and influence over political institutions. The Revolution of Dignity marked a change in the nature of mobilisation, with much more popular and grassroots tactics and explicit challenges to the government and internal corruption. Informal meetings and social media were the drivers of this mobilisation [96]. Youth and the middle class emerged as a powerful political force in the context of social movements.

INDEPENDENCE OF JUDICIARY

Ukraine has been plagued by problems with the impartiality of the judiciary, although the indices place the problem at the usual level for Eastern Europe. Between 2010 and 2014, the Ukrainian judiciary faced corruption issues, with allegations of bribery and undue influence affecting the impartiality of the legal system. Political figures have often been accused of interfering in judicial proceedings, compromising the independence of the judiciary. President Viktor Yanukovich, who was in office from 2010 to 2014, was criticised for consolidating power and weakening democratic institutions, including the judiciary. There were concerns that judges were appointed on the basis of political loyalty rather than merit, potentially compromising the independence of the judiciary and supported incomplete justice and politically motivated prosecutions. Opposition figures were sometimes targeted through the legal system, raising questions about the judiciary's independence from political influence.

Despite the 2014 turning point, the functioning of the judiciary remains contested, and despite reforms since 2015, corrupt judges in the system have maintained their influence. Until recently, judges themselves selected judicial candidates, which meant that compromised judges could maintain the status quo by preventing honest actors from entering the system. In 2018, the VDem index showed that Ukraine under Poroshenko was still struggling with corruption issues despite some progress being made after-2014.

[94] "Ukraine Growth Study Final Document", World Bank, 2016.

[95] Yuriy Shveda, Joung Ho Park, "Ukraine's revolution of dignity: The dynamics of Euromaidan", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 7, 1, 2016, 85-91, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2015.10.007>.

[96] Megan MacDuffee Metzger, Joshua A. Tucker. "Social Media and EuroMaidan: A Review Essay." *Slavic Review*, 76, 1, 2017, 169-191., doi:10.1017/slr.2017.16.

Ukraine stagnated behind the regional average on this matter. Corruption issues have been discussed in Ukraine, but since 2013, it has been the only case showing improvements in the Eastern European Neighbourhood. The interference of Ukrainian oligarchs in the judiciary has been a major concern since 2014. In 2023, Ihor Kolomoisky was indicted for money laundering activities between 2014 and 2020, and he was considered one of the main backers of the Zelenski government. Since 2016, investors have ranked widespread corruption and distrust of the judiciary as the top two obstacles to foreign investment in Ukraine. Moreover, the International Republican Institute's 2021 public opinion survey, found that Ukrainians ranked corruption within state institutions as the most important problem facing the country and the third-most important issue facing them personally, after inflation and the rising cost of living [97].

In 2020, a questionable decision by the Constitutional Court threatened to invalidate the legal basis for Ukraine's anti-corruption institutions [98]. Progress has been made with the adoption of legislation to reform the High Council of Justice (HCJ) by ensuring that independent foreign experts participate in the decisions of the Ethics Council and the re-establishment of the High Qualification Commission of Judges (HQCJ), which was dissolved in November 2019. However, Ukraine has a history of failing to implement legislation targeting vested interests [99]. In its 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International ranked Ukraine 117th out of 180 countries worldwide, giving it 33 out of a maximum of 100 points, with zero indicating that "corruption effectively replaces the government".

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Recently, there have been growing links between Russian actors and radical right activists, publicists, ideologues, and politicians in the West. Such links between the Kremlin and the European populist radical right have grown stronger over the past decade, reflecting what has been described as a "marriage of convenience" based on converging interests [100]. Over the course of several elections, this orientation has become increasingly conflated with the comparative status of the Russian and Ukrainian languages and competing interpretations of the country's cultural history, with Ukrainian nationalists and European integrationists tending to be strongest in the West and centre of the country, and pro-Moscow political figures more popular in the East and the South.

OPPOSITION WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

The war and political parties have consolidated the Ukrainian national identity, which was composed of nationalist and liberal elements [101]. Nationalist tendencies are an overall concern and have been known to lead to political conflicts.

[97] "Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine", IRI, 2021, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/FOR-RELEASE-2021-November-Survey-of-Residents-of-Ukraine_ENG.pdf. Last accessed November 13th, 2023.

[98] Nick Fenton and Andrew Lohsen, "Corruption and Private Sector Investment in Ukraine's Reconstruction", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/corruption-and-private-sector-investment-ukraines-reconstruction>. Last accessed November 13th, 2023.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Andrey Makarychev, "Normative and Civilisational Regionalisms: The EU, Russia and their Common Neighbourhoods", *The International Spectator*, 53,(3), 2018, 1-19, DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2018.1483630.

[101] Hadas Aron Emily Holland, "Beyond the 'End of History': Nationalism, Liberalism and the War in Ukraine", 2022. <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/beyond-end-history-nationalism-liberalism-and-war-ukraine>.

Interestingly, in the IRI survey of 2021, the status of the Russian language was cited as having a direct impact for only 6% of respondents, the military conflict in Donbass for 15% and the occupation crimes for 2%. Vulnerable minority groups, most notably Roma and LGBT+ people, could be at risk of seeing recent human rights gains eroded without concerted support and attention. It is important to mention that some of the opposition has been attributed to the rising circles of nationalists, sovereigntists or even radical right, such as the All-Ukrainian Union Party 'Svoboda' or the Right Sector [102].

CRITICAL ELECTIONS AND KEY EVENTS

The period between 2010 and 2014 was a critical and tumultuous time for Ukraine, marked by significant elections and events that influenced the trend towards autocratisation and defined its aftermath.

- 2010 Presidential Election: in 2010, Viktor Yanukovich won the presidential election, defeating Yulia Tymoshenko. This election was significant as it marked a political shift in Ukraine, with Yanukovich leading a pro-Russian government [103].
- 2011 Local Elections: in 2010 and 2011, Ukraine held local elections that affected the balance of power in various regions. These elections were crucial in shaping the political landscape at both national and local levels [104].
- 2013-2014 Euromaidan Protests: the Euromaidan protests erupted in late 2013 in response to then-President Yanukovich's decision to suspend an association agreement with the European Union in favour of closer ties with Russia. The protests evolved into a broader movement calling for political reform and an end to corruption. It culminated in February 2014 in a crackdown by Ukrainian forces that left more than 100 people dead [105].
- February 2014: Yanukovich flees: in February 2014, amid escalating violence during the Euromaidan protests, President Yanukovich fled the country. This event marked a turning point in Ukrainian politics and led to a power vacuum [106].
- 2014 Presidential Election: following Yanukovich's departure, Ukraine held presidential elections in May 2014. Petro Poroshenko emerged victorious, securing a significant mandate. This election was crucial in establishing a new leadership and direction for Ukraine [107].

[102] Likhachev, "Far-right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy",

[103] Nathaniel Copsey, Natalia Shapovalova, "THE UKRAINIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 2010", Representation, 46 (2) 2010, 211-225, DOI: [10.1080/00344893.2010.485842](https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2010.485842)

[04] Tadeusz A. Olszański, "Local government elections in Ukraine: last stage in the Party of Regions' takeover of power", Center for Eastern Studies, 2010. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2010-11-04/local-government-elections-ukraine-last-stage-party-regions-takeover>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[105] Katerina Tertychnaya and Tomila Lankina, "Electoral Protests and Political Attitudes under Electoral Authoritarianism", The Journal of Politics, 82(1), 2020 285-299.

[106] Mikhail Minakov, Matthew Rojansky, "Democracy in Ukraine: Are We There Yet?", Kennan Cable, 30, 2018

[107] Nazar Boyko, Erik S. Herron & Roman Sverdun "Administration and management of Ukraine's 2014 presidential election: a systematic and spatial analysis", Eurasian Geography and Economics, 55 (3) 2014, 286-306, DOI: [10.1080/15387216.2014.986494](https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2014.986494).

- **Annexation of Crimea (2014):** in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, a region in southeastern Ukraine. The annexation was widely condemned by the international community, and it further heightened tensions between Ukraine and Russia [108]. Around the same time, pro-Russian separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine escalated into a full-blown conflict. The regions of Donetsk and Luhansk declared independence, leading to ongoing conflict and tensions between Ukrainian forces and separatist groups.

These events had a profound impact on Ukraine's political landscape, shaping the country's direction and its relations with both Russia and the European Union. The period was marked by political change, social movements, and the ongoing challenge of managing internal and external pressures.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Since 2014, the parliament has consistently prioritised the adoption of legislation implementing the harmonisation of the EU acquis, in line with Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU (EU 2014). The VRU has also formally adopted a comprehensive institutional reform strategy developed in cooperation with the EP (2016).

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that the situation in Ukraine during this period was complex, and there were different perspectives on the nature of governance under President Yanukovich. The Euromaidan protests and the subsequent change of government reflected widespread public dissatisfaction with perceived autocratic tendencies and a desire for democratic reform. Events in 2014, including Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, further shaped Ukraine's political landscape and its ongoing efforts to strengthen democratic institutions. Since 2014, Ukraine has made progress against autocratisation, even with a simmering conflict brewing on its territory. The 2019 elections sealed this political reality. However, deep-seated concerns regarding the separation of power, earnest state institutions and networks of influence have clouded these advancements. Nationalist and far-right factions are visible actors, irrespective of the Russian appropriation of these sentiments. The next Ukrainian election, whenever it may be held due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, will be critical for the nation's democratic trajectory. It will have to take into account international allegiances, the population outside its borders and the success of the current government, which, while famous as a wartime leader, has struggled with questions of transparency and flexibility of the political architecture of the state.

[108] Richard E. Ericson, Lester A. Zeager, "Ukraine Crisis 2014: A Study of Russian-Western Strategic Interaction" *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, 21, (2), 2015, 153-190. <https://doi.org/10.1515/peps-2015-0006>.

CASE STUDY: ARMENIA

(Karoline Tolsrup & Dana Dolghin)

TIMESPAN OF ANALYSIS: 2020-2022

TYPE OF REGIME CHANGE: From Electoral Autocracy to Electoral Democracy

CHANGES DURING THIS TIMESPAN

Armenia's government structures have undergone dramatic fluctuations between 2020 and 2022, and while it qualifies as an electoral democracy, the case study shows that this assessment is too linear to capture the processes at play. Indeed, the 2019 Freedom House report proclaimed: "A Breakthrough in Armenia as Other Regimes Harden Authoritarian Rule" [109] due to the 11 days of protests in Yerevan in April 2018 aimed at ousting the incumbent President, Serzh Sargsyan. The events in 2018 are crucial to understanding the timeframe of the analysis and also why this episode was chosen. His proposal to run for Prime Minister shortly before the end of his two-time presidential mandate triggered the unrest. Constitutional amendments passed by Parliament and a popular referendum back in 2015, transforming Armenia from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary republic allowed the prime minister to be appointed by a parliamentary majority. However, Sargsyan's move was interpreted as a circumvention of the transfer of power. The 2015 constitutional amendment was seen as having a negative impact on the separation of powers or as a backdoor for Sargsyan or others keen to prolong their rule and circumvent term limits [110]. The Velvet Revolution in 2018 culminated with Sargsyan's resignation and the rise of opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan's, who led his My Step alliance to victory during the December 2018 elections. The 2019 Varieties of Democracy report saw this peaceful resignation and the subsequent elections as promising indicators of democratic progress [111]. Under the headline Liberalization of Autocracies, the report states:

"The rule of law remains severely limited in all liberalising autocracies apart from Armenia. After the Velvet Revolution in 2018, the country stands on the verge of meeting the standards for electoral democracy. Still, it fails regarding the quality of the voter registry, vote buying, and overall electoral freedom and fairness" [112].

The most significant geopolitical event during this period was the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, which involved Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict had a profound impact for Armenia's political and economic landscape. In 2020, Armenia is even hailed as a "ray of hope" [113], although consistently classified as an Electoral Autocracy till the 2022 report, where Armenia is deemed to have undergone a democratic transition from EA (n.ae electoral autocracy) to ED, Electoral Democracy [114].

[109] "Armenia", Freedom of the World, 2019, Freedom House 2019, 7.

[110] Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan, "THE 2015 REFERENDUM IN ARMENIA", East European Quarterly Vol. 43, No. 4, 2015, 293-301, 2015

[111] "Democracy Facing Global Challenges", Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) Annual Report 2019, 9.

[112] Staffan Lüthmann, Anna Lindberg "A third wave of autocratization is here"

[113] Autocratization Surges—Resistance Grows, V-Dem Report, 2020. https://www.v-dem.net/documents/14/dr_2020_dqumD5e.pdf. Last accessed 12 January 2024.

[114] Vanessa A. Boese, Martin Lundstedt, Kelly Morrison, Yuko Sato, Staffan I. Lindberg (State of the world 2021: autocratization changing its nature?), Democratization, 29:6, 983-1013, 2022, DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2022.2069751](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2069751)

However, Armenia is discussed as a democracy in steep decline, due to “the government under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is severely restricting press freedom and prosecutes journalists speaking out against the government amid the ongoing war with Azerbaijan” [115]. The statements refer to the imposition of martial law in Armenia in September 2020, and ensuing clashes with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which banned criticism of the actions of government officials and local authorities, and gave police greater powers to impose fines or, for example, demand the removal of media content and output [116]. Martial law was only lifted shortly before the early elections in June 2021 [117]. Although some legislation on transparency in media ownership has been reinstated and defamation has been decriminalised, neither the protection of independent journalism nor measures to curb media polarisation and misinformation have been implemented in line with European standards [118]. The post-conflict period brought about significant challenges, including the need for reconstruction in the affected regions, the return of displaced persons, and the wider economic impact of the war.

ECONOMIC PROFILE

Armenia has faced economic challenges since the early 1990s. During the period covered by this report, which includes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, remittances from the Armenian diaspora, which play an important role in supporting the country's economy, were particularly affected. Remittances account for a significant proportion of Armenia's GDP and are crucial to household income [119]. Closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan have limited trade routes, affecting economic development. Armenia has close political and economic ties with Russia. Russian investment and economic ties have been significant for Armenia, and Russia has played a role in regional dynamics. However, changes in Armenian policy towards the US and the European Union have had an impact [120]. According to the World Bank, Armenia's economy is performing well, supported by significant intervention in the economic sector. Corruption continues to affect overall trade networks and development [121].

POPULAR MOBILIZATION

In November 2020, following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the signing of a ceasefire agreement with Azerbaijan, widespread protests broke out in Armenia. Many Armenians were dissatisfied with the terms of the agreement, which included territorial concessions. Protesters accused the government, led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, of mishandling the conflict.

[115] Papada, Evie and Altman, David and Angiolillo, Fabio and Gastaldi, Lisa and Köhler, Tamara and Lundstedt, Martin and Natsika, Natalia and Nord, Marina and Sato, Yuko and Wiebrecht, Felix and Lindberg, Staffan I., *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*. Democracy Report 2023 (March 2, 2023). V-Dem Working Paper - Democracy Report 2023, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4560857>, 2024.

[116] Paul Dallison, *Armenia declares martial law after clashes with Azerbaijan*, Politico.eu, 27.09. 2020, Reporters without Borders 2020.

[117] “Armenia, Azerbaijan Declare Martial Law After Clashes In Disputed Nagorno-Karabakh” RFE/RL's Armenian Service, 27.09.2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-accuses-azerbaijan-of-attacking-settlements-in-disputed-nagorno-karabakh/30860288.html>

[118] *Media Landscape in Armenia*, Reporters without Borders 2023, 01.01.2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/armenia>.

[119] Thomas, R.L., Vardanyan, Y., Yagaloff, L. et al. “Remittances: The Impact on Families in Armenia”, *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 39, 634–646 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-018-9580-9>.

[120] Mathieu Droin, Tina Dolbaia, Abigail Edwards, “A Renewed Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Reading Between the Front Lines”, *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/renewed-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-reading-between-front-lines>. Last accessed November 13th, 2023.

[121] Armenia, OECD, no date, <https://www.oecd.org/corruption/Anti-corruption-reforms-in-Armenia.htm>. Last accessed November 13th, 2023.

In June 2021, Armenia held snap parliamentary elections. The run-up to the elections was marked by protests and rallies in which various political forces expressed their positions. The elections were seen as a response to the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the situation. Following the parliamentary elections, which Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's party won, there were protests from opposition groups disputing the results. The opposition accused the government of electoral fraud. Throughout this period, there were calls from various sectors of the population for Prime Minister Pashinyan to resign. These calls were often fuelled by dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its aftermath. There have also been protests about economic standards and social conditions. In January 2021, protests broke out in several Armenian cities following the deaths of prisoners. Demonstrators raised concerns about prison conditions, alleging mistreatment and torture. The protests led to clashes between demonstrators and the police.

INDEPENDENCE OF JUDICIARY

Armenian courts and judicial institutions are vulnerable to political influence and corruption [122]. Acquittal rates are low, and lengthy detention remains a problem, with persistent reports of police abuse and violence against detainees persist [123]. In particular, the rule of law has deteriorated in the areas bordering Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, and conditions in detention facilities have worsened. Implementation has been slow, despite the adoption of new Criminal and Criminal Procedure Codes aimed at protecting citizens' human rights and judicial fairness. Improvements in sub-categories within the V-dem methodology, such as electoral democracy index (EDI), Liberal component index (LCI) and Participatory component Index (PCI), are particularly emphasised and relate to, inter alia, checks and balances between institutions, a more robust independent judiciary and electoral administration, freedom of expression and protection of individual rights. On the ground, in Armenia, these indicators reflect, e.g. the adaptation of a new Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code in 2021 based on the recommendations issued by the Council of Europe, in line with the government's proposed five-year judicial-reform strategy from 2019 [124].

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The media landscape in Armenia is divided between small, liberal and relatively independent online media and broadcast media, that are linked with political parties or elites and therefore not financially independent. Severe journalistic restrictions were imposed under martial law in 2020, including restrictions on the movement of journalists in parliament [125]. Reporters Without Borders has previously highlighted the difficulties faced by local and international journalists covering events in the Karabakh region, where journalists are deliberately targeted by artillery, and martial law imposed bans on social media curtail publishing freely [126]

[122] Kimmo KILJUNEN, "The functioning of democratic institutions in Armenia", COE, 10.01.2022. <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=29607&lang=en>. Last accessed 12 January 2024.

[123] "Armenia", Freedom House 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2022>. Last accessed November 13th, 2023.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid

[126] Ibid

Although martial law was lifted ahead of the June 2021 elections, the parliament passed a law criminalising serious insults against officials and public figures in July 2021 [127], only to repeal it one year later [128] and instead circulated a draft amendment to the law “On the Legal Regime of Martial Law”, which carves out an ambiguous legal space allowing for extensive wartime censorship in the event of a threat to the Republic of Armenia [129]. In this polarised landscape, violence and threats against journalists have increased. Following Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s press conference on July 25th 2023, the International and European Federations of Journalists (IFJ-EFJ), together with its affiliate in Armenia, the Union of Armenian Journalists (UAJ), condemned a government-sponsored social media hate campaign and harassment against Armenian journalists, including death threats [130]. The EFJ General Secretary, Ricardo Gutiérrez, called on the Armenian government to denounce such threats and to support an investigation and prosecution of the perpetrators, especially if government officials are involved (IFJ-EFJ 2023).

OPPOSITION WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

Armenia is considered in the context of the post-Soviet dimension. As Falkowski argues “Unlike many other post-Soviet states, Armenia has a very empowered civil society with strong traditions of civic activity, an extensive network of non-governmental organisations, and a relatively good level of freedom of speech and political freedoms.” (2015). Nevertheless, the war continues to influence political protests, such as the skirmishes and the political violence of 2020, following the 2020 44 days of conflict. The Nagorno Karabakh conflict also unfolds around ethnic lines, with Azeris primarily supporting former leader Pashinyan, who was open to hold negotiations with Azerbaijan [131].

CRITICAL ELECTIONS AND KEY EVENTS

Constitutional changes in 2015 to transform Armenia into a parliamentary republic, where the prime minister is elected by parliament, led to a power grab by Serzh Sargsyan in 2018, sparking widespread demonstrations and unrest in the capital and other major cities. The then President, Serzh Sargsyan, who was president at the time, decided to retire in an unusual move. The civil unrest was seen as a new Velvet Revolution. His successor, Nikol Pashinyan, won over the parliament and eventually elections later the same year. Although he promised to reform of the judicial system and better protect civil rights, Pashinyan was slow to deliver and introduced significant restrictions on press freedom and freedom of expression under the veil of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which flared up again in autumn 2020. In September 2020, martial law was reinstated for one year, significantly changing the landscape of press freedom and freedom of association.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Mark Dovich, *Advancing Democratic Culture in Armenia, 2022*, <https://freedomhouse.org/programs/regional-programs/europe-programs/democratic-culture-armenia>. Last accessed November 13th, 2023.

[129] “At least 5 members of the press covering Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict targeted by Pegasus”, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), <https://cpj.org/2023/05/at-least-5-members-of-the-press-covering-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-targeted-by-pegasus-spyware-report/>. Last accessed November 13th, 2023.

[130] “Armenia: Government must put an end to online harassment of journalist”, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/armenia-government-must-put-an-end-to-online-harassment-of-journalists>. Last accessed November 13th, 2023.

[131] Ruzanna Stepanian, “Armenian Opposition, Karabakh Parties Warn Pashinyan”, Radio Free Europe, 18.07.2023. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32417461.html>.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Armenia is strongly supported by NATO, which has no role in the negotiations for Nagorno-Karabakh. In 2022, the first military exercises together with the US were held on Armenian territory, marking a clear shift away from the alliance with Russia. Since 2016, this has been in continuous decline in conjunction with clear steps forward by Western powers.

The OECD supports this. In 2022, Armenia ratified its accession to the International Criminal Court in order to consolidate its position regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The EU is an essential element of the main political narratives in Armenia, generally motivating the liberal factions. Armenia maintains relations with the European Union (EU) through the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The CEPA is a bilateral agreement signed on November 24, 2017, and entered into provisional application on June 1, 2018. It aims to deepen political and economic relations between Armenia and the EU. The CEPA is a comprehensive agreement that covers various aspects of cooperation, including political dialogue, economic cooperation, trade, justice, and human rights. CEPA encourages Armenia to undertake reforms in a number of sectors and to align its policies and regulations with EU standards. The agreement supports institutional cooperation and capacity building to improve governance and administrative practices. The EU provides financial assistance to support Armenia's reform efforts and the implementation of the CEPA. This assistance is often directed towards projects that promote good governance, economic development and social progress.

CONCLUSION

Armenia's political landscape, post-Velvet Revolution, illustrates challenges and progress in upholding democracy. The revolution marked a significant shift towards democratic reform and institutional anti-corruption, but the journey has been marred by political volatility, especially due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This has led to nationalistic sentiments and political polarization dividing the population and, challenging the democratic consolidation. Despite these hurdles, the strength of Armenia's civil society and public participation in political processes shows a vibrant democratic spirit. However, issues like ensuring judicial independence and protecting freedom of expression remain critical for Armenia's democratic health. Moreover, the influence of external powers, particularly Russia, continues to shape Armenia's political landscape. Striving for democratic governance necessarily contends with regional geopolitics and internal complexities.

4. EU ENLARGEMENT

In recent years, the Western Balkans and Turkey have witnessed concerning trends towards autocratisation. Despite initial efforts to align with European democratic values, some countries in the region have experienced substantial setbacks. Issues such as political polarisation, erosion of democratic institutions, and limitations on press freedom have raised alarms. Turkey, in particular, has faced criticism for a noticeable shift towards autocratic governance. The government's crackdown on dissent, the purging of civil servants, and curtailment of media freedoms have drawn international concern. Additionally, constitutional changes have concentrated power in the presidency, contributing to the erosion of checks and balances. In the Western Balkans, several countries have struggled with challenges to democratic principles. Persistent corruption, weak rule of law, and limited political pluralism have hindered progress toward EU accession. Some leaders in the region have been accused of centralising power, undermining the independence of the judiciary, and stifling opposition voices. Among these countries, Albania and Montenegro are relatively stable over time. Autocratisation is observed in Serbia (ongoing) and North Macedonia (with several episodes). Recently, concerns have been raised about the concentration of power and autocratic tendencies within Kosovo's political landscape. Accusations of corruption, limited media freedom, and challenges to the rule of law have been reported. Additionally, political polarisation and frequent changes in government have contributed to a less stable political environment. Efforts to address these issues and strengthen democratic institutions have been ongoing, but progress has been slow and uneven. International observers and organisations have called for sustained measures to enhance transparency, accountability, and the protection of democratic values in Kosovo. The graphs we produced based on V-DEM data (see below) collectively indicate that while some enlargement countries have shown periods of democratic improvement, there are clear trends of autocratisation in recent years, with varying degrees of decline. Serbia, Turkey, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, in particular, show marked autocratisation trends, whereas Montenegro and Kosovo show less pronounced declines. Each country's graph reflects its unique political and historical context within the enlargement process.

Serbia, North Macedonia, and Turkey are selected as case studies for autocratisation due to their distinct yet revealing political trajectories. Serbia's post-Milosevic democratic regression, particularly under Vučić's administration, highlights the tension between European aspirations and authoritarian tendencies. North Macedonia's experience with ethnic politics, EU accession ambitions, and recent democratic backsliding presents a nuanced picture of the challenges in maintaining democratic norms. Turkey's evolution from democratic reforms to overt autocratisation under Erdoğan provides a stark example of democratic reversal in a geopolitically pivotal nation. Together, these cases shed light on the complex interplay of internal politics and external pressures contributing to the erosion of democratic institutions in the context of European enlargement.

Figure 18 - Autocratisation episodes per decade in Albania based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

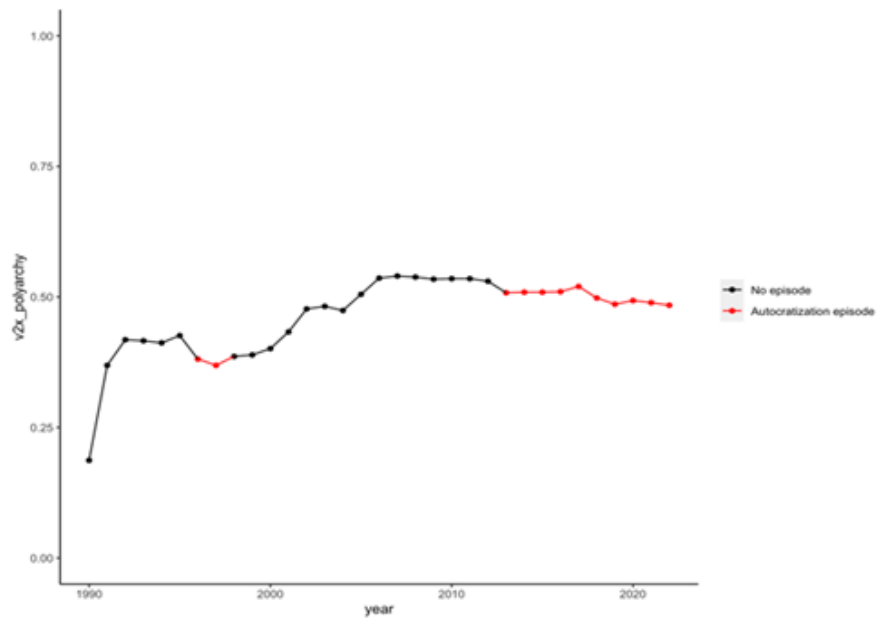


Figure 19: Autocratisation episodes per decade in Serbia based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

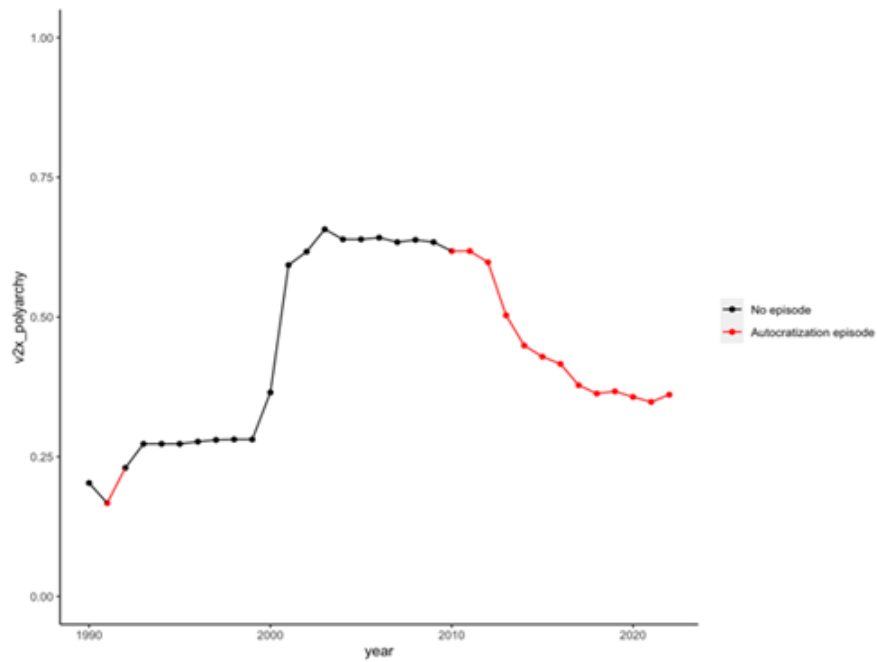


Figure 20: Autocratisation episodes per decade in Montenegro based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

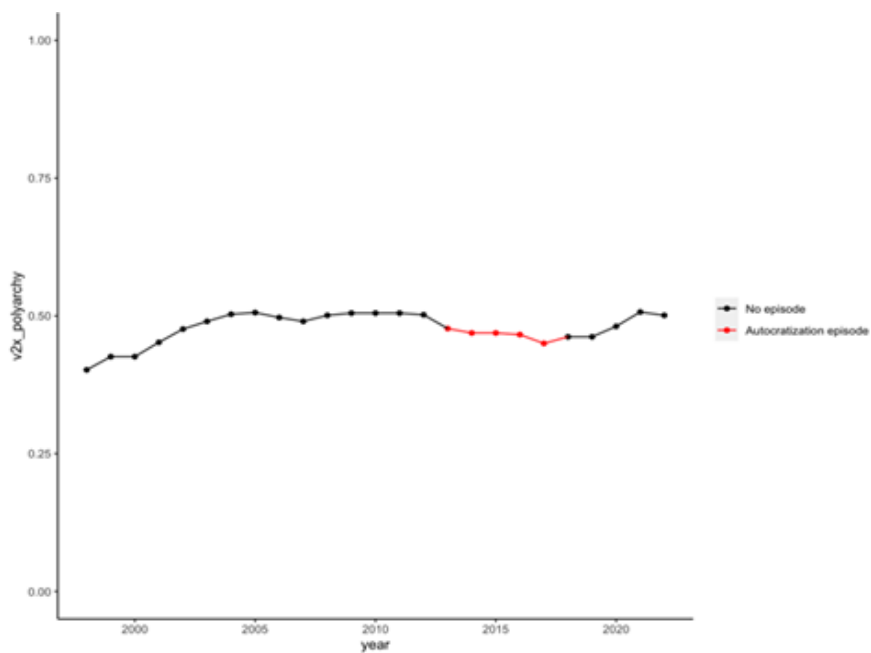


Figure 21: Autocratisation episodes per decade in North Macedonia based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

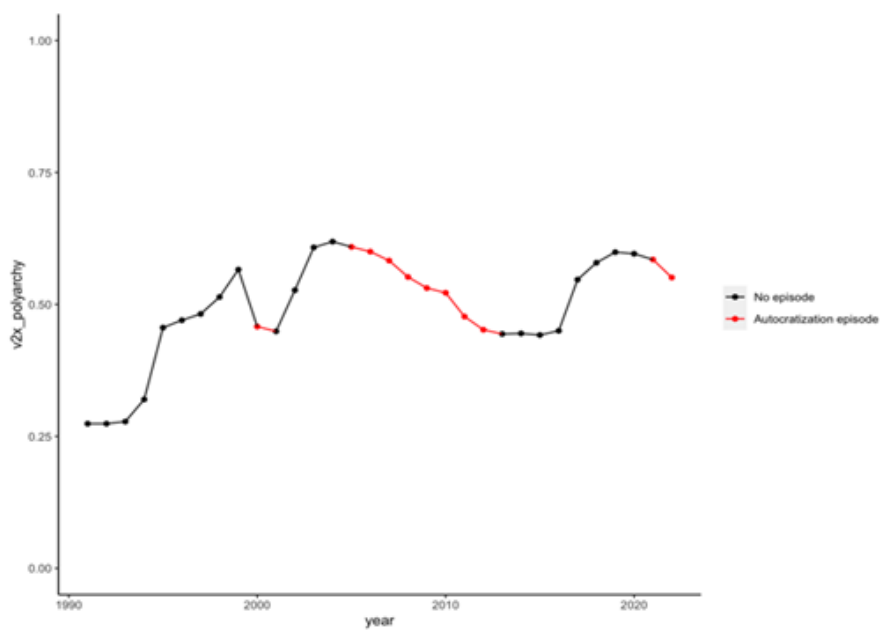


Figure 22: Autocratisation episodes per decade in Bosnia and Herzegovina based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

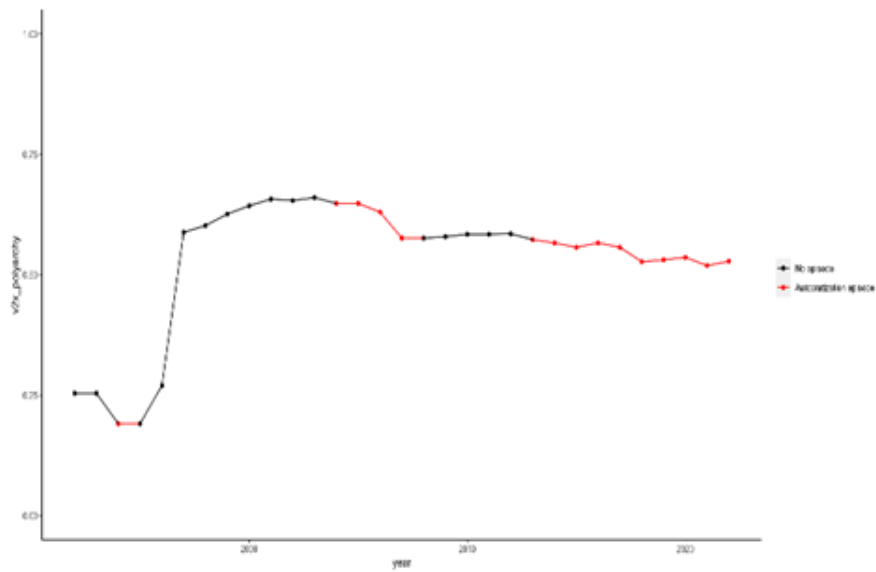


Figure 23: Autocratisation episodes per decade in Kosovo based on V-Dem, generated November 2023

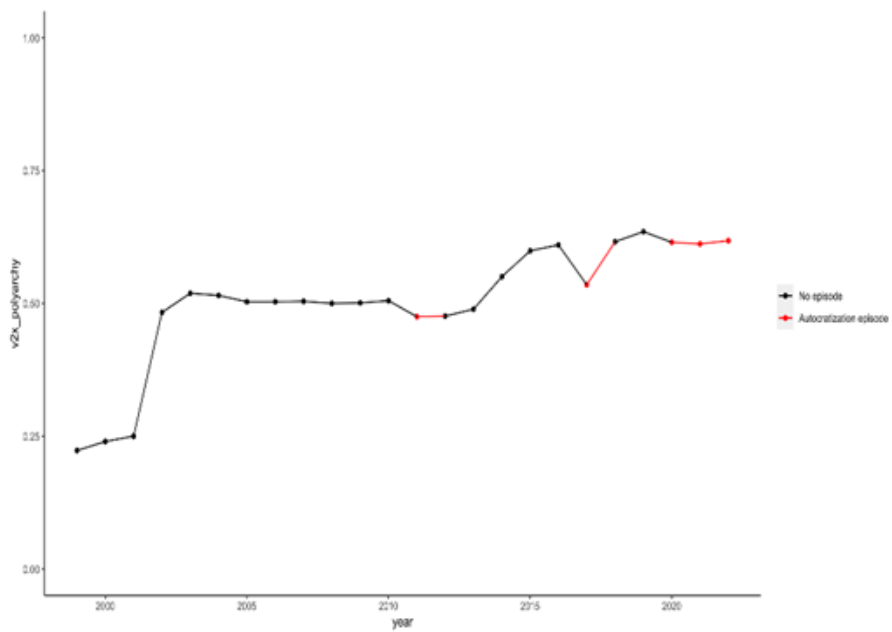
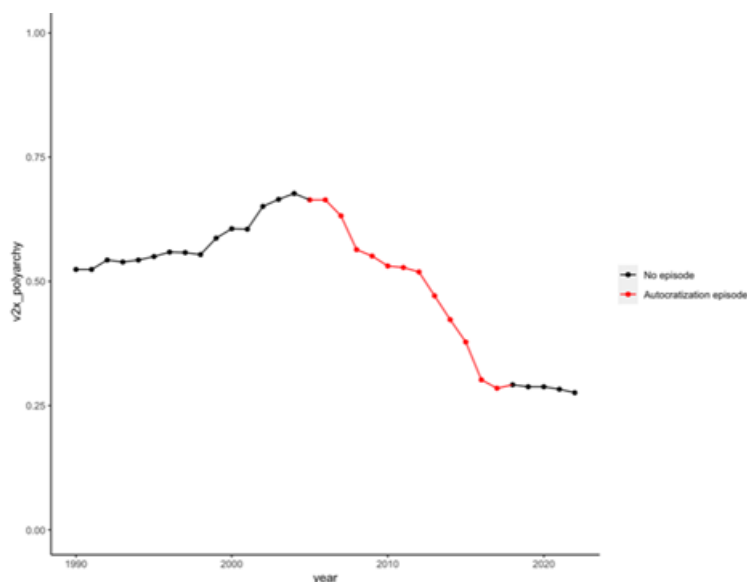


Figure 24: Autocratisation episodes per decade in Turkey based on V-Dem, generated November 2023



CASE STUDY: SERBIA

(Venelin Bochev)

TIMESPAN OF ANALYSIS: 2016-2022

TYPE OF REGIME CHANGE: From Liberal Democracy to Electoral Autocracy

CHANGES DURING THIS TIMESPAN:

The regime change towards electoral autocracy in Serbia has been dated to as early as 2014, corresponding to the appointment of Aleksandar Vučić as Prime Minister and the re-election of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) as the largest party in parliament [132]. However, the period analysed, coincides with to the consolidation of autocracy in Serbia, as evidenced by the systematic obstruction of the parliamentary opposition's participation in parliamentary activities [133], state capture [134], and the undermining of media freedom [135]. The timeframe also corresponds with a significant transformation of the Serbian political system. Despite the formal structure of a premier-presidential system outlined in the Serbian constitution, in which the Prime Minister is designated as the head of the executive branch, Aleksandar Vučić has exercised control over the government since his election as president in 2017, largely through to his leadership of the SNS [136].

[132] Lührmann, Anna, Marcus Tannenber, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "Regimes of the world (RoW): Opening new avenues for the comparative study of political regimes", *Politics and governance* 6.1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i1.1214>.

[133] Tepavac, Tara. "The parliament of Serbia." *Undermining Democracy. Processes and Institutions in Serbia 2010-2020* (2021). CRTA, Belgrade, <https://demokratija.cрта.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Undermining-Democracy-Processes-and-Institutions-in-Serbia-2010-2020-Publication.pdf#page=81>. Last accessed on 25 October 2023.

[134] Keil, Soeren, "The business of state capture and the rise of authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia", *Southeastern Europe* 42.1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04201004>.

[135] Huszka, Beáta, "Human rights on the losing end of EU enlargement: The case of Serbia", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56, 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12604>.

[136] Dušan, Spasojević, and Stojiljković Zoran, "The presidentialisation of political parties in Serbia: Influence of direct elected president", in Dušan, Spasojević, and Stojiljković Zoran *The presidentialisation of political parties in the Western Balkans*, London: Palgrave, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97352-4_3.

Autocratisation in Serbia has taken place within a context where constraints imposed by the judiciary, parliament, and executive bodies have historically been weak. On the other hand, the absence of horizontal accountability mechanisms has facilitated processes such as the erosion of media freedom, as evidenced by the adoption of legislative changes that have enabled the privatisation of media outlets by individuals with close ties to the ruling elite [137]. Additionally, unfettered control of the executive has enabled state capture and the use of public administration and tendering to create patronage networks and a pro-regime business class that has been mobilised to tilt the electoral playing field in the regime's favour [138]. Nonetheless, the regime in Serbia appears committed to maintaining a democratic façade, as evidenced by the calling of snap elections after the opposition boycotted the 2020 elections and the tolerance of public protests. The latter allows the government to deflect full accountability for political and economic developments and provides it with justifications for postponing substantial reforms that could jeopardise Vučić's rule, such as the constitutional reforms described later in this analysis.

ECONOMIC PROFILE

After the Bulldozer Revolution, which led to the election of a reformist government and the beginning of democratisation in 2000, market-oriented reforms in Serbia started relatively late compared to the rest of the region [139]. This meant that the arrival of Vučić and the SNS in the 2010s coincided with the need to implement some overdue economic reforms, such as that of the pension system [140]. The implementation of these reforms by Vučić and his party brought international support to the regime in the early stages of its rule and legitimised and attracted domestic support [141]. This is seen as one of the components of "stabilitocracy" in Serbia, whereby the regime has ensured relative stability in exchange for tacit external acquiescence to domestic concerns about good governance [142]. These economic concerns have also been linked to corruption in projects such as the Belgrade Waterfront, which have been argued to finance autocratisation [143].

POPULAR MOBILIZATION

Social actors have arguably been the most active part of the resistance to democratisation in Serbia, organising four major waves of protests since 2016. The first wave of protests took place in Belgrade between April and July 2016.

[137] Huszka, Beáta, "Human rights on the losing end of EU enlargement: The case of Serbia", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12604>.

[138] Sotiropoulos, Dimitri A, "Political Clientelism as a Type of State-Society Relation Eroding Democracy", *The Irregular Pendulum of Democracy: Populism, Clientelism and Corruption in Post-Yugoslav Successor States*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023.

[139] Dolenc, Danijela. "Democratization in the Balkans." *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 1 (2016): 125-144.

[140] Vujošević, Miodrag, Slavka Zeković, and Tamara Maričić. "Post-socialist transition in Serbia and its unsustainable path." *European planning studies* 20, no. 10 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2012.713330>.

[141] Günay, Cengiz, and Vedran Dzihic. "Decoding the authoritarian code: Exercising 'legitimate' power politics through the ruling parties in Turkey, Macedonia and Serbia." *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16, 4, 2016, 529-549, DOI: [10.1080/14683857.2016.1242872](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1242872)

[142] Pavlović, Srđan, "West is best: How 'stabilitocracy' undermines democracy building in the Balkans," *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog* (2017), <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/>. Last accessed on 27 October 2023.

[143] Keil, Soeren, "The business of state capture and the rise of authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia", *Southeastern Europe* 42.1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04201004>.

They were initially mainly directed against the construction of the Belgrade Waterfront real estate project on the Danube, but eventually spread to the rest of the country and became more anti-government [144]. The second wave of protests was organised between April and May 2017 following the Serbian presidential elections and was initiated by university students. They were later joined by syndicates of the police, the army, taxi drivers, lawyers and other professional and grassroots organisations. In particular, the social base of the protests broadened as they became more generally directed against Vučić's regime [145]. The third wave of protests lasted from November 2018 to March 2020. The protests were sparked by the attack on an opposition non-parliamentary politician, Borko Stefanović but also broadened in scope, attracting a large spontaneously formed grassroots movement, united under the banner *Jedan od pet miliona* (One of Five Million) [146]. Responding to the protests, Vučić said that he would not compromise with the protesters "even if there were 5 million people in the street" (prompting protesters to adopt the slogan "One of Five Million" ("#1od5miliona"). The last wave of protests took place in July 2020, aimed initially against a rise in COVID-19 infection rates and government measures and the outcome of the June parliamentary elections boycotted by political opposition, and perceived by some as fraudulent [147].

INDEPENDENCE OF JUDICIARY

As a key pillar EU accession process, the rule of law has always been high on the official agenda of the Serbian government [148]. Nonetheless, as widely discussed in the literature, the adoption of the rule of law reforms has tended to be partial and protracted. At the same time, their implementation has been consistently undermined in a process that has seen increasing *de jure* and decreasing *de facto* compliance with the *acquis* [149]. The adoption of constitutional reform in 2022 aimed at enhancing the independence of the judiciary through the creation of a High Judicial Council and High Prosecutorial Council; the definition of their size and the manner in which their members are elected is a case in point. Despite the persistent recommendations for reform by the Venice Commission and the European Commission since 2012 [150], and the official commitment of the Serbian government, there has been a regrettable delay in the initial adoption. The formation of a task force to initiate discussions on the adoption the reform in parliament took half a decade to materialise [151]. The protracted reform effort, for which the ruling majority had often blamed the opposition, was then resumed in December 2020 and put to a vote in parliament in June 2021 and a referendum in January 2022, following external pressure from the EU and the Council of Europe, which had pointed to the lack of opposition to block the reform [152].

[144] Milan, Chiara, "From the streets to the town halls: Municipalist platforms in the post-Yugoslav space", *Urban Studies*, 60.11 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980221090134>

[145] Spasojević, Dušan, and Jelena Lončar, "Facing protests in Serbia: patterns of new competitive authoritarianism", *Facing protests in Serbia: patterns of new competitive authoritarianism*, *Democratization*, 30:7, 1380-1399, DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2023.2238614](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2238614)

[146] *Ibid*

[147] *Ibid*

[148] Kmezić, Marko, "Rule of law and democracy in the Western Balkans: addressing the gap between policies and practice." Damir Kapidžić, Věra Stojarová (eds), *Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe*, London: Routledge, 2021.

[149] Mendelski, Martin, "The EU's pathological power: The failure of external rule of law promotion in South Eastern Europe", *Southeastern Europe* 39.3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-03903003>; Richter, Solveig, and Natasha Wunsch. "Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans." *Journal of European Public Policy* 27.1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1578815>.

[150] Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, "Serbia Progress Report 2012", European Commission, Brussels, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-progress-report-2012_en. Last accessed on 25 October 2023.

[151] Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, "Serbia Progress Report 2016", European Commission, Brussels, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/media/2824/serbia-report-2016.pdf>. Last accessed on 25 October 2023.

[152] Interviews with Danko Runić, Council of Europe; Jovana Spremo (YUCOM); Sofija Mandić (CEPRIS).

The reform was widely seen as a step in the right direction, including the Venice Commission [153]. Nonetheless, experts have noted that the success of the reform depends on secondary laws and regulations which could undermine its overall goal – formal independence of judges and prosecutors, most of whom are not appointed by Parliament [154]. On the other hand, the partial and externally driven approach to the rule of law reform has so far failed to address systemic problems such as political influence on judicial appointments and decisions of the courts and widespread corruption, which contribute to autocratisation [155].

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The erosion of media freedom has been a prominent aspect of autocratisation in Serbia. The ruling majority adopted reforms that allowed the opaque privatisation and the arbitrary granting of public subsidies to media outlets. At the same time, political pressure against independent media has become increasingly evident [156]. This, combined with the country's already weak checks and balances, has allowed Vucic and the SNS to severely undermine public debate and political participation by granting themselves favourable coverage and discouraging criticism. The country's weakened media freedom has essentially tilted the electoral playing field, with reports suggesting that Vucic received more than 10 times more coverage than his opponents during the 2017 presidential election [157].

OPPOSITION WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

Despite the emergence of three significant waves of protests, they have so far proven unable to reverse the tide of autocratisation in Serbia. This can be attributed to several key factors, the most important of which is the reluctance of social movements to fully recognise opposition parties as legitimate challengers to Aleksandar Vučić's rule [158]. A major obstacle is that many of these opposition figures, such as Dragan Đilas and Vuk Jeremić, were previously part of the ruling establishment and, as such, are viewed with suspicion due to perceived compromises made during their time in power. This tainted past hampers their credibility as potential leaders of a new political era. Furthermore, the entrenched division between pro-Western and pro-Russian factions within both the protest movements and the opposition parties further complicates the formation of a united front. This deep-seated divide prevents the emergence of a cohesive and powerful opposition that could effectively challenge the status quo. While these waves of protests have highlighted the widespread discontent and desire for change in Serbia, they face significant challenges translating this energy into a coherent and successful challenge to autocratisation.

[154] Interview by the author with Danko Runić, Council of Europe.

[155] Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: Serbia", 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2023>. Last accessed on 25 October 2023.

[156] Huszka, Beáta, "Human rights on the losing end of EU enlargement: The case of Serbia", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12604>. ; Nikola Burazer, "Nations in Transit: Serbia", Freedom House, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2023>. Last accessed on 25 October 2023.

[157] Matthew Brunwasser, "Serbia Prepares to Elect a President Amid a Murky Media Landscape", *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/30/world/europe/serbia-prepares-to-elect-a-president-amid-a-murky-media-landscape.html>. Last accessed on 25 October 2023.

[158] Draško, Gazela Pudar, Irena Fiket, and Jelena Vasiljević, "Big dreams and small steps: comparative perspectives on the social movement struggle for democracy in Serbia and North Macedonia,"

CRITICAL ELECTIONS AND KEY EVENTS

The 2022 snap elections stand out as a pivotal moment, that will show the limits of electoral autocracy in Serbia, which needs to demonstrate a level of representative democracy and political will to cooperate with external actors, such as the EU. Aleksandar Vucic's decision to call these elections came a full two years before the end of the legislature's term, even though his overwhelming majority was largely due to the opposition's electoral boycott rather than any distortion of the electoral process. On the one hand, this move was a strategic manoeuvre aimed at preventing the opposition from forming a united front against the ruling regime. Among other tactics, Vucic's government lowered the electoral threshold from 5% to 3%, thus discouraging the formation of broader coalitions and creating divisions within the opposition. On the other hand, the SNS supermajority in parliament increased pressure from external actors to implement long-overdue constitutional reforms. This put Vucic and his allies in a precarious position, as they could no longer use the political context as an excuse to delay these reforms.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Serbia's position as a candidate member state of the European Union has generated widespread support among EU stakeholders. In recent years, the effectiveness of this process, driven by conditionality in the context of the country's accession process, has been widely criticised for failing to bring about substantive change in the quality of governance [159].

Nevertheless, reforms such as the constitutional amendments under discussion show that EU actors can achieve tangible results during specific "windows of opportunity", depriving the ruling majority of the possibility to exploit domestic or external crises to avoid reform. At the other end of the spectrum, the European Parliament's attempts to coordinate talks between the extra-parliamentary opposition and the ruling parties following the latter's electoral boycott have generally been seen as ineffective in bringing about changes in electoral conditions and media freedom [160].

CONCLUSION

Serbia continues to operate as an electoral autocracy, with attempts by civil society and the political opposition to challenge the ruling regime marred by disunity. These efforts have failed to coalesce into a united front capable of dislodging the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) from its dominant position of power. However, Aleksandar Vučić's decision to call early parliamentary elections in 2022, despite the SNS having an overwhelming majority in parliament with control of nearly 80% of the seats due to the absence of an opposition presence following a boycott of the 2020 elections, highlighted the inherent limitations of electoral autocracy in Serbia. This move underscored the regime's need to maintain a veneer of democracy in order to preserve its legitimacy and maintain a political context that prevented it from taking sole responsibility for reforms imposed by external entities, most notably the European Union.

[159] Kmezić, Marko, "Rule of law and democracy in the Western Balkans: addressing the gap between policies and practice." Damir Kapidžić, Věra Stojarová (eds), *Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe*, London: Routledge, 2021.

[160] Interviews with Ksenija Marković (Democratic Party); Dušan Spasojević (University of Belgrade) taken by the author in 2021-2022

CASE STUDY: NORTH MACEDONIA

(Venelin Bochev)

TIMESPAN OF ANALYSIS: 2006-2017

TYPE OF REGIME CHANGE: From Electoral Democracy to Electoral Autocracy

CHANGES DURING THIS TIMESPAN

The resignation of Nikola Gruevski as Prime Minister and the dismissal of his VMRO-DPMNE [161] party from the executive after a decade governing the country (2006-2016) that culminated in state capture, where institutions and agencies were staffed with personnel linked to the ruling party and a select few companies benefitted from multi-million projects such as “Skopje 2014”. The removal came after the 2016 parliamentary elections, which enabled the formation of a new ruling majority between the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), and the parties representing the country’s ethnic Albanian community.

However, as will be shown below, the transition to electoral democracy took place after a long resistance campaign involving several groups of actors, led by the SDSM and its leader, Zoran Zaev, who became prime minister in 2017. In this case, we have a resistance that stops further autocratisation and leads to democratisation.

ECONOMIC PROFILE

The advent of Nikola Gruevski’s autocratisation project in North Macedonia coincided with an initial period of pursuit of neoliberal economic reform [162] and relatively high annual GDP growth figures, ranging between 5 and 6% in the early years of Gruevski’s government [163]. It has been argued in the literature, that debt reduction and privatisation drive contributed to the initial international support for the regime [164], culminating with the European Commission’s recommendation to start accession negotiations in 2009 [165]. Nonetheless, privatisation was used to support the creation of a pro regime business elite [166] that benefitted from multi-million-dollar procurement projects, such as “Skopje 2014,” in return for support for the ruling regime [167]. As a result, an argument could be made for a political economy of state capture that financed autocratisation [168].

[161] Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство [Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity]

[162] Yabanci, Bilge, and Dane Taleski, "Co-opting religion: How ruling populists in Turkey and Macedonia sacralise the majority," *Religion, State & Society* 46.3 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2017.1411088>. Last accessed on 27 October 2023.

[163] "GDP growth (annual %) – North Macedonia," World Bank (2023), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2022&locations=MK&start=1999>. Last accessed on 27 October 2023.

[164] Yabanci, Bilge, and Dane Taleski, "Co-opting religion: How ruling populists in Turkey and Macedonia sacralise the majority," *Religion, State & Society* 46.3 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2017.1411088>.

[165] Vachudova, Milada Anna, "EU enlargement and state capture in the Western Balkans," *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: a failure of EU conditionality?* (2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91412-1_4.

[166] Džankić, Jelena. "Capturing contested states: Structural mechanisms of power reproduction in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro." *Southeastern Europe* 42.1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04201005>.

[167] Keil, Soeren, "The business of state capture and the rise of authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia", *Southeastern Europe* 42.1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04201004>.

[168] Innes, Abby. "The Political Economy of State Capture in Central E Urope." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52.1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12079>.

POPULAR MOBILIZATION

There were two significant protests during this period. The first one took place between May and June 2015 following the indictment of opposition leader Zoran Zaev, who had obtained and released wiretapped conversations implicating Gruevski and his regime of, among other things, the surveillance of 20,000 Macedonian citizens and the cover up of murder of a young man and the second occurred when incumbent President Gjorge Ivanov attempted to halt the investigation into Gruevski and other politicians implicated in the wiretaps [169].

INDEPENDENCE OF JUDICIARY

Even under Gruevsk, the rule of law has constantly been on the agenda in North Macedonia, not least because of the country's EU candidacy, which requires the adoption of reforms related to the independence of the judiciary and the fight against corruption and organised crime [170]. However, the government has repeatedly undermined formal reform efforts through subtle and informal mechanisms. One notable example during the studied period was the establishment of a special prosecutor's office that had to investigate the allegations arising from the released wiretaps. On the one hand, despite the establishment of the Special Prosecutor's Office, its capacity to conduct a comprehensive investigation was limited in terms of personnel and equipment. At the same time, its work was hampered by other bodies controlled by the Gruevski government, such as the police and the Macedonian prosecutor's office, which had to hand over the case to the newly established office [171]. On the other hand, the work of the Special Prosecutor's office was subsequently undermined by political actors, notably President Gjorge Ivanov, who attempted to pardon the investigated officials, including former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski [172].

However, it should also be stressed that the Constitutional Court played a key role during the period under study, managing to preserve its independence from Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE by overturning the decision to dismiss parliament and call elections that would have been boycotted by the opposition and prolonged the political crises.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

During Gruevski's rule, media freedom in North Macedonia has been undermined in at least three critical ways. First, the government has used its control over the executive and the judiciary to disrupt the activities of unchecked media and force them to close down. A case in point is the raid on the opposition-oriented A1 TV and the subsequent indictment of its owner and more than a dozen of his associates for money laundering and tax evasion, which contributed to the station's bankruptcy [173].

[169] Ibid.

[170] Kmezić, Marko. "EU rule of law conditionality: Democracy or 'Stabilitocracy' promotion in the Western Balkans?." Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil, Marko Kmezić (eds), *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A failure of EU conditionality?* London: Plagrave 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91412-1_5. Last accessed on 27 October 2023.

[171] Interview with EU delegation official, Belgrade.

[172] Tomini, Luca, Suzan Gibril, and Venelin Bochev, "Standing up against autocratization across political regimes: a comparative analysis of resistance actors and strategies", *Democratization* 30.1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2115480>.

[173] "Free Speech' Row In Macedonia After Police Raid TV Channel", *Radio Free Europe* (2010), https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia_a1_media/2231614.html. Last accessed on 27 October 2023.

Secondly, Gruevski relied on pro-government media to carry out smear campaigns against opponents and used the granting of various subsidies to the media to force friendly coverage, leading to widespread self-censorship [174]. Thirdly, Gruevski and his government proposed and implemented laws that formally undermined media freedom. The law on the Broadcasting Council, which increased the number of appointees from government-controlled bodies, is a case in point [175].

OPPOSITION WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society actively resisted autocratisation during the two waves of popular mobilisation mentioned above. Civil society was the driving force behind creative decisions, such as throwing paint balloons at buildings constructed as part of the 'Skopje 2014' project, which branded the 2016 popular mobilisation as a 'Colourful revolution' and increased the visibility of the protests [176]. It was also represented in the councils set up by civil society organisations to coordinate the protests. Each organisation was allowed to have two representatives, increasing its representation compared to the SDSM, which had a total of two representatives, despite providing essential support to the protesters, such as filling of balloons with paint and rallying many party members to participate in the protests [177]. Nonetheless, the SDSM had a close relationship with some of the larger civil society organisations, such as Open Society, whose leadership has historically been linked to the party, ensuring that it had an influential voice [178]. Finally, the leadership of the protests recognised the role that the SDSM had to play in the forthcoming elections, and so fostered links with the party and persuaded other more critical parts of civil society not to undermine the efforts of Zaev and his party. The overall result was increased socialisation between civil society and the opposition led by the SDSM, which contributed to the longevity of the protests and mobilised popular support for the SDSM in the upcoming elections.

CRITICAL ELECTIONS AND KEY EVENTS

While the 2016 parliamentary elections were undoubtedly decisive for the peaceful transfer of power, several other important events need to be outlined:

- The parliamentary boycott organised by the SDSM after the 2014 parliamentary elections, through which it launched the resistance campaign and worked out the conditions that have guided it throughout, in particular: the separation of party and state activities; better regulation of the media; improvements to electoral laws; the formation of a caretaker government.
- The Przino Agreement was reached in June 2015 after the first wave of protests. The agreement provided for the formation of a caretaker government and a special prosecutor to investigate the alleged crimes of the Gruevski government, which came to the fore after the release of the leaked wiretaps.

The agreement to form a government between the SDSM and two ethnic Albanian parties, the DUI and the Alliance for Albanians, was preceded by the storming of parliament by VMRO-DPMNE activists.

[174] Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: North Macedonia", 2015, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/nations-transit/2015>. Last accessed on 27 October 2023.

[175] Dimishkovska, Ljubica, "Nations in transit report 2012 – Macedonia", Freedom House (2012), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2012Macedonia_final.pdf. Last accessed on 25 October 2023.

[176] Draško, Gazela Pudar, Irena Fiket, and Jelena Vasiljević, "Big dreams and small steps: comparative perspectives on the social movement struggle for democracy in Serbia and North Macedonia," *Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe*. Routledge, 2021.

[177] Interview with Fani Panovska (former Open Society); Pavle Bogoevski (former SDSM) taken by the author, 2022.

[178] Interview with Goran Janev, Institut de Sociologie (ULB), taken by the author, 2022.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

International support has been instrumental during the resistance campaign. EU actors participated as mediators during the Przino Agreement, which was reached in June 2015 after the first wave of protests between the main political parties in North Macedonia [179]. Then, in the midst of the second wave of protests, there was also decisive pressure from the EU and the US after President Gjorge Ivanov pardoned those implicated in the wiretaps, forcing him to reverse the decision. While the analysis concludes that the formation of an opposition bloc led by the SDSM and its socialisation and support by civil society was the fundamental pillar that led to the removal of Gruevski and the VMRO-DPMNE from power, pressure from external actors also played an important role. In particular, it served to level the playing field between the opposition and the ruling elite in situations where the latter abused its institutional advantage.

CONCLUSION

The resistance campaign demonstrates how the political opposition, relying on extra-institutional mechanisms such as boycotts and whistleblowing, was able to mobilise popular support to mount an electoral challenge to a government that consistently weakened checks and balances and undermined public contestation. Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that the campaign attracted institutional actors, such as the Constitutional Court and international actors, who supported the efforts of the resisters and put pressure on Gruevski and his VMRO-DPMNE.

CASE STUDY: TURKEY

(Seda Gürkan)

TIMESPAN OF ANALYSIS: 2017-2023

TYPE OF REGIME: Electoral Democracy to Electoral autocracy

CHANGES DURING THIS TIMESPAN

The report focuses on the period between 2017 and 2023. The year 2017 marks a significant turning point for Turkey as in a constitutional referendum held in April 2017, Turkish citizens approved (51.41% in favour) constitutional changes that introduced a new presidential system. This marked Turkey's departure from the parliamentary system, which had been in place since the establishment of the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923. It is important to note that Turkey's democratisation process started a decade ago with extraordinary measures taken by the government in response to the Gezi events (May 2013) and corruption scandal (December 2013), involving members of the AKP government, and subsequently the coup attempt against the Turkish government that took place in July 2016 [180.] The 2016 coup attempt and the subsequent state of emergency (2016-2018) period had a devastating impact on Turkey's democracy.

[179] VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), Democratic Party of Albanians.

[180] Hakkı Taş, "The 15 July abortive coup and post-truth politics in Turkey", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 18, 1(2018) , 1-19, DOI: [10.1080/14683857.2018.1452374](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2018.1452374).

Under the state of emergency, the rule of law eroded, and fundamental freedoms were massively curtailed. However, these negative trends in Turkey's autocratisation process have been consolidated with Turkey's exit from democracy and the constitutional changes introduced in 2017. In other words, 2017 marks a turning point when extraordinary anti-democratic measures were codified in the amended constitution through a new Presidential system. Under the new system, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was re-elected in the presidential election in June 2018 and then again in 2023.

Since then (2017), Turkey has undergone a radical transformation in its domestic politics and international relations. In domestic politics, nationalism, conservatism, and authoritarianism are on the rise [181]. In particular, the new Presidential system has increasingly concentrated power in the hands of the president by granting excessive powers to an unaccountable president and undermining the principle of the separation of powers. In this way, the transition to the new presidential system has undermined the fundamental aspects of a democratic system. Another critical issue in Turkish domestic politics is the growing polarisation of Turkish political parties and society.

Turkey's accelerating autocratisation over the past decade has had a profound impact on its international relations, as its foreign policy has become increasingly conflictual and unpredictable. The country's relations with the EU and the United States have deteriorated rapidly. Turkey's EU accession negotiations have stalled and its bilateral relations with several individual EU member states have become more conflictual. At the same time, Turkey's rapprochement with Russia remains a source of concern for Turkey's Western allies. As Turkey prepares to celebrate the 100th anniversary of its republic in October 2023, it faces three major problems: entrenched autocracy, a highly centralised but inefficient system of governance, and a fragile economy [182].

ECONOMIC PROFILE

In 2020, annual real GDP growth was 1.9%, rising abruptly to 11.4% in 2021. Total GDP increased from \$761.4 billion in 2019 to \$815.3 billion in 2021. GDP per capita (PPP) will increase from \$28,423 in 2019 to \$30,472 in 2021. This meant that the GDP per capita growth rate jumped from -0.4% in 2019 to 10.1% in 2021 [183]. The unemployment rate (total % of the labour force) increased slightly from 10.93% in 2017 to 12.03% in 2021 [184]. The Turkish economy remains fragile due to structural problems, imbalances and institutional weaknesses. The erosion of the rule of law and the lack of economic administration independence continue to negatively affect the performance of the Turkish economy [185]. While structural problems hamper the proper functioning of the Turkish economy, the main problem is that the Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye (CBRT) and key regulatory institutions remain directly linked to the presidency, in particular since the transition to the Presidential system. This lack of independence of major financial bodies undermines their ability to pursue a consistent, transparent and effective economic and monetary policy. An illustrative example of the politicisation of financial bodies is the frequent changes in the management team of the CBRT, including Central Bank governors, deputy governors and monetary policy board members, who have failed to comply with the Presidential Palace's economic policies in the last decade. These inefficient monetary policies and structural problems in the Turkish economy have resulted in a weak Turkish Lira and a high inflation rate.

[181] Yasushi Hazama, "Conservatives, nationalists, and incumbent support in Turkey", *Turkish Studies*, 22 (5) 2021, 667-693, DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2020.1858814.

[182] "Turkey Country Report 2022", BTI, 2022. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/TUR>.

[183] Turkey, OECD, <https://data.oecd.org/turkiye.htm>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[184] Ibid.

[185] "Turkey Country Report", BTI, 2024 forthcoming.

Turkish authorities have long insisted on following a low-interest policy because this would encourage the industry to borrow credits and invest in production. In this way, low-interest rates and the weak lira would increase Turkey's exports. As a result of this policy, which runs contrary to traditional economic thinking, actual interest rates turned profoundly negative, triggering a substantial depreciation of the lira and market instability. The interventions by the CBRT led to a temporary slowdown to the lira, which further depreciated in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and consumer inflation reached 80.2% in the summer of 2022, mainly affecting food and energy prices [186]. Following the elections, in June 2023, Erdogan appointed a new central bank governor, Hafize Gaye Erkan, three central-bank deputy governors, and a new Minister of Treasury and Finance, Mehmet Simsek. Since this new economic team took office, the central bank has hiked rates to 25% from 8%, turnaround from the Turkish government's earlier unorthodox policies. However, inflation continues to challenge the Turkish economy, and the budget deficit is worsening.

POPULAR MOBILIZATION

Despite growing political dissatisfaction with Turkey's presidential and governance systems, popular mobilisation remains limited. This is because of two main factors. First, Turkish society remains fragmented along several fault lines. Over the past decade, growing societal polarisation between secularists and conservatives, as well as fault lines between Sunni Turks and ethnic/religious minorities, have made mass mobilisation extremely difficult. Second, Turkey's backsliding on the rights of association and assembly rights continued during the reporting period. While the international community (EU, Freedom House) has noted an increase in repressive measures, use of force and the number of interventions in peaceful demonstrations, it has become almost impossible for opposition groups to organise demonstrations, with security forces regularly using disproportionate force to disperse 'illegal' gatherings. BTI 2024 (forthcoming) notes that "several attempted demonstrations by opposition groups were prohibited or stopped by the police, including demonstrations on human rights violations, environmental rights or protests by dismissed civil servants. In the same way, large protest gatherings are constantly banned, including those held on Peace Day in Istanbul, International Women's Day, as well as the "Armenian Genocide Commemoration Day" and parades to mark Pride month." The 2020 law on the prevention of financing of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction was criticised by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission for its incompatibility with international standards and for further restricting the activities of civil society organisations. The law has been used by the Turkish authorities to control and intimidate civil society organisations, in particular human rights organisations.

These repressive measures on the freedoms of association and expression, combined with a fragmented society and a weak civil society tradition, hinder any attempt at popular mobilisation.

INDEPENDENCE OF JUDICIARY

Over the past decade, the executive has increasingly exercised control over the judiciary. Under the 2017 constitutional amendments, the president has the authority to appoint 12 out of 15 judges of the Constitutional Court, as well as the members of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (Hâkimler ve Savcılar Kurulu, HSK), which is the key institution responsible for the appointment, promotion, transfer and performance evaluation of judges and prosecutors [187].

[186] "Turkey Country Report", BTI, 2024 forthcoming.

[187] "Turkey Country Report", BTI, 2024 forthcoming.

Furthermore, over the years, the judiciary has become the main instrument of the executive to silence the opposition. The AKP government has taken symbolic measures to ensure the independence of the judiciary. The Judicial Reform Strategy 2019–2023 and the March 2021 Human Rights Action Plan (HRAP) are highly symbolic and far from restoring judicial independence and limiting the influence of the executive over the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK). The presidential palace's pressure and control on judges and prosecutors undermines the independence of the judiciary.

The arbitrary and highly politicised recruitment and promotion of judges and prosecutors is a major concern. The main problem is the structure of the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK), its lack of independence from the executive and the procedure for appointing its members. According to the amended constitution, eleven of the thirteen members of the HSK are elected. Four of the eleven elected members are proposed by the President, and seven are proposed by Parliament by qualified majority. None are elected by their peers. The remaining two seats are allocated ex officio to the Minister of Justice and the Deputy Minister, who are also appointed by the President. During the period under study, Turkey began to fail to comply with the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) despite Turkey's obligations as a member of the Council of Europe and its constitutional obligation. Appointments to the Constitutional Court are also highly politicised and the Court is under political pressure from the Turkish ruling elite.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In the last decade, freedom of expression has eroded in Turkey. The majority of media outlets are under government control. The government directly controls public media outlets, while private media is owned by large businesses with close ties to President Erdoğan. These media outlets univocally reflect the government's position. Furthermore, opposition media and dissident journalists are continuously intimidated, arrested or fined. This leads to self-censorship among media professionals. Also, bans on social media, pressure on Kurdish media, and the fining of media outlets are common in Turkey. According to the 2022 European Commission Report on Turkey, as of September 2022, 69 journalists and media workers were in prison, either awaiting trial or serving sentences [189]. In 2021, at least 41 (48 in 2020) journalists were taken into custody, and 35 (23 in 2020) journalists were sentenced to a total of 92.5 (103 in 2020) years in prison. In 2022, a journalist was killed for reporting on corruption [190].

Another cause of concern is the executive control of the High Council for Broadcasting (RTÜK), Turkey's broadcast regulator, whose members are appointed by the government-controlled parliament. RTÜK regularly imposes heavy fines to silence the few remaining independent media outlets. The government continued to block access to websites that were critical of the government's policies. In this regard, the law on the Internet adopted in July 2020 which grants the government extensive control of social media was a significant blow to media freedom. The presidential circular of January 2022 on press and broadcasting led to further arbitrary and more restrictive media control. Turkey's Disinformation Law, adopted in October 2022, was highly detrimental to the freedom of expression as, according to the Freedom House, it is used "to silence members of the political opposition as well as critical journalists [191].

[189] COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Türkiye 2022 Report, European Commission, 12.10.2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022SCO333>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[190] Ibid.

[191] Turkey 2023, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-net/2023>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

[192] Hamdi Firat Buyuk."Internet Freedoms in Turkey Continue to Deteriorate: Report", Balkan Insight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/10/internet-freedoms-in-turkey-continue-to-deteriorate-report/>. Last accessed November 14th, 2023.

According to Twitter’s transparency report, Turkey leads in social media censorship. The Free Web Turkey 2021 Annual Report shows that at least 11,050 URLs were blocked in 2021 [192]. Academic freedom is also deteriorating in Turkey. While the Turkish president directly appoints the rectors, universities are under strict government control, and self-censorship has become routine among academics. The government’s extensive use of anti-terror legislation and broad interpretation of “terrorism” has enabled it to restrict almost all forms of free expression [193]. Although in recent years, Turkey’s position in the World Press Freedom Index appears to have improved from 154 in 2020 (out of 180 countries) to 153 in 2021 and then to 148 in 2022, this is due to other countries falling, and a reduction in the number of imprisoned journalists.

OPPOSITION WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

In Turkey, civil society remains very weak and fragmented. As of 2023, there are more than 120,000 associations and several hundred unions and chambers in Turkey. In total, there are 184,000 Civil Society Organizations. However, dissident voices or CSOs critical of the government are increasingly intimidated or criminalised. The anti-terror legislation and the vast definition of “terrorism/terrorist” help the executive to silence many NGOs and associations. Furthermore, through emergency decrees, around 1,400 associations have been closed without legal recourse after the failed coup. The Law on Preventing Financing of Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, in force since December 2020, has dealt a further blow to Turkish CSOs, facilitating their control and closure by the Ministry of Interior. Overall, CSOs are usually excluded from genuine consultation. However, pro-government organisations are more visible, receive more funding and play a more significant role.

CRITICAL ELECTIONS AND KEY EVENTS

During the period under study, Turkey held a public referendum on the presidential system in 2017, parliamentary/presidential elections in June 2018, local elections in March 2019 and parliamentary and presidential elections in 2023. Although elections are organised regularly and largely in accordance with democratic principles, international observers agree that these elections are, to a great extent, accessible but not fair. A number of irregularities have also been observed. These include unequal media access for parties, limitations on fundamental freedoms, the misuse of state resources to support pro-government candidates and the Supreme Election Council’s (Yüksek Seçim Kurulu, YSK) lack of independence.

In April 2022, the Turkish Grand National Assembly adopted a new electoral law, which lowered the electoral threshold for parliamentary elections from 10% to 7% and changed the formula for calculating the distribution of parliamentary seats. Rather than moving towards a more democratic composition of the Assembly, the law was primarily motivated by a strategic calculation for benefiting the AKP-MHP coalition’s vote rate in the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections. According to international observers, the 2023 twin elections were, to a great extent, free but unfair [194]. The outcome of the 2023 presidential election confirmed the ongoing division and polarisation in Turkish society, as no candidate won more than 50% of the vote in the first round on 14 May, and a second round run-off resulted in a clear split of votes between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (52.14%) and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (47.86%).

[193] “Turkey Country Report”, BTI, 2024 forthcoming.

[194] “Türkiye elections marked by unlevel playing field yet still competitive, international observers say”, OSCE, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkiye/543552>.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Over the past decade, Turkey has begun to adopt a more assertive balancing strategy in foreign policy to further its interests. The country pivots between the European Union, the United States and Russia to promote its short-term interests. A prime example is Turkey's position during Russia's war of aggression since 2022. While Turkey refrained from joining to the EU's sanctions regime, it played a mediating role between Russia and the EU/US.

Although Turkey is officially a candidate country for the EU, Turkey's accession to the EU seems unlikely. Nevertheless, the EU and Turkey continue to cooperate in areas of joint interest, including energy, transport, economy and trade, counterterrorism, and refugees. However, this transactional relationship is far from sustaining Turkey's reform process. After the elections in 2023, in sharp contrast to Ankara's highly Eurosceptic statements since the failed coup in 2016, Erdogan stated Turkey's determination to join the EU and its willingness to restart accession negotiations with the EU, on the other hand, Turkey accepted to lift its veto over Sweden's NATO membership, although, on the condition of Stockholm's cooperation in the fight against terrorist organisations. However, these symbolic acts of re-alignment with the West cannot be seen as a genuine willingness on Erdogan's part to relaunch Turkey's reform process or to pursue a pro-Western foreign policy.. Instead, Erdogan's willingness to pursue a flexible foreign policy between the EU/NATO and Russia is mainly driven by Turkey's fragile economy and complex strategic environment.

The EU continues to fund substantial humanitarian projects in Turkey. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the EU has taken several measures to mitigate its economic and social impact (European Commission 2021) [195]. In 2022, Turkey received new funding of €50 million as part of the €3 billion package announced by the European Commission in June 2021 to support refugees in Turkey until 2024. This €50 million was directed in addition to the €325 million humanitarian aid already announced in December 2021 for the Emergency Social Safety Net program in Turkey, bringing the total EU humanitarian funding for Turkey since 2012 close to €3.34 billion [196].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while Turkey's autocratisation process accelerated a decade ago with the AKP's repressive measures after the Gezi events and the corruption probe in 2013, Turkey's regime change in 2017 marked the consolidation of these authoritarian trends in the 'New Turkey'. The state of emergency declared after the failed coup (2016-2018), the implementation of the amended constitution and the spread of the new presidential system since 2017 have had a devastating impact on Turkey's democratic system. During this period (2017-2023), Turkish domestic politics have become more authoritarian, polarised, nationalist and conservative; the Turkish government has pursued an unpredictable and conflictual foreign policy. Under Erdogan's presidency (until 2028), the prospect of Turkey's normalisation in both domestic and foreign policy is doubtful. But a complete break with the West (US/EU) seems equally unlikely, given Turkey's fragile economy and risky geopolitical environment.

[195] COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT, Turkey 2021. <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-10/Turkey%202021%20report.PDF>. Last accessed November 13th, 2023.

[196] "Turkey: EU provides additional €50 million humanitarian aid to support vulnerable refugees", European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/ip_22_3678

5. CONCLUSION

As we conclude our analysis, it becomes evident that the trends of autocratisation within the European Union's neighbourhood are both complex and diverse, varying significantly across the Eastern Neighbourhood, Southern Neighbourhood, and the Western Balkans and Turkey. These variations are not merely incidental but are deeply rooted in the unique historical, political, and cultural contexts of each region.

In the Eastern Neighbourhood, encompassing countries like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, we observe a landscape marked by post-communist transitions. These nations have experienced oscillations between democratic aspirations and autocratic regressions. The tug-of-war for influence between the European Union and Russia significantly shapes their political trajectories. Challenges such as struggles for judicial independence, media freedom, and rampant corruption are common, painting a picture of regions in a continuous struggle for democratic consolidation.

Turning our gaze to the Southern Neighbourhood, which includes Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, and Tunisia, a different pattern emerges. Here, the legacy of the Arab Spring looms large, with countries navigating the complex aftermath of these revolutionary movements. While Israel and Tunisia have been notable for their democratic practices, recent trends, especially in Tunisia, indicate a rapid descent into autocratic governance. This region is characterized by traditional monarchies, military dictatorships, and electoral autocracies, facing significant challenges in maintaining judiciary independence and freedom of expression.

The Western Balkans (comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) and Turkey, present a concerning picture of democratic backsliding. Despite initial progress towards European democratic standards, these nations are grappling with persistent corruption, weak rule of law, and political polarization. Turkey's shift towards autocracy post-2017 and Serbia's drift under Aleksandar Vučić are particularly notable. These trends are indicative of the region's struggle with political consolidation and autocratic tendencies, even as they aspire to align with European values.

This comparative analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of autocratisation across the EU's neighbourhood. While overarching themes of democratic erosion and challenges to the rule of law are evident, the specific manifestations of these trends are deeply influenced by each region's distinct political, social, and historical backdrop. The role and impact of the European Union in these regions vary, reflecting the complexity of promoting democratic values and practices in diverse geopolitical landscapes. As we reflect on these findings, it becomes clear that a nuanced, context-specific understanding is crucial for effectively addressing the challenges of autocratisation and supporting the journey towards more democratic societies.

APPENDIX

We double-checked the autocratisation trends highlighted in this report with V-dem data by contrasting them with the Freedom in the World index by Freedom House. This index is composed of two aggregated sub-indexes: Civil Liberties, measuring freedoms of expression and belief; associational and organisational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy without interference from the state; and Political Rights, measuring free and fair participation in the political process, the right to vote freely for distinct alternatives in legitimate elections, competition for public office, joining political parties and organisations, and electing representatives who have a decisive impact on public policies and are accountable to the electorate. Countries are graded between 1 (most free) and 7 (least accessible). Despite the different conceptualisations and measurements of democracy, Freedom in the world seems to confirm autocratisation trends identified with V-dem data.

Autocratisation involves a gradual decline in democratic principles and the erosion of democratic institutions. Some countries in the European Neighborhood, particularly in the Western Balkans, Southern Neighbourhood and the EU Enlargement area, have experienced challenges related to democratic backsliding. This includes issues such as the weakening of the rule of law, restrictions on media freedom, and limitations on political opposition. At the same time, populist and nationalist movements have gained ground in several European countries, both within the EU and in the neighboring regions. These movements often challenge the established political order and may contribute to a more centralised and authoritarian style of governance.

The rule of law is a fundamental principle of the European Union, and compliance with this principle is a key criterion for countries seeking EU membership. Concerns about the rule of law have been raised in some candidate and potential candidate countries. Issues such as judicial independence, corruption, and the functioning of democratic institutions have been points of contention. Furthermore, the process of EU enlargement has faced challenges, with some member states expressing reservations about further expansion. The EU has emphasized the importance of meeting specific criteria related to democracy, the rule of law, and economic reforms for candidate countries. However, progress has been uneven, and accession talks have been affected by political developments within candidate countries and differences among existing EU member states.

Geopolitical considerations play a significant role in the dynamics of the European neighborhood. The influence of external actors, such as Russia, can impact the political trajectories of countries in the region. Additionally, issues such as unresolved conflicts and geopolitical tensions can affect the prospects of democratic governance and EU integration.

At the same time, society and grassroots movements have played a crucial role in advocating for democratic values and pushing back against autocratisation. Activists, journalists, and non-governmental organizations have been instrumental in raising awareness about democratic backsliding and holding governments accountable.

Southering Neighbourhood

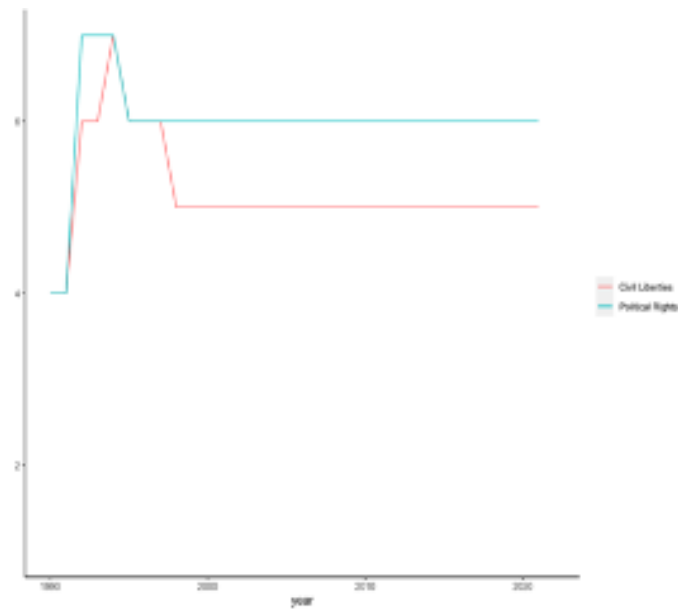


Figure 25: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Algeria in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

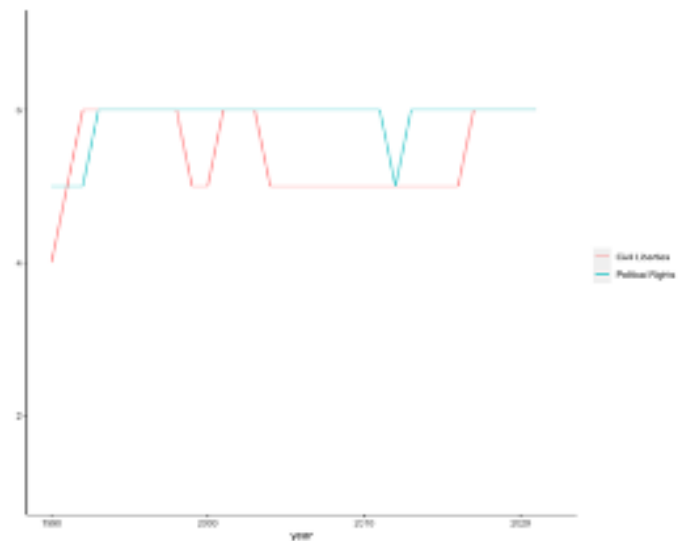


Figure 26: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Egypt in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

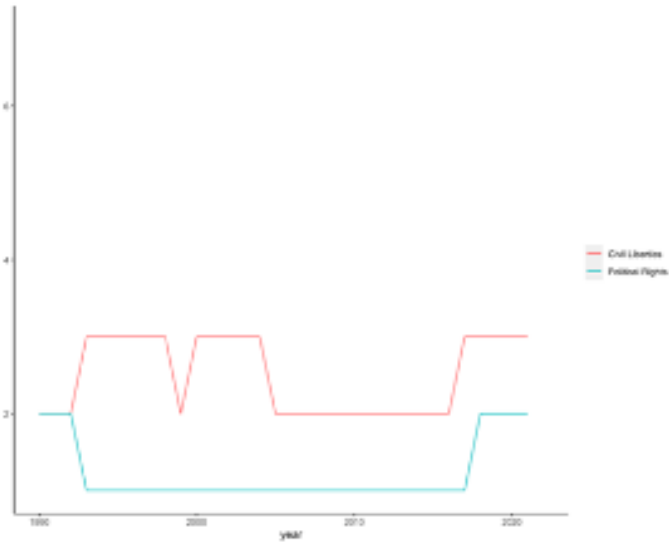


Figure 27: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Israel in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

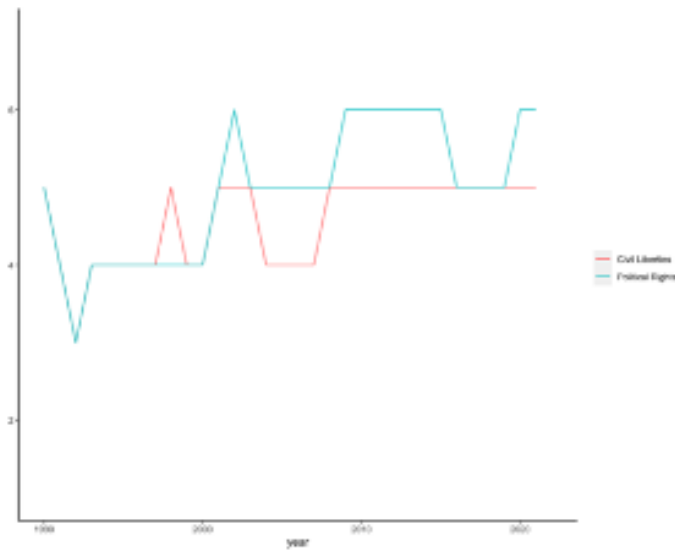


Figure 28: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Jordan in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

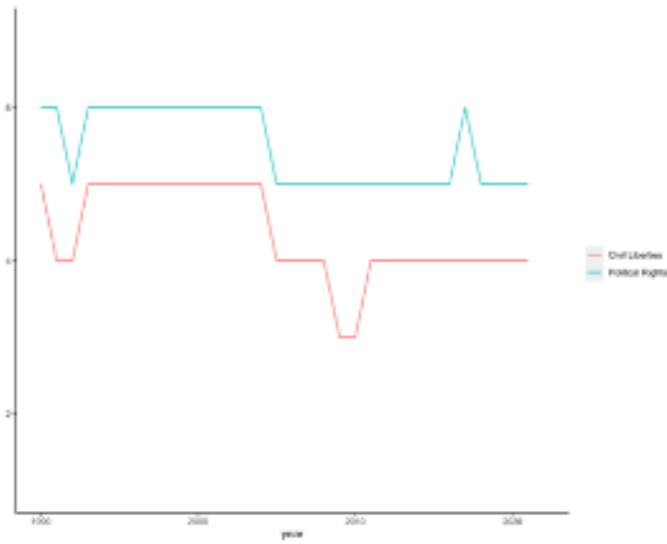


Figure 29: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Lebanon in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

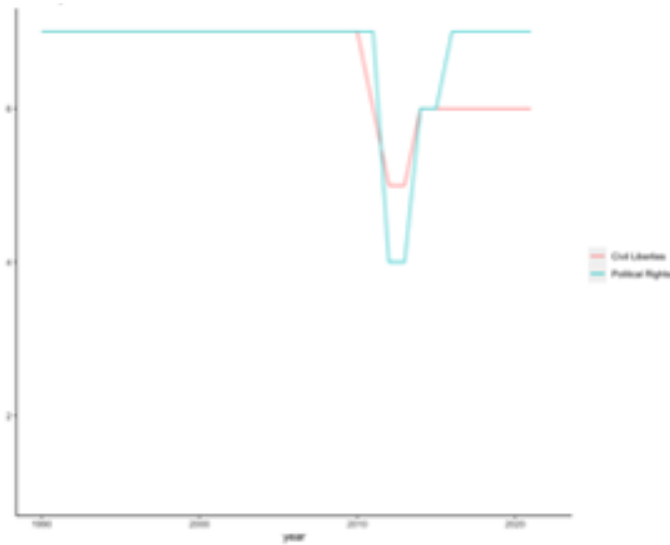


Figure 30: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Libya in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

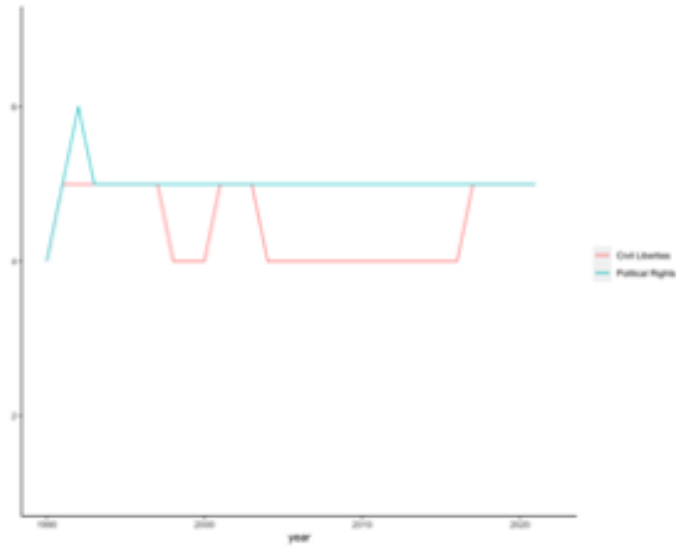


Figure 31: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Morocco in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.



Figure 32: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in the Palestinian Territories in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

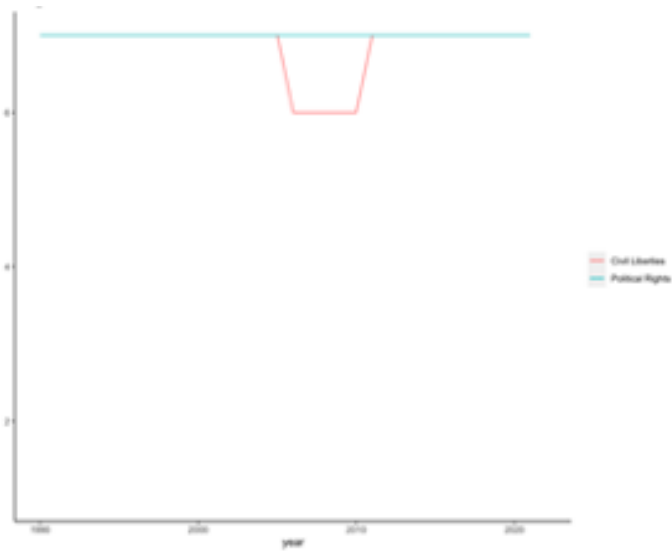


Figure 33: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Syria in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

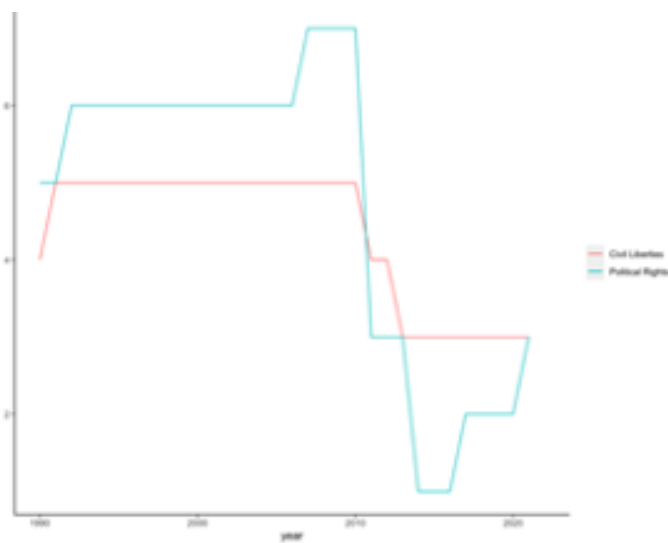


Figure 34: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Tunisia in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

Eastern Neighborhood

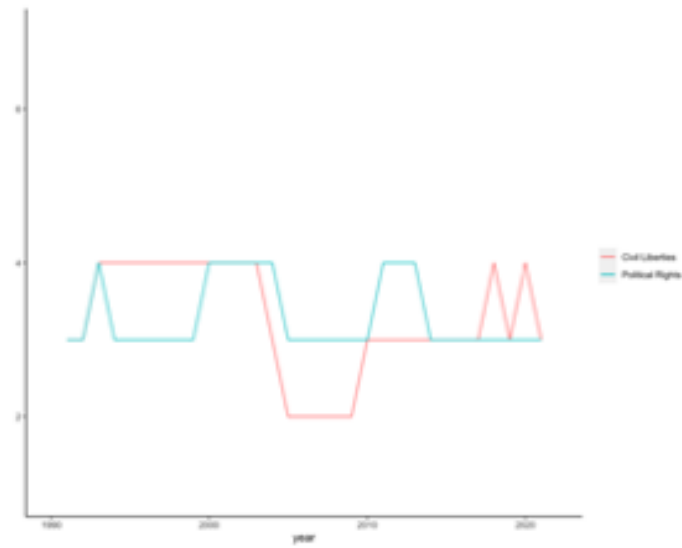


Figure 35: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Ukraine in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.



Figure 36: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Armenia in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

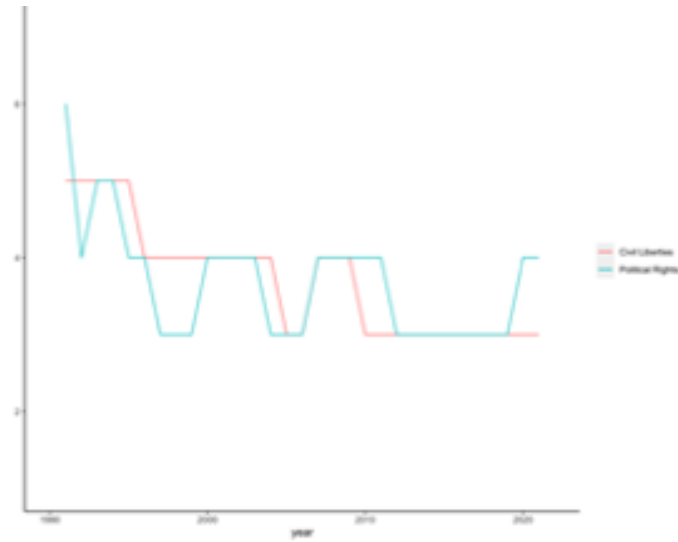


Figure 37: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Georgia in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.



Figure 38: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Azerbaijan in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

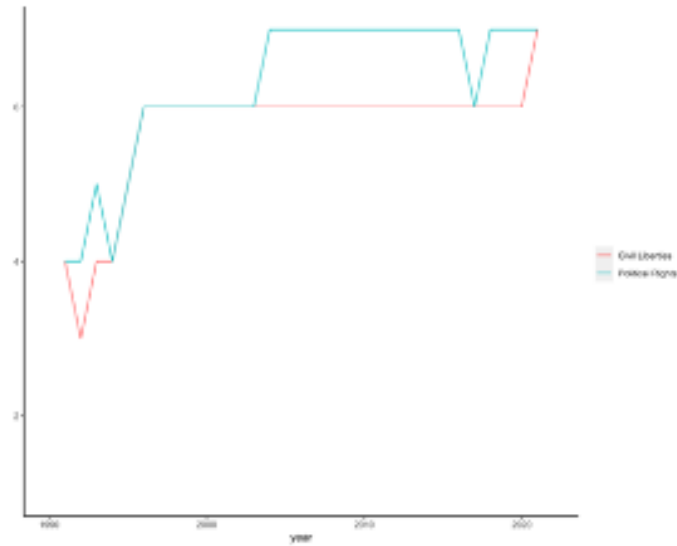


Figure 39: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Belarus in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

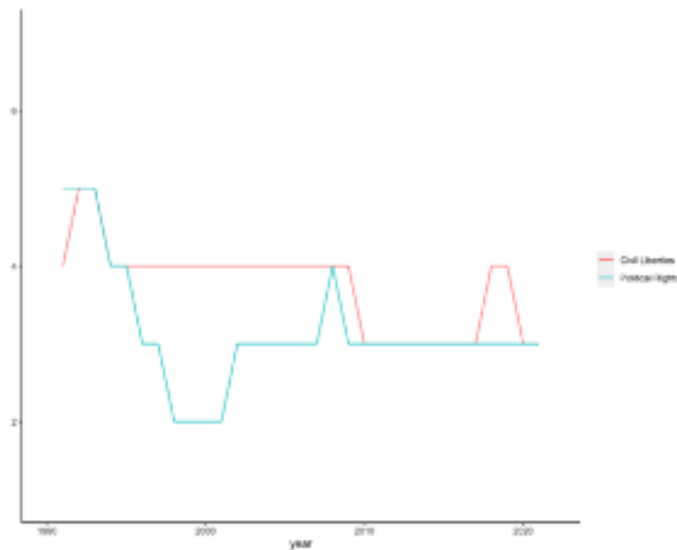


Figure 40: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Moldova in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

EU Enlargement



Figure 41: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Albania in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

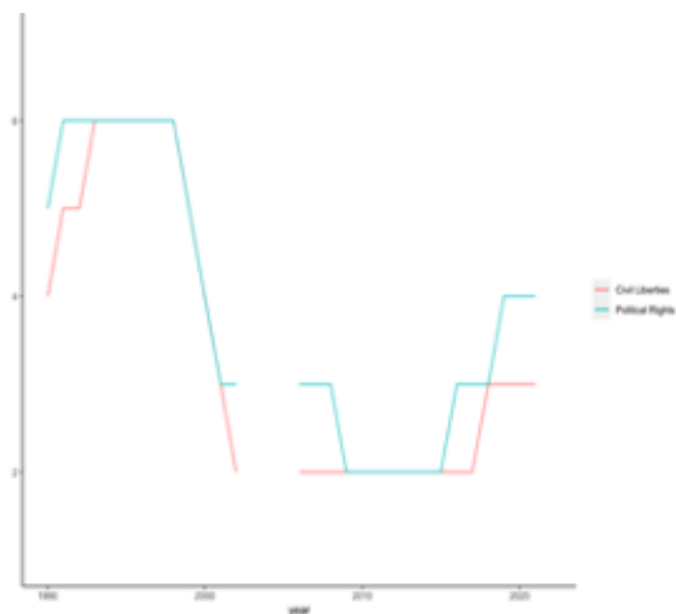


Figure 42: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Serbia in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

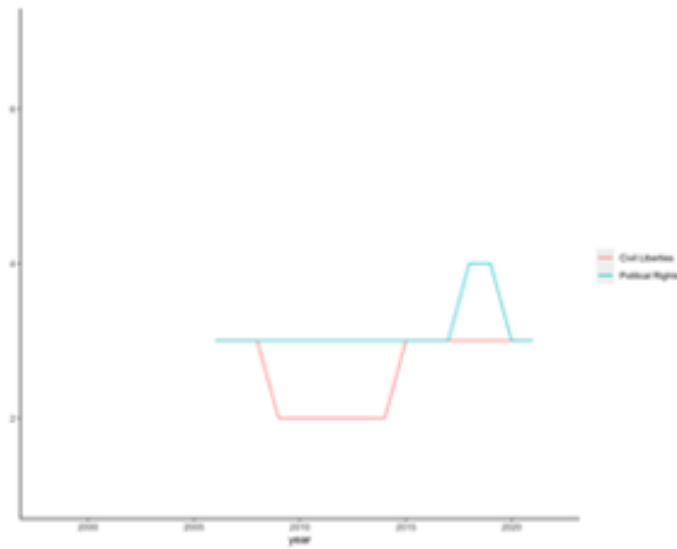


Figure 43: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Montenegro in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

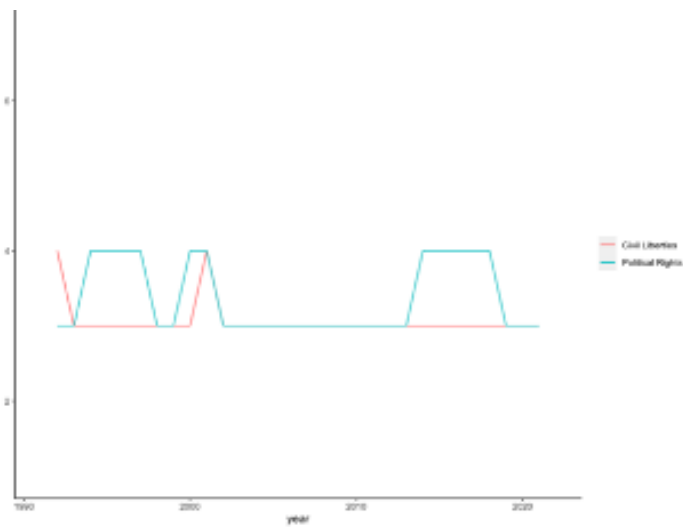


Figure 44: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in North Macedonia in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

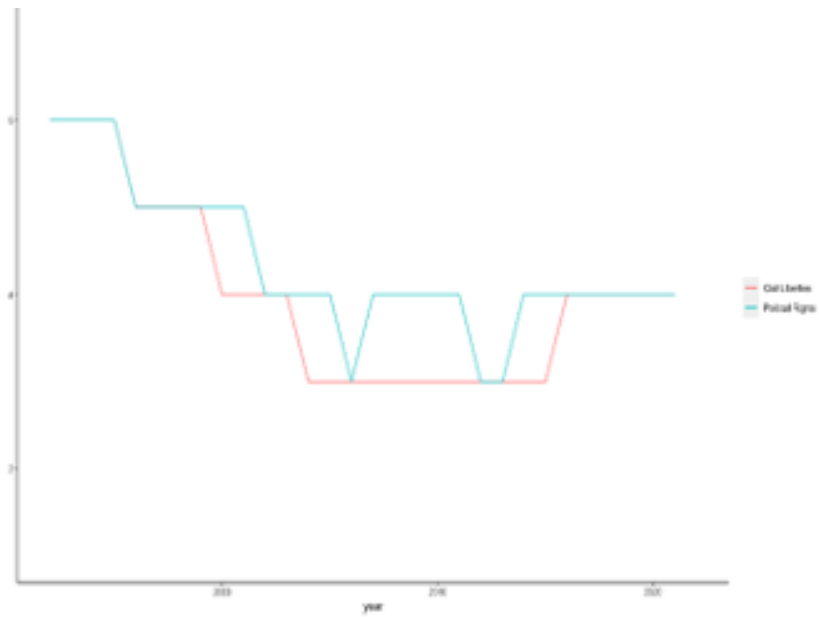


Figure 45: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

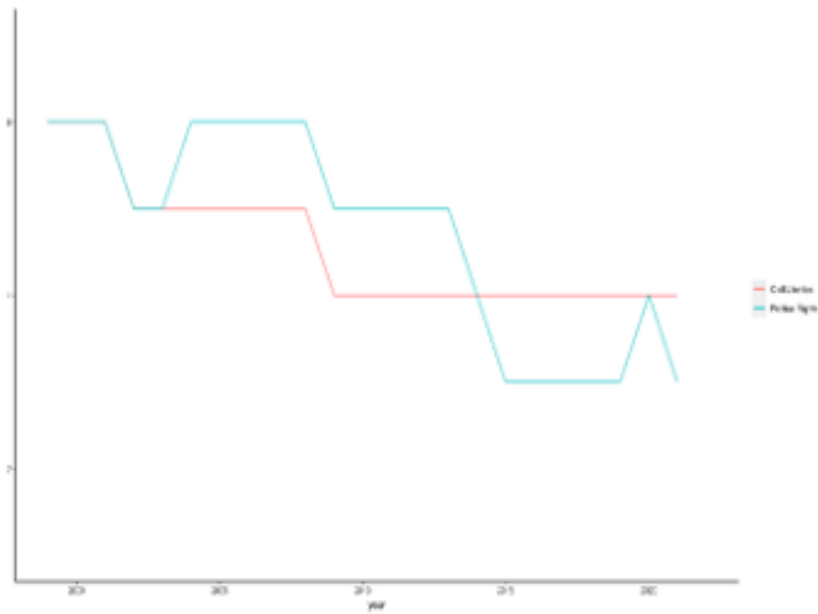


Figure 46: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Kosovo in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.

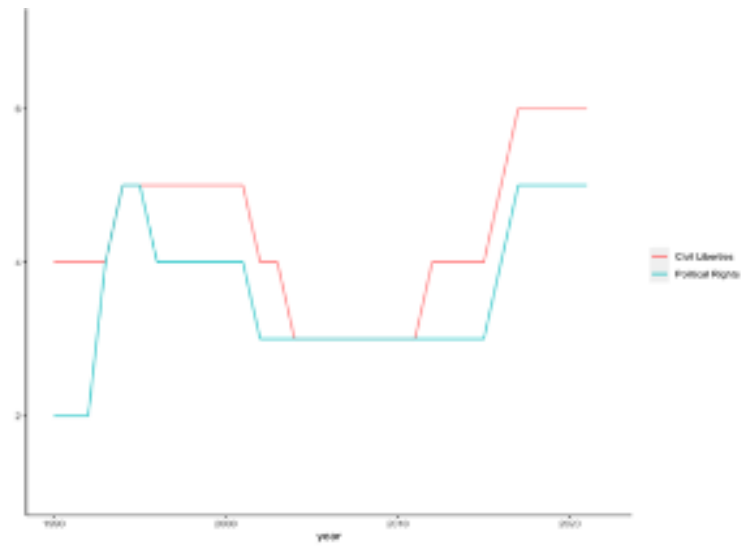


Figure 47: Comparison between Civil Liberties and Political Rights in Turkey in the Freedom in the World Index and V-Dem index.