

THE DYNAMICS OF AUTOCRATISATION AND DISSENSUS IN THE EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD

REPORT



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Introduction

By Luca Tomini (ULB) and Claudia Bădulescu (ULB)

In recent years, the EU's neighbourhood has become a laboratory of democratic experimentation – and erosion. From the shores of the Mediterranean to the post-Soviet space, countries once seen as on a democratic path have experienced troubling reversals. Elected leaders have concentrated power, civic space has shrunk, and liberal-democratic norms are being openly contested. While some of these shifts have been gradual and procedural, others have taken more abrupt and disruptive forms. Together, they reflect a broader trend of autocratisation unfolding in diverse and context-specific ways, but united by a growing dissensus over what liberal democracy means and who gets to define it.

This report aims to make sense of these developments by providing a comparative and in-depth analysis of autocratisation trajectories in the EU's neighbourhood. It does so by building on the framework and findings of the RED-SPINEL (*Respond to Emerging Dissensus: Supranational Instruments and Norms of European democracy*) project's previous work¹, while refining the analytical lens through which political transformations are examined. By focusing on key episodes of democratic erosion across six countries in the EU's neighbourhood, this report contributes to a better understanding of how autocratisation unfolds, what drives it, and how dissensus over liberal democracy both enables and emerges from these processes. It aims to support practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in understanding and tackling the complex and evolving landscape of democratic backsliding in the EU's neighbourhood regions.

To guide this analysis, the case studies are structured around **three core questions** that help unpack the complexity of autocratisation processes in the EU neighbourhood:

1. *How has the process of autocratisation unfolded?* This first question involves a descriptive analysis of the events under consideration, highlighting the ways in which autocratisation has manifested. It identifies key moments, the main political dimensions affected, the primary actors driving the process, and the constellation of opposition forces resisting it.

2. *What are the primary causes of this process?* The second question seeks to identify the key causal factors behind autocratisation. While each case has its own

¹ We note in particular Deliverable D.3.4. The state of autocratization in the EU neighbourhood. The report is available here: https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/State_of_Autocratisation_0.pdf

particularities, this report focuses on a select set of causal elements that explain the emergence of authoritarian dynamics in the studied cases.

3. *What forms of dissensus reinforce the autocratisation process?* The third question examines the nature of dissensus over liberal democracy that autocratizing actors leverage to challenge democratic institutions and consolidate their rule.

The following sections develop the analytical framework for each of these three questions, providing the conceptual foundation for the case studies that follow.

1.1. Understanding autocratisation Models

Answering the first question in this report requires some clarity about what autocratisation entails. Autocratisation is a dual process: it involves the deterioration of democracy through the dismantling of democratic institutions and practices while simultaneously constructing and consolidating autocratic structures. While much of the literature on democratic backsliding focuses on the destructive aspects, such as weakening institutional checks and balances, attacks on media independence, and restrictions on political and civil liberties, broadening the perspective to include the construction of authoritarian institutions provides a more comprehensive view, which is relevant to understand what type of values, norms, and institutions that autocratizing actors aim to build to replace democratic ones.

Decades of research have advanced our understanding of contemporary autocratisation processes, although some areas remain unexplored. Early studies examined the global scope of autocratisation (Boese, Lindberg, and Lührmann 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Skaaning 2020; Tomini 2021). Additionally, efforts have been made to refine measurement approaches (Jee, Lueders, and Myrick 2022; Pelke and Croissant 2021), addressing the conceptual ambiguity of terms such as "autocratization," "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo 2016), "democratic regression" (Croissant and Haynes 2021), and "de-democratization" (Tilly 2003). Recent research has shifted towards identifying the primary drivers of autocratisation, often linked to executive power and ruling elites (Benasaglio Berlucci and Kellam 2023). Scholars have analysed the decisions, strategies, and objectives of incumbent leaders, while others have focused on structural and institutional determinants, including economic performance, socioeconomic and ethnic inequalities, and polarisation (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021).

Autocratization is an open-ended process with multiple potential outcomes: it may halt, stagnate, revert, trigger regime adaptations, or culminate in a full-fledged authoritarian transition. While much of the research has focused on influential cases, such as Hungary under Orbán, Poland under Kaczyński, and Turkey under Erdoğan, less attention has been paid to smaller, less economically and politically relevant countries, precisely some of the countries covered by this report.

There are three primary models of autocratisation that emerge from this scholarly debate, as follows:

1. Plebiscitary Aggrandizement: this process, typically gradual, involves the consolidation of power in the executive branch at the expense of legislative and judicial independence, achieved through a series of legislative and executive maneuvers. The erosion of democracy is closely linked to the leader's ability to gain and sustain broad popular support (Levitsky and Loxton, 2015; Balderacchi and Tomini, 2024), often facilitated by anti-establishment or populist political platforms. As our report will showcase, this mechanism has been central to autocratisation in **Turkey**, **Georgia** and **Israel**, where it was shaped by religious and conservative themes. The autocratisation process in **Turkey** accelerated following the 2017 constitutional referendum, which marked the transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in power since 2003 (Prime Minister) and President since 2014. The consolidation of executive power marked this period, politicization of the judiciary, suppression of opposition (particularly after the 2016 coup attempt), and increasing restrictions on media and civil society. Erdoğan's sustained electoral dominance and populist-nationalist discourse enabled a legalistic yet substantive dismantling of democratic checks. Similarly, in 2018, Georgia entered a phase of autocratisation marked by plebiscitary aggrandisement, under the informal leadership of Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream government. Despite nominal democratic procedures, executive dominance has grown steadily, particularly after the 2020 and 2024 elections. Judiciary independence has been eroded, critical media harassed, and opposition voices marginalized. The government maintains legitimacy through electoral victories and appeals to national sovereignty, while increasingly sidelining democratic institutions and Western-oriented civil society actors. The case of Israel also indicates emerging Plebiscitary Aggrandizement from 2013 onward. During Benjamin Netanyahu's fourth and subsequent terms as Prime Minister, **Israel** experienced a gradual erosion of liberal-democratic norms. The attempted judicial overhaul in 2023–2024 has its roots in a decade-long campaign to delegitimise institutional checks, especially the Supreme Court, through populist rhetoric and legislative proposals. Although still a democracy, this period witnessed growing polarisation,

the politicisation of key institutions, and attempts to reshape the constitutional balance of power under the guise of democratic mandates.

2. Executive Entrenchment: This pattern occurs when ruling elites lack broad popular or parliamentary support and resort to electoral manipulation, state-sponsored violence, and political deals to maintain power. In such cases, the incumbent secures their hold on power not by breaking with the establishment, but by aligning with segments of the socio-economic and political elite. Instead of leveraging anti-establishment appeals, this process relies on political deals, electoral manipulation, state-sponsored violence, and even self-coups rather than the more pseudo-legalistic tactics of executive aggrandizement. This report will focus on the cases of Serbia and Tunisia as examples of Executive Entrenchment. Under Aleksandar Vučić, who became President in 2017 after serving as Prime Minister since 2014, **Serbia** entered a phase of executive entrenchment beginning around 2016. The ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) leveraged institutional dominance, media capture, and elite networks to undermine democratic competition. Elections continued to be held, but they were increasingly skewed through unfair conditions, clientelism, and the marginalization of opposition actors. The judiciary and parliament lost independence, while dissenting voices were increasingly constrained. In **Tunisia**, the path towards autocratisation was taken once more in July 2021, when President Kais Saied dismissed the parliament and began ruling by decree. Saied, in power since 2019, dissolved constitutional institutions and pushed through a new constitution via a low-turnout referendum in 2022. His rhetoric fused anti-party populism with technocratic legitimacy. Without strong party or military backing, his strategy relies on institutional paralysis and selective repression rather than mass mobilisation, signalling a clear shift toward entrenched presidential authoritarianism.

3. Military-led autocratisation: While less common today, military-led autocratisation still occurs in specific regions. Unlike the first two patterns, which are primarily civilian-led (even when the military is used as a tool, as in self-coups), this form of autocratisation sees the armed forces assuming control of the government or progressively strengthening their control over, and reshaping, the political order. Historically, military interventions have occurred for various reasons, but in autocratisation processes, they are often justified by two key narratives. One is the notion of a "stabilizing intervention" where the military steps in due to perceived or actual governance failures in addressing severe social, economic, or security crises. The second justification is the removal of a political force deemed a threat, either to democracy itself or to entrenched socio-economic interests. Our report focuses on the case of **Armenia** (2020–2022) as a case of military-led autocratisation combined with executive entrenchment. Following the

2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan (in power since 2018) faced deep political and military pressure. Although initially seen as a democratic reformer, Pashinyan's tenure from 2020 to 2022 revealed an increasing executive dominance, the politicisation of the judiciary, and a heavy reliance on security structures to manage dissent and maintain control. The military's influence in political life intensified, with both elite pressure and threats of intervention reflecting a militarized dimension within a civilian-led government.

This report will illustrate how autocratisation unfolds across these diverse trajectories and patterns, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of its mechanisms and variations across different contexts. For the purposes of this report which analyses turning points of liberal democracy and dissensus within regular parameters of liberal democracy, we have decided to pause the analysis for the Israel country case study, given the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

1.2. Understanding causes of autocratisation

The second question concerns the causes of this phenomenon. Without aiming to provide an exhaustive case-by-case analysis, the objective of this report is to identify the most significant and representative causal elements for each case study. The current wave of autocratisation is a truly global phenomenon, spreading into all regions of the world. This stands in some contrast to the third wave of democratization, which barely touched the Middle East and North Africa. While each case of autocratisation is unique, several common factors facilitate its occurrence, according to the literature:

Economic and social conditions: Widening socio-economic disparities, ethnic tensions, and gender inequalities contribute to societal fragmentation, which in turn weakens democratic resilience. Economic downturns, financial crises, and chronic unemployment create widespread dissatisfaction, providing fertile ground for autocratic leaders who present themselves as the only solution to economic instability. Under such conditions, populist and nationalist rhetoric gains traction, further deepening societal divisions.

Authoritarian legacies and institutional weaknesses: Many states with histories of authoritarianism face persistent challenges in consolidating democratic institutions. Fragile rule of law, corruption, and the absence of strong political parties make these democracies particularly vulnerable to erosion. Weak institutional checks and balances allow political leaders to amass unchecked power, facilitating autocratisation over time.

Political polarization and populism: Deepening political divisions foster a climate where illiberal leaders can exploit tensions to justify consolidating power. Populist rhetoric frequently portrays political adversaries as existential threats to the nation, thereby undermining democratic norms and institutions in the name of stability or national unity. In the West, and in highly polarized environments, supporters of far-right leaders often prioritize ideological victories over democratic principles, further enabling autocratic tendencies.

Authoritarian influence from external powers: In the globalized political landscape, authoritarian regimes increasingly exert influence beyond their borders through economic leverage, disinformation campaigns, and covert political support. Rather than relying on military intervention, contemporary authoritarian states employ “sharp power” strategies, using state-controlled media, financial incentives, and strategic alliances to promote illiberal governance models. Regional powers such as Russia and China have been particularly active in fostering autocratisation by supporting allied regimes, funding political movements, and spreading narratives that challenge democratic norms.

Taken together, these factors create a complex and interconnected landscape where autocratisation often occurs through a combination of structural weaknesses, political agency, and external influences. By identifying these drivers and, in particular, the most influential driver for each country, this report seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how and why autocratisation unfolds in different contexts and countries from across the EU neighbourhood.

1.3 The nexus between dissensus over liberal democracy and autocratisation

Finally, the third question of this report relates to the issue of dissensus over liberal democracy. Dissensus over liberal democracy plays a crucial role in fueling and strengthening autocratisation processes in the EU neighborhood. The various forms of dissensus—mild, severe, disruptive, and destructive (see Coman and Brack)—contribute differently to the erosion of democratic norms, institutions, and principles, often creating fertile ground for autocratic actors and regimes.

Mild dissensus, although seemingly limited in scope, can gradually erode democratic legitimacy by fostering scepticism toward democratic procedures and governance practices. When dissatisfaction with specific policies or decision-making procedures becomes widespread, political actors may exploit these grievances to push for procedural changes that limit pluralism, participation, or transparency. In the EU neighbourhood, such dynamics can be

observed in cases where governments justify restricting civil liberties under the guise of efficiency or security, thereby subtly weakening democratic governance.

Severe dissensus intensifies this process by exposing deep-seated divisions over how democracy should function. In this context, actors seek to correct perceived failures of democracy; however, their conflicting goals lead to polarisation and institutional deadlock. In many EU neighborhood countries, political elites have leveraged such divisions to justify the centralization of power, often arguing that democratic inefficiencies necessitate strong leadership or alternative governance models. This trend is evident in instances where executive aggrandisement is legitimised by claims of correcting democratic dysfunctions, ultimately weakening democracy's checks and balances.

Disruptive dissensus marks a turning point where the very principles of liberal democracy come under direct challenge. When conflicts target core constitutional values and norms, the political game itself is contested, often leading to outright autocratisation. In several EU neighborhood countries, populist and illiberal forces have capitalized on these conflicts to push for constitutional changes that redefine democratic governance in ways that diminish political competition and individual rights. This type of dissensus often provides a gateway to soft authoritarianism, in which democratic structures remain in place but are increasingly hollowed out.

Finally, *destructive dissensus* represents the most extreme challenge to liberal democracy, as both its ideals and practices come under siege. In these cases, actors advocating for non-democratic alternatives gain prominence, leading to irreconcilable conflicts between pro-democracy forces and those favoring autocratic rule. This level of dissensus has been evident in instances of democratic systems collapsing, often through the co-optation of institutions, electoral manipulation, or an outright military takeover. In the EU neighborhood, the prevalence of such dissensus has facilitated the rise of fully authoritarian regimes, where governance is increasingly repressive.

Crucially, dissensus does not merely *precede* autocratisation. It both fuels and is produced by it, in a recursive dynamic that reshapes the democratic landscape of the EU's surrounding regions. As autocratic leaders dismantle democratic safeguards, control media narratives, and restrict civil society, they deepen societal divisions and undermine trust in democratic alternatives. This recursive dynamic sustains the autocratisation process. Autocratizing actors weaponize dissensus to entrench their rule, presenting themselves as the only force capable of resolving social fragmentation, restoring national unity, or defending cultural identity. This strategy is particularly effective in contexts marked by unresolved

historical traumas, ethnic tensions, or geopolitical uncertainty which are features common across many EU neighbourhood countries. At the same time, dissensus is actively constrained in autocratizing and authoritarian regimes. As democratic spaces shrink, citizens lose the ability to express dissent through peaceful protest, electoral participation, or independent media. In countries such as Tunisia, Armenia (2020–2022), and parts of the South Caucasus, legal and extralegal tools are used to suppress critical voices, narrowing the public sphere and silencing alternative visions of democracy. The paradox is stark: while autocratizing leaders rely on the existence of dissensus to justify their rise, they often seek to eliminate or monopolize dissent once in power.

This complex interplay between dissensus and autocratisation is especially relevant for the EU neighbourhood, where fragile democracies are exposed to both internal vulnerabilities and external authoritarian influences. The EU's model of liberal democracy is increasingly contested not only by domestic actors but also by regional powers that promote alternative governance models. Understanding how dissensus evolves and how it is instrumentalised or suppressed by autocratizing elites is crucial for identifying early warning signs of democratic erosion and formulating targeted responses. Ultimately, strengthening liberal democracy in the EU's neighbourhood requires not only institutional support but also engagement with the underlying conflicts and societal divisions that drive dissensus in the first place.

1.4 Research objectives and methodology

This report contributes to a deeper understanding of the underlying conflicts and societal divisions that fuel dissensus and autocratisation by examining in detail six representative cases from the EU neighbourhood: Serbia, Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, Israel, and Tunisia. Each case illustrates distinct trajectories of democratic erosion and reflects a different configuration of dissensus over liberal democracy, whether driven from above, emerging from societal cleavages, or influenced by regional and global dynamics.

The selection of cases reflects both geographic balance and variation in autocratisation models. While all six countries lie in the broader EU neighbourhood, they differ in regime type, democratic history, institutional capacity, and geopolitical orientation. The inclusion of both formally democratic and hybrid regimes enables comparative insights into how autocratisation unfolds under different political conditions. Moreover, the cases reflect the three main modes of autocratisation identified earlier in the report, i.e. plebiscitary aggrandizement, executive entrenchment, and militarized or security-led processes of autocratisation, thereby allowing for cross-case learning and pattern identification.

Methodologically, the report draws on a qualitative, comparative case study approach, combining process-tracing with interpretive analysis of political discourse, institutional developments, and key events. Each case study revisits the analytical framework and findings developed in RED-SPINEL Deliverable 3.4, which focused on four dimensions: (1) economic and social context, (2) state of judicial independence, (3) freedom of speech and media pluralism, and (4) popular opposition, elections, and critical turning points. For each case, we examine how autocratisation unfolded, identify its main drivers, and analyse how dissensus over liberal democracy was both mobilized and reshaped in the process.

By situating these cases within a shared analytical framework, the report offers both context-sensitive accounts and comparative insights. It aims to support civil society actors, policymakers, and researchers in diagnosing democratic erosion and responding to it more effectively. In doing so, the report sheds light on how dissensus operates across different settings, how it interacts with institutional and political developments, and how it can be both a symptom and a tool of autocratisation. Ultimately, understanding these dynamics is essential for protecting liberal democracy not only across the EU neighbourhood, but also within the EU.

Case Studies of Autocratisation: East

ARMENIA: Executive Entrenchment and Dissensus (2018-2022)

1.3. Introduction

Armenia's political landscape underwent a dramatic transformation in 2018, signalling what appeared to be, for a number of years, a reversal of its entrenched autocratic practices since the 1990s.² The peaceful political transformation, known as the Velvet Revolution, reminiscent of the 1989 optimism for the consolidation of democratic institutions after a long-enduring authoritarian system, carried over to much of the analysis of 2018. In 2022, V-Dem ranked Armenia as one of the world's top ten democratisers.³ However, this teleological narrative of democratic progress post-2018 was met with greater scepticism in greater detail. Despite the collective demand for change that mobilised citizens onto the streets, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's interpretation and practice of such demands, symbolised in aggressive lustration and the complete removal of the "old guard", raised concerns about his commitment to democratic processes.⁴ The government's suspicion of criticism, its measures to contain dissent, tensions between the executive and the judiciary, and the extensive reliance on intelligence services were immediately visible and echoed older practices of the Armenian executive power.⁵ These patterns became more pronounced following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the subsequent 2021 ceasefire, which coincided with a noticeable decline in press freedom, judicial independence, civil society activity, human rights protections, and the integrity of the electoral system. As of 2025, Armenia is again classified among the world's

² Sammut, Dennis. "Two Years After the Velvet Revolution, Armenia Needs the EU More Than Ever." *European Policy Centre*, 2 June 2020, www.epc.eu/en/publications/Two-years-after-the-Velvet-Revolution-Armenia-needs-the-EU-more-than-33e910.

³ V-Dem Institute, "Democracy Report 2022: Autocratisation Changing Nature?", University of Gothenburg, March 2022, https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf, Pg 19

⁴ Cookman, Liz, "Armenia Opts for Pashinyan, Democracy Despite Defeat in War," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/21/armenia-election-war-pashinyan-democracy/>

⁵ Bertelsmann Stiftung, "Armenia Country Report 2022," *BTI Transformation Index*, 2022, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ARM>.

ongoing autocratiser group.⁶ This regression illustrates how democratically elected leaders in post-conflict settings can centralise power under the pretext of stability, security, and sovereignty. Armenia thus offers a compelling case study of *executive entrenchment* in a context further shaped by military conflict, and the report traces these dynamics since 2018, highlighting the manifestations, causes, and dynamics in which dissensus played a part in autocratisation, both as an enabler and as a strategy of power.

1.4. Background

Before 2018, international watchdogs and organisations consistently criticised Armenia's political system for its limited judicial independence and a Parliament dominated mainly by the ruling political elite, particularly the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which held power for much of the post-Soviet period. Legislative processes were heavily shaped by the government, with limited space for opposition or debate. Armenia operated as a semi-presidential system, in which the president wielded significant power over judicial appointments to the Constitutional Court and other high courts, prior to the 2015 constitutional reforms.⁷ Judicial decisions in politically sensitive cases often favoured the ruling party's interests,⁸ reinforcing the perception that courts were used as tools for political control rather than impartial adjudicators. Because of this impunity climate, the judiciary was also singled out as an indirect contributor to the widespread human rights abuses.⁹ Elections were nominally competitive but were regularly flagged for irregularities, including vote-buying and voter intimidation, both nationally and internationally.¹⁰ In 2015, constitutional changes transitioned Armenia from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system, ostensibly to strengthen democratic institutions. That same political reform was contested by the opposition and public alike as a ploy to allow President Sargsyan to maintain power.

⁶ Nord, Marina, Altman, David, Angiolillo, Fabio, Fernandes, Tiago, Good God, Ana, and Lindberg, Staffan I., *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratisation – Democracy Trumped?*, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, March 2025, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf

⁷ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2018 - Armenia*, 28 May 2018, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/freehou/2018/en/121025>.

⁸ Vardanyan, Edgar, "Parliamentarism in Armenia," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung – South Caucasus Region*, November 7, 2018, <https://ge.boell.org/en/2018/11/07/parliamentarism-armenia>.

⁹ International IDEA and Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD), *The Constitutional/Political Reform Process in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan: Political Elite and Voices of the People*, August 15, 2005, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/the-constitutional-political-reform-process-in-georgia-armenia-and-azerbaijan.pdf>.

¹⁰ xxx

Behind this institutional backdrop lies a deeply polarised social fabric, divided between those who align with the political elites and those increasingly distrustful of authorities. There is also strong sentiment aligned with nationalism, “as an alternative to the existing value system,” especially around ethnic and class differences, which has continued to shape the situation vis-à-vis the opposition. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict entrenched a form of ethnical nationalism that permeates state discourse and public discourse, narrowing the space for pluralism. Nationalist sentiments, especially since the 1990s, have been strong narratives, centred on a “historical homeland” and the “rebirth of an independent state”, supported primarily by those living abroad.¹¹ This led to the politicisation of ethnicity, the privileging of the majority population by the movement, the discrimination of minorities, and eventually to ethno-territorial conflicts.

1.5. Unfolding Autocratisation

2018-2019: The Discontents of the Revolutionary Promise

In May 2018, following the widespread protests in April against Serzh Sargsyan’s attempt to retain power by transitioning to the prime minister position, Nikol Pashinyan, a leading mobiliser of the opposition whose platform had been anti-corruption, anti-clientelism, and reform of the judiciary since 2007, won the elections. A former journalist, Pashinyan’s political trajectory was defined as a mission to “renew the regime”, calling for the impeachment of President Robert Kocharyan in 2007 and standing against Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, as well as oligarchs, notably Tsakuryan Gagik in 2008.¹² Pashinyan was a vocal critic of the Armenian political system, condemning its clientelism and factionalism. He led public protests against what he deemed rigged elections and took similar concerns about the lack of integrity of the judiciary and the Constitutional Court.¹³ His arrest and imprisonment following the 2008 post-election violence transformed him into a symbol of political oppression in Armenia¹⁴, and was elected to Parliament in 2012 in the opposition and went on to found the Civil Contract political group the following year.

¹¹ Ter-Matevosyan, Vahram. 2024. “From Transcaucasia to the South Caucasus: Structural and Discursive Predicaments in Armenia’s Regional Integration.” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 39 (4): 677–96. doi:10.1080/08865655.2023.2200782.

¹³ Mejlumyan, Ani. "Armenia's Pashinyan Compromises on Court Reform." *Eurasianet*, 23 Sept. 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/armenias-pashinyan-compromises-on-court-reform>.

¹⁴ Armenia Globe, “Nikol Pashinyan: The Rise and Rule of a Capitulate,” *Armenia Globe*, October 26, 2021, <https://armeniaglobe.com/nikol-pashinyan-the-rise-and-rule-of-a-capitulate/>

While Pashinyan's agenda emphasised reform, transparency, civic empowerment, and national dignity, he often employed a combative rhetoric, framing adversaries as "enemies" of the people. He presented his rise to power as a moral uprising against entrenched political monopolies and the political groupism fostered by Armenia's previous leaders, particularly the two former presidents who came to power during the 1992–94 initial phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Indeed, observers noted that the peaceful people's revolution in the spring of 2018 was also a triumphal removal of the "Karabakh clan", the influential political circle around the president who stems from the territory.¹⁵ However, the selective nature of reforms in the first year of Pashinyan's mandate raised concerns, especially since the December 2018 elections granted him and the My Step Alliance a supermajority in Parliament, with 88 out of 132 seats.

Pashnyan also discussed the diversification of traditional Russian external orientation, as evident in the pursuit of new military and security partners. The EU has been one of them, with Armenia's democratic aspirations and the initiation of steps to apply for candidacy high on the agenda, particularly driven by public opinion, which has seen a massive shift in trust towards the EU. Armenia is a member of CEPA. The democracy focus also strengthened the leaning towards the US, which stressed a "pragmatic" foreign policy and the normalisation of relations with Azerbaijan.

Following through on his promises, shortly after coming to power, criminal cases were launched against former government officials, including former President Robert Kocharyan for repressing the 2008 protests, and former President Serzh Sargsyan for alleged corruption. The timing, framing, and public handling of these cases raised concerns that these actions resembled political retaliation against political rivals rather than genuine transitional justice. The overlap between reform and the growing centralisation of power and politicisation of state institutions¹⁶ was evident in May 2019, when Pashinyan urged supporters to block court entrances after a court released former President Robert Kocharyan on bail, an act widely condemned as a breach of judicial independence.¹⁷ Amid the charged rhetoric of "us vs. them"

¹⁵ Broers, Laurence. *After Armenia's Velvet Revolution, a New Look at the Karabakh Challenge*. Chatham House, 31 May 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/05/after-armenias-velvet-revolution-new-look-karabakh-challenge>.

¹⁶ Peter Liakhov. "Armenia seeks transitional justice to overcome legacy of old regime." *Eurasianet*, 28 June 2019. <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-seeks-transitional-justice-to-overcome-legacy-of-old-regime>

¹⁷ *Statement of 21 May 2019 on the Recent Blockage of Courts in Armenia*. European Parliament, 21 May 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/statement-of-21-may-2019-on-the-recent-b/product-details/20190521DPU21701>.

sweeping promises of radical change, and evident public distrust in the judicial system, signs of executive overreach and institutional politicisation began to emerge.

Legal experts warned that the mechanisms proposed for the envisaged judicial reform, without robust procedural safeguards and with a Parliament dominated by the ruling party, risked entrenching power.¹⁸ The comprehensive vetting and lustration process to assess judges' integrity, professional competence, and possible ties to the former regime was at the core of these debates. Although presented as a push for reform, it signalled the president's direct interference and a politicised approach to judicial restructuring. Critics and the Venice Commission viewed it as a direct challenge to judicial independence, arguing that such interference risked replacing one form of political influence with another under the guise of reform.¹⁹ While framed as a necessary step toward restoring public trust in the judiciary, critics cautioned that without adequate safeguards, these reforms risked becoming tools for political influence rather than genuine institutional renewal. The Armenian Union of Judges and various legal scholars began to voice concern over the government's rhetoric and interventions, warning of "executive overreach."²⁰

The National Security Service (NSS) began to play an increasingly prominent and politically visible role in the aftermath of the elections. The institutions led multiple high-profile raids and arrests targeting customs officials, judges, and business figures allegedly linked to the old regime, many of which were heavily publicised through media coverage.²¹ These actions included the prosecution of former President Robert Kocharyan for his role in the 2008 post-election violence, as well as operations against figures accused of large-scale corruption, tax evasion and abuse of office. One of the most notable investigations was the probe into the influential oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan in 2020. Pashinyan framed these actions as part of a broader campaign of revolutionary justice aimed at dismantling entrenched corruption networks. He frequently highlighted NSS operations on social media, which he has

¹⁸ Council of Europe. "Judicial Reform Praiseworthy, but Early Retirement for Constitutional Court Judges Raises Concerns." *Council of Europe*, 5 June 2019, https://search.coe.int/directorate_of_communications/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=090000168098386f

¹⁹ European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). *Draft Joint Opinion of the Venice Commission and the Directorate of Human Rights (DHR) of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI) of the Council of Europe on the Amendments to the Judicial Code and Some Other Laws*. CDL(2019)030, 30 Sept. 2019, <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL%282019%29030-e>.

²⁰ Paturyan, Yevgenya Jenny; Liana Simonyan; and Gor Papikyan, "People Won, Now What? The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Anti-Corruption and Judicial Reform in Post-Uprising Armenia (2018–2025)," *Frontiers in Political Science*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1656829>.

²¹ "Armenia's National Security Service: A Year of Leadership Changes." *Hetq*, 27 Apr. 2020, <https://hetq.am/en/article/113133>. Accessed 11 May 2025.

been building as the primary communication platform, portraying the agency as a key instrument of reform and accountability. The growing centrality of the NSS to the government was also reflected in the instability and politicisation of its leadership. In June 2020, Argishti Kyaramyan, a young and loyal appointee of Pashinyan, was appointed head of the NSS but was dismissed just a few months later. In fact, the agency saw three different directors in the span of one year, raising concerns about politicised appointments and the agency's evolving role as an executive tool rather than an independent institution.²²

The rising influence of the intelligence was also marked by a series of public controversies involving surveillance and pressure tactics against opposition figures, dissenting judges, and civil servants perceived as unsupportive of the new administration. One of the most notable incidents occurred in 2018, when a wiretapped phone conversation between the then-NSS Director Artur Vanetsyan and the head of the Special Investigative Service was leaked. The recording revealed discussions about coordinating actions on politically sensitive cases, including the prosecution of former President Kocharyan.²³ This leak fueled widespread suspicion that law enforcement and investigative bodies were being manipulated for political purposes, undermining the government's commitment to impartial justice.²⁴

After the elections, Pashinyan's rhetoric toward critical media outlets shifted from a favourable view as an instrument of balance to a threat to security. In July 2019, following an investigative report by CivilNet on judicial appointments and the lack of substantive reform, pro-government voices on social media launched coordinated attacks against the outlet, with no official response.²⁵ Pashinyan himself accused respected investigative platforms like Hetq.am and CivilNet of being aligned with former elites and undermining national interests when they reported on government inefficiencies, unfulfilled promises, or alleged overreach. Journalists who highlighted issues such as controversial judicial appointments and questionable public spending were increasingly targeted by libel and accusations of slander.²⁶ Opposition-linked media, such as Yerkir Media, associated with the Armenian Revolutionary

²² Sarukhanyan, Vahe. "Abuse of Official Power: International Arrest Warrant Issued for Former Armenian Deputy Minister of Finance." *Hetq*, 12 Feb. 2020, <https://hetq.am/en/article/113133>.

²³ CivilNet. "NSS Director and Armenia's Head of Special Investigation Service Explain Leaked Phone Call." *CivilNet*, 11 Sept. 2018, www.civilnet.am/en/news/381827/nss-director-and-armenias-head-of-special-investigation-service-explain-leaked-phone-call/.

²⁴ OC Media. "Armenian Security Service Pressured Judge According to Wiretapped Phone Call." *OC Media*, 11 Sept. 2018, <https://oc-media.org/armenian-security-service-pressured-judge-according-to-wiretapped-phone-call/>.

²⁵ Mejlumyan, Ani. "Media Polarization Rising in Armenia." *Eurasianet*, 30 Oct. 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/media-polarization-rising-in-armenia>.

²⁶ Horsley, William. *Safety of Journalists: Guidebook*. 3rd ed., edited by Andrey Rikhter, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2020, www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/7/469758.pdf.

Federation (ARF), faced mounting pressure, including reduced access to government briefings and broader political marginalisation.²⁷ In contrast, Pashinyan strategically expanded his presence on social media, cultivating a direct channel to the public that bypassed traditional media scrutiny and enabled him to shape narratives unfiltered.

Similarly, NGOs that had once been vocal supporters of democratic reform came under fire when they began to criticise aspects of the government's judicial restructuring. Organisations like the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly and the Union of Informed Citizens were accused by pro-government commentators of shielding the interests of the old regime. Civil society figures who warned about the dangers of executive overreach, particularly during the vetting of judges, were frequently dismissed as defenders of entrenched corruption.²⁸ At the same time, more radical NGOs were rejected on account of public morality.²⁹

2019-2020: Revolutionary Despotism

Judicial reform remained at the heart of Pashinyan's agenda in the year following the revolution, but it increasingly became a source of political confrontation, most notably with the Constitutional Court. Tensions escalated between the government and the Court's chair, Hrayr Tovmasyan, who was widely perceived as loyal to the former Republican Party elite. The government challenged the legitimacy of Tovmasyan's appointment and accused him of obstructing reform efforts and protecting the interests of the old regime. The standoff culminated in a sustained campaign to force Tovmasyan's resignation, including legislative amendments aimed at limiting the powers and tenure of Constitutional Court judges. Critics argued that these moves undermined judicial independence and were politically motivated attempts to reshape the court in favor of the ruling party. Supporters of the government, however, framed the confrontation as a necessary step in dismantling remnants of the pre-2018 power structure and restoring public trust in the judiciary.³⁰ These efforts were widely seen as politically motivated, and various international organisations expressed grave concern about

²⁷ Berikyan, Mane. "CivilNet, Other Media Outlets Call on Pashinyan to Hold Face-to-Face Press Conferences." *CivilNet*, 26 June 2022, www.civilnet.am/en/news/666262/civilnet-other-media-outlets-call-on-pashinyan-to-hold-face-to-face-press-conferences/.

²⁸ Paturyan, Yevgenya Jenny. "Armenian Civil Society: Growing Pains, Honing Skills and Possible Pitfalls." *Armenia's Velvet Revolution: Authoritarian Decline and Civil Resistance in a Multipolar World*, edited by Laurence Broers and Anna Ohanyan, I.B. Tauris, 2020, pp. 101–118.

²⁹ Ishkanian, Armine, and Sona Manusyan. "The Postprotest Context in Armenia: Divergent Pathways for Civic Actors." *After Protest: Pathways Beyond Mass Mobilization*, edited by Richard Youngs, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, pp. 19–24.

³⁰ Armas-Cardona, Gabriel. "Context Matters: The Rule of Law and Armenia's Referendum to Remove Constitutional Court Justices." *Verfassungsblog*, 29 Feb. 2020, <https://verfassungsblog.de/context-matters/>.

the Armenian authorities' rapid, confrontational approach, warning that such measures posed a threat to judicial independence and the rule of law.³¹

The confrontation peaked with the government's highly publicised plan to hold a national referendum in April 2020. The proposed constitutional amendment sought to dismiss seven of the nine sitting Constitutional Court judges, effectively restructuring the Court in a single move. Although the referendum was postponed, the intent signalled the government's determination to reshape the judiciary on its own terms. In parallel, the Armenian Parliament passed several amendments to the Judicial Code. These included strengthening the role and independence of the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), the body responsible for overseeing judicial appointments and disciplinary matters, as well as introducing mandatory asset declarations for judges, clearer disciplinary procedures, and measures to enhance transparency in court operations and case assignments.

Reforms were presented as part of a broader democratic transformation and often accompanied by consultations with civil society; however, critics argued that some key decisions were made unilaterally by the executive. The lack of openness and transparency led Avetik Ishkhanyan, a human rights activist and head of the Helsinki Committee of Armenia, to characterise this manner of governance as “revolutionary-despotism”³² In fact, HCA was one of the targets of new government. NGOs welcomed reform initiatives, others raised red flags about a growing culture of “us vs. them” in governance, where dissent or critique was increasingly equated with loyalty to the old regime.

Organisations such as Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House began documenting early signs of mounting pressure on independent media and growing polarisation in Armenia's public discourse. While the post-revolution environment initially promised a more open and pluralistic media landscape, this began to erode as the government faced criticism and scrutiny over its reform agenda. Both organisations noted an increase in hostile rhetoric toward journalists and civil society actors, particularly those who questioned the pace, focus, or impartiality of reforms. Government officials and pro-government voices increasingly portrayed critical media as adversarial or aligned with former regime interests, contributing to a climate of suspicion and division. Freedom House, in particular, warned that

³¹ Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. *Opinion on Three Legal Questions in the Context of Draft Constitutional Amendments Concerning the Mandate of the Judges of the Constitutional Court*. CDL-AD(2020)016, 19 June 2020, [https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/CDL-AD\(2020\)016-e](https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/CDL-AD(2020)016-e).

³² Harutyunyan, Anna. "The Struggle for Press Freedom and Journalistic Integrity in Armenia." *The Armenian Weekly*, 11 Mar. 2025, <https://armenianweekly.com/2025/03/11/the-struggle-for-press-freedom-and-journalistic-integrity-in-armenia/>.

these patterns could threaten democratic gains made after the revolution by stifling dissent and undermining the role of watchdog institutions.

2020-2021: Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and militarisation

In September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan attacked Nagorno-Karabakh, resulting in the devastating loss of thousands of victims but also a decisive victory of Azerbaijan, which reclaimed most of the territory it lost two decades prior. After six weeks of fighting, Armenia signed a Russian-brokered ceasefire, ceding significant territories to Azerbaijan, including areas long held by ethnic Armenian forces.³³ Pashinyan announced the agreement via Facebook, without prior parliamentary or public consultation, triggering widespread outrage, as the ceasefire was seen as a national humiliation and a systemic shift in the political attitude on the conflict. The aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war marked a dramatic turning point in Armenia's political landscape, leading to a collapse in public trust in Prime Minister Pashinyan's trust and leadership. In the weeks that followed the ceasefire agreement, thousands of protesters gathered in Yerevan, demanding his resignation and blaming the government for the military defeat and territorial concessions.

Although Pashinyan and his political party presented himself as a change to the former political establishment, and implicitly their interest in the conflict, politically, he had consistently emphasised unification regarding Nagorno-Karabakh and has upheld the ethnic nationalism that has dominated Armenian political discourse³⁴, hardening Armenia's stance, contributing to the breakdown of peace negotiations and further entrenching maximalist positions on both sides of the conflict. Nagorno-Karabakh has played a central role in shaping Armenia's national identity and political narrative and is regarded as the ancestral homeland of Armenians. The territory is symbolically enshrined in the preamble of Armenia's Constitution, which references the aspiration for reunification. Over the past three decades, the conflict and the territory have served as foundational elements of ethnic nationalist discourse embraced by nearly all major political actors.

The ceasefire also deepened existing institutional divides and highlighted long-standing structural issues in Armenia's political system. Armenia's defence, security, and internal

³³ "An Analysis of the November 9 Ceasefire Agreement and Its Implementation." *Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation*, 2 July 2021, <https://caucasusedition.net/an-analysis-of-the-november-9-ceasefire-agreement-and-its-implementation/>.

³⁴ OC Media. "Pashinyan Calls for 'Unification' between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia." *OC Media*, 5 Aug. 2019, <https://oc-media.org/pashinyan-calls-for-unification-between-nagorno-karabakh-and-armenia/>.

affairs ministries have historically been closely tied to elite networks rooted in the post-Soviet military establishment.³⁵ These positions were traditionally filled from circles of trust within the former presidential administrations, reinforcing a pattern of militarised elite formation. Serzh Sargsyan himself epitomised this trajectory, having held key roles in defense, national security, and intelligence before ascending to the presidency.³⁶ The shift in political direction regarding the territory made the tensions between these groups starkly evident.

Further deepening Armenia's institutional crisis, Prime Minister Pashinyan dismissed key military leaders in response to mounting criticism over his handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh war and accused them of orchestrating a coup. This escalation came to a head in February 2021, when Colonel General Onik Gasparyan, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, publicly called for Pashinyan's resignation, an extraordinary rupture in Armenia's post-Soviet civil-military relation. It was virtually unprecedented for senior military leadership to challenge a sitting prime minister openly.³⁷ The crisis intensified when President Armen Sarkissian also urged a political transition. Although he stopped short of explicitly demanding Pashinyan's resignation, Sarkissian proposed forming a "government of national accord" to lead the country through a transitional period and organise new elections. This idea gained traction among opposition forces and segments of the public. The war became a political fault line. Pashinyan framed the military's failures as the legacy of decades of mismanagement by the former regime, while Kocharyan and Sargsyan, representing the old guard, accused Pashinyan of losing a war they claimed could have been avoided or better managed.

The martial law imposed in 2020, in the wake of the war, significantly curtailed freedoms, particularly the freedom of information. The law not only restricted media coverage and public debate but also marked a shift toward greater state control over the narrative surrounding the conflict and the government's actions. But in October 2020, amendments to the initial law effectively banned criticism of the government's handling of the war. Under this law, any form of public dissent or opposition to the administration's policies, particularly concerning the war's outcome was prohibited. This further consolidated the government's authority and severely limited space for open political dialogue.³⁸

³⁵ Busini, Carlo, "From Karabakh to Yerevan: Post-Conflict Democratization in Armenia," *Caucasus Edition*, 28 July 2025, <https://caucasusedition.net/from-karabakh-to-yerevan-post-conflict-democratization-in-armenia/>

³⁶ International Crisis Group. "Upholding the Ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia." *International Crisis Group*, 14 September 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-conflict/upholding-ceasefire>.

³⁷ Armenia PM Pashinyan Warns of Coup Attempt as Army Demands Resignation." *BBC News*, 25 Feb. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56194421>.

³⁸ Freedom House. *Freedom on the Net 2021: Armenia*. 2021, www.freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-net/2021.

As a result, criticism of Pashinyan's leadership was met with increasing aggression. The government employed law enforcement and security services to contain opposition activity and silence protests. The arrests of protesters, journalists, and political rivals became more frequent, and these actions sparked domestic and international concerns, with critics accusing the government of undermining the democratic principles it had championed during the 2018 revolution.³⁹

Armenians living abroad became targets of the government, specifically those who had played an active role in the 2018 protests and were increasingly critical of it afterwards. Some cases included Mourad Papazian, Massis Abrahamian, and Suneh Abrahamian, as well as former political leaders who were prevented from entering Karabakh at the request of the Armenian government. Additionally, a number of Armenian journalists who primarily worked for publications that supported the opposition received bans on visiting Karabakh in a similar setup. Armenian critics were accused of "hate speech".⁴⁰

The use of martial law and censorship raised alarm among human rights organisations and democratic watchdogs, who viewed these measures as a significant backslide in Armenia's democratic trajectory. Civil society, structurally dependent on external funding and with virtually no access to the policymaking process remained fragile⁴¹, in the absence of a culture of dialogue or formal mechanisms for consultation⁴². The erosion of institutions checks also happen in relation civil society, where efforts to reshape narratives through loyalist media and social media campaigns were evident.

In 2021, the political crisis in Armenia deepened further when President Armen Sarkissian, facing intense pressure and the growing political impasse, called for snap parliamentary elections. Some saw this action as a form of technocratic takeover, underscoring not only the deepening conflict within the executive branch but also highlighting the fragility of the popular vote in the face of intense institutional and political turmoil. Despite mounting calls for his resignation from military leaders, opposition parties, and large segments of the public, Prime Minister Pashinyan resisted stepping down. Instead, he agreed to hold snap

³⁹ Ohanyan, Anna. "Is Armenia's Democracy on Borrowed Time?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 11 Dec. 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/12/is-armenias-democracy-on-borrowed-time?lang=en>.

⁴⁰ "Armenian Government Critic Convicted Posthumously." *Azattyun*, 18 Dec. 2023, www.azattyun.am/a/32735635.html.

⁴¹ Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe. *Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process: Fact-Finding Visit to Armenia, 27–29 November 2019*. Council of Europe, June 2020, <https://rm.coe.int/report-visit-of-the-conference-of-ingos-to-armenia-2019/16809ed448>.

⁴² Delcour, Laure, and Narine Ghazaryan. "Armenia's Fragile Democratisation: A New Role for the EU?" *European Democracy Hub*, 23 Jan. 2024, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/armenias-fragile-democratisation-a-new-role-for-the-eu/>.

parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2021. Pashinyan framed this decision as a way to reaffirm his democratic mandate and seek a renewed mandate from the people to govern.

The Civil Contract party faced growing accusations of using blackmail and behind-the-scenes pressure to manipulate local politics and secure support for its candidates. There were reports of local officials being coerced into abandoning their governing coalitions in favour of supporting the Civil Contract, thereby undermining the integrity of democratic processes at the local level. The party's representatives were also accused of boycotting council proceedings and abandoning coalitions without explanation, which often led to the paralysis of local governments.⁴³ Police have suspected to put pressure on opposition members problematic to the government and interfering in policy⁴⁴

Judicially, reforms continued. In 2022, the Anti-Corruption Court became the flagship of efforts to enhance accountability, strengthen the rule of law, and address public demands for justice following years of perceived elite impunity, implemented by the Supreme Judicial Council, in line with amendments to Armenia's Judicial Code and other anti-corruption legislation. This specialised body focused on handling high-profile corruption within the political and business elite. Today, it operates alongside other key anti-corruption institutions in Armenia, such as the Anti-Corruption Committee (ACC), formerly known as the Special Investigative Service, and the Corruption Prevention Commission (CPC). The launch of the court received backing from the European Union and the Council of Europe, which provided technical assistance, legal expertise, and funding to support the strengthening of judicial independence and integrity in Armenia. This collaboration was part of the broader EU-Armenia cooperation framework under the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which aims to bolster democratic governance, rule of law, and anti-corruption efforts in Armenia.

While the creation of the Anti-Corruption Court was seen as a positive step toward strengthening the judiciary and addressing corruption, it also raised concerns among critics who questioned the independence of the court and the potential for political influence in its operations. Some feared that the court could be used selectively as a tool for political retribution rather than genuinely addressing systemic corruption.

⁴³ International IDEA. *Armenia - December 2023: The Global State of Democracy*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Dec. 2023, <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/armenia/december-2023>.

⁴⁴ International IDEA. *Armenia - December 2023: The Global State of Democracy*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Dec. 2023, <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/armenia/december-2023>.

1.6. Causes of Autocratisation

Presidential Preference

The presidents have structurally moulded Armenia's political system. Between 1991 and 1998, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, initially perceived as a reformist, increasingly strengthened the executive's mandate, leading to mixed democratic practices. The growing executive dominance went hand in hand with limited press freedom and interference in elections.⁴⁵ His successor, Robert Kocharyan, ruled with an increasingly authoritarian style and suspicions of electoral fraud, suppression of opposition, and corruption. This executive aggrandisement culminated in the deadly crackdown on dissent following the 2008 presidential election. Serzh Sargsyan came to power later that year as a reformer, but by the end of his second term, the tendency to secure a political position for the outgoing president was once again transparent, as seen in the 2015 Constitutional Referendum. Although Armenia transitioned to a parliamentary republic, officially reducing presidential powers and strengthening Parliament and the prime minister, the reform was perceived as a manoeuvre for Sargsyan to stay in power as prime minister after completing two presidential terms. His attempt to do so in 2018 sparked the protests.

The former presidents also hold a deep influence and control over the regime. Armenia's former governing forces always remained well-resourced and enjoy a strong institutional presence in the judiciary and the media.

(II) Legitimacy of Institutions

The deep-seated distrust of political institutions has persisted throughout Armenia's recent history. The concentration of power in the executive branch, particularly under successive presidents since independence in 1991, the alignment of institutions such as the judiciary, media, and law enforcement, and the zero-sum game of political parties have eroded public confidence in their ability to serve the interests of the people rather than the political elite. For years, Armenia's judiciary was seen as a tool of the ruling party, often aligned with the executive branch and failing to hold the powerful accountable for corruption or human

⁴⁵ Zolyan, Mikayel. "The Poverty of Authoritarianism: What Made the Armenian Revolution Possible." *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 108, 31 Jan. 2019, pp. 3–6. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000323671>.

rights abuses.⁴⁶ Under the leadership of both previous and current governments, Armenia's judicial system has been subjected to political manipulation, with key decisions in politically sensitive cases perceived as made in favour of the ruling elite. The judiciary's alignment with the political establishment has perpetuated the public's belief that the courts are not impartial but instead serve the interests of the powerful. Political manoeuvring, appointments, and circles of trust often led to selective reforms in these institutions, both during Serzh Sargsyan's tenure and later under Nikol Pashinyan's Government.

The 2015 constitutional changes, which shifted Armenia from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary republic, were perceived by critics as a thinly veiled attempt to maintain executive dominance through manipulation of the electoral and judicial systems. Despite the promise of democratic change following the 2018 elections, Pashinyan's administration has faced criticism for failing to address the underlying corruption within the state apparatus.

Political parties, although diverse, have historically faced a lack of trust, primarily because they are associated with a type of politics centred on certain individuals and their agendas rather than a broader social project.

Trust in political parties remains low, while at the same time the role of important associations and various informal organisations at the community level continues to be significant, drawing on historic traditions of independent assembly for defence in the 19th- and 20th-century imperial context.

The oligarchy has continued to dominate the political system, although its dismantlement was one of the main slogans of the Velvet Revolution. The system of a few trusted figures in economic enterprises who benefit from ties to the government is held accountable for the country's slow economic progress.⁴⁷ Since then, the government has increasingly acknowledged and tacitly approved the oligarch system.⁴⁸ The opposition factions continue to enjoy a strong support among the oligarchs. The relationship with G. Tsarukyan, whose house was raided by the National Security Service at Pashinyan's orders, became a turning point in the oligarch's support for the regime. Tsarukyan's Prosperous Armenia party ran in the early parliamentary elections in 2021, it failed to win enough votes.

One analyst argues:

⁴⁶ United States Department of State. *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Armenia*. U.S. Department of State, 2024. <https://am.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/92/hrr2023.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center). *The Oligarchic System in Armenia and the Influence of Diaspora Tycoons*. AIR Center, 2022, www.aircenter.az/uploads/Y8DUP1i9vHcW.pdf.

⁴⁸ Ibrahimov, Mirza. *The Oligarchic System in Armenia and the Influence of Diaspora Tycoons*. Analysis, Azerbaijan Center for International Relations, 2022, <https://aircenter.az/uploads/Y8DUP1i9vHcW.pdf>.

“the oligarchic system in Armenia is one of the main sources of funding for attracting additional resources, solving humanitarian problems, and improving the well-being of the population. On the other hand, Armenian oligarchs fund many activities related to “Karabakh issue”, which expand their power over Armenia’s foreign policy, thus impeding Armenian economic development because, due to the lack of economic relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia remains isolated.”⁴⁹

Identity politics

Prioritising identity over the institutional rule of law has been evident in the justifications for restrictions on free speech or association offered in the name of national security. Nagorno Karabakh and the memory of the Armenian Genocide continue to play crucial roles in the political framings and discourses and foster an ethno-nationalist discourse where dissent or pluralism can be easily presented as a betrayal of national unity. What emerges is a conflation of securitisation with the absence of dissent. The Karabakh conflict plays a central role in political life and identity formation. Particularly after 2020, with the competing visions in the political space, ideas of security and national survival have justified executive power concentration and discredited civil society, critical media, and opposition voices as “foreign agents” or “undermining national unity.”

An important dimension of the institutional setup is connected to the country's homogeneity and high ethnic politicisation. Small minority communities (e.g. Yezidis, Assyrians, Kurds, Russians) have limited political visibility and institutional representation. While not overtly persecuted, they are excluded from national political narratives and rarely integrated into broader policy discourse. Their symbolic and political marginalisation reinforces a dominant monoethnic state identity.

Geopolitics

The historical tension between pro-Western reformists and pro-Russian, nationalist factions has led to entrenched divisions within Armenian society. These divisions were particularly evident in the aftermath of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, where the military defeat triggered widespread protests and calls for Pashinyan's resignation. The military establishment, the opposition, and various pro-Russian groups all demanded his removal, framing him as a weak leader. In response, Pashinyan accused these factions of undermining his Government and attempting a coup.

⁴⁹ Ibid 19

The EU's role in defusing political tensions has been limited to a few statements, mostly by the European Parliament”⁵⁰ while, at the same time, the EU's encourages a bottom-up approach to Armenia's democratisation. Indeed, the largest donor to civil society in Armenia sponsors a wide range of activities, including 31 projects totalling €31.3 million in 2021, within which 140 CSOs received additional funding via sub-granting mechanisms.⁵¹

The blockade imposed on the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh since December 2022 has generated almost no response from the EU, further emboldening Azerbaijan to occupy the region through military means in September 2023. The EU's neutral-arbiter approach to conflict resolution has triggered criticism in Armenia, as the union has sidelined support for a democratising country by placing it on an equal footing with its increasingly authoritarian adversary.

That has since fuelled animosity towards Turkey, with Pashnyan arguing that “Turkey's expansionist foreign policy, and the territorial aspirations towards Armenia came to evidence the revival of their genocidal ideology.”⁵² The military support of Israel towards Azerbaijan⁵³, next to the long-standing relationship with Turkey. Highly rhetorical gestures such as resident Biden's Recognition of the Armenian Genocide in 2021 and the German Bundestag recognition of the genocide in 2016 were also important. President Biden was signalling the U.S. government's dissatisfaction with Turkish policy in a number of domains, like its conduct in Syria and the purchase of Russian military hardware.⁵⁴

1.7. How Dissensus drives Autocratisation.

Armenia has been particularly singled out for polarisation, both as a process of democratic decline and as a strategy of governance, because it became a central mechanism through which political power was consolidated and dissent was delegitimised after the 2018

⁵⁰ Delcour, Laure, and Narine Ghazaryan. "Armenia's Fragile Democratisation: A New Role for the EU?" *European Democracy Hub*, 23 Jan. 2024, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/armenias-fragile-democratisation-a-new-role-for-the-eu/>

⁵¹ Delcour, Laure, and Narine Ghazaryan. "Armenia's Fragile Democratisation: A New Role for the EU?" *European Democracy Hub*, 23 Jan. 2024, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/armenias-fragile-democratisation-a-new-role-for-the-eu/>

⁵² The Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, “PM Nikol Pashinyan's Message on Armenian Genocide 106th Anniversary,” 24 April 2021, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2021/04/24/Nikol-Pashinyan-April-24/>

⁵³ Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), *The Karabakh Gambit: Israel's Role in the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War*, 2021, <https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Karabakh-Gambit-IsraelRole-1.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Moses Dirk, “The Diplomacy of Genocide,” American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS), 2021, <https://www.aicgs.org/2021/05/the-diplomacy-of-genocide/>

Revolution. Fuelled by the revolutionary rhetoric of “the people versus the corrupt elite,” the distance wedged between groups was a sustained narrative that portrayed critics of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s government as enemies of reform or allies of the former regime. Political opposition, civil society actors, independent media, and even segments of the judiciary were often accused of sabotaging the revolution or acting on behalf of foreign or oligarchic interests. This “us-versus-them” discourse, amplified through social media, fragmented the political landscape into loyalists and traitors, reducing space for pluralism or constructive opposition. The result was a justification for executive overreach, as democratic institutions were bypassed or weakened in the name of defending the revolution.

Mild Dissensus

Mild dissensus emerged primarily around the role of the presidential mandate, specifically its limits. It was evident in the competing visions about the state, with reformist, liberal-democratic actors often emphasising independent institutions, human rights, and European integration, while more nationalist or conservative forces argue for sovereignty-centred governance, majoritarianism, and executive strength, especially in times of crisis, such as war.

Disputes over judicial reform also entailed mild dissensus. While a consensus existed that the judiciary needs reform, there was deep disagreement over how, for instance, vetting judges through transitional justice mechanisms violates judicial independence or enhances it. Similarly, dissensus emerged around issues of electoral legitimacy and institutional integrity. Supporters of the post-2018 government viewed electoral victory as a democratic mandate to reshape institutions. Critics argued that democracy must also include institutional checks, not just electoral majorities. More broadly, many citizens support anti-corruption, transparency, and reform in rhetoric, but express low trust in institutions or NGOs leading these efforts, creating fragmented ownership of democratic processes.

Severe Dissensus

Severe Dissensus has arisen regarding whether courts should be autonomous or subordinate to popular will, particularly since 2018. Critics of judicial independence, including figures in the ruling Civil Contract party, have argued that courts formed under former regimes are inherently corrupt and illegitimate, and therefore that vetting or removing judges en masse is justified. Opponents argue this approach threatens liberal democratic norms and enables authoritarian consolidation under the guise of reform. Instances such as the 2020 constitutional referendum effort to remove judges from the Constitutional Court sparked intense conflict

between the executive and judiciary, with support and opposition dividing not only institutions but also civil society.

There is a deep value-based conflict over the role of independent media which points to severe Dissensus. Pro-government voices have frequently delegitimised critical media outlets like CivilNet, Hetq, and others, labeling them as “foreign agents” or tied to the “former elites.” This reflects a rejection of the watchdog function of media in liberal democracies. During the 2020 war and its aftermath, laws banning government criticism under martial law revealed not only practical constraints but also a deeper ideological rejection of pluralistic debate during national crises.

Civil society groups, particularly those advocating for transparency, minority rights, or the rule of law, have been accused of undermining national interests or serving as proxies for Western interference. This reflects a severe dissensus over whether liberal democratic institutions, such as NGOs, watchdogs, and human rights groups, are legitimate actors. Pro-government figures and online actors have repeatedly attacked organisations such as the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly and Transparency International Armenia, implying that these groups obstruct sovereignty and national unity.

The unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has entrenched ethnic nationalism in political discourse and equally shows how transitions toward autocracy can exacerbate ethnic tension.⁵⁵ Efforts to promote pluralism, minority rights, or even cautious peace with Azerbaijan are often met with accusations of betrayal, highlighting a fundamental disagreement about whether pluralistic or civic forms of democracy can coexist with ethno-nationalist identities. Critics have framed Pashinyan’s shift away from maximalist Karabakh claims following the 2020 war as capitulation, and by supporters as necessary realism, thereby deepening ideological fractures.

Disruptive Dissensus

Agreements that move beyond debate and into the realm of institutional breakdown, mass delegitimation, or extralegal confrontation often occur during pivotal crises, particularly when the political elite, security apparatus, and segments of society no longer agree on who holds legitimate authority or how political conflicts should be resolved.

It was the case following Armenia’s defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, The military openly called for his resignation, with the Chief of the General Staff, Onik

⁵⁵ Panzano, Guido. "Autocratisation as Ethnocratization? How Regime Transformations toward Autocracy Deteriorate Ethnic Relations." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2024, pp. 303–334, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2023.2281732>.

Gasparyan, demanding he step down. Pashinyan, in turn, accused the generals of attempting a coup. This public conflict between the executive and the military represented a breakdown in civilian-military relations and breached democratic norms. The situation escalated beyond institutional procedures, with protests, counter-protests, and presidential involvement, revealing a lack of consensus on how leadership change should occur in a democracy. In effect, the military's direct political intervention and Pashinyan's framing of it as a coup attempt undermined both sides' democratic legitimacy and polarised the public dangerously.

Under martial law, the government banned criticism of its war conduct and invoked censorship. Journalists and civil society were threatened or suppressed. The legal framework of liberal democracy was suspended, and no agreed-upon institutional forum existed to contest these decisions. This introduced a state of exception in which democratic rights were curtailed indefinitely, and the public had limited means to challenge it through institutional channels. The suspension of media freedom and opposition rights fractured the core of democratic practice.

Civil Contract (the ruling party) used blackmail and political pressure to paralyse local councils, force defections, and gain control, which has led to the collapse of local government Functioning (2021–2023). In several municipalities, including Yerevan, coalitions collapsed, councils ceased functioning, and governance came to a halt. Disruption at the municipal level spread into broader democratic fatigue and public distrust in representative mechanisms. This erosion of democratic functioning at the local level suggests that key actors are no longer committed to democratic norms, even outside of national politics.

Destructive dissensus has been emerging through the role that ethnic nationalism has had in Armenian politics, and specifically around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The homogeneity of the country, with 95% Armenians, has often been used by successive governments, including Pashinyan's, to consolidate authority, especially during or after security crises. It has been often appropriated by the current Government, particularly striking and in conjunction with internal contestations of its legitimacy. Pashinyan's initial efforts seemed to point to a de-escalation of tensions with Azerbaijan, but quickly reverted to invoking ethnic unity to suppress criticism, rally support, or frame opposition as unpatriotic or foreign-aligned. Deeply rooted in the memory of the early 20th century and the Armenian genocide, this cultural preservation perspective has been a currency in the political negotiations in the country.

GEORGIA: From Hope to a Restricted Field of Politics

1.8. 1 Introduction

V-Dem’s 2025 Report places Georgia as the lead of the The-Year Democratic Decline.⁵⁶ Freedom House also integrates Georgia into the group, moving from a hybrid regime to a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime.⁵⁷ Suggestively, the Georgian political establishment has, since October 2024, going through its most significant mass contestation since the 2003 Rose Revolution⁵⁸, triggered first by accusations of fraudulent elections, and then by the new prime-minister Irakli Kobakhidze’s announcement that the Georgian Dream (GD) party majority government would suspend EU accession talks until 2028, and would refuse EU aid.⁵⁹ In light of this steep decline and realignments, this report traces the autocratisation dynamics that led to this moment, maps the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, civil liberties, and political pluralism under the rule of the Georgian Dream party in the specific Georgian Parliamentary system, and shows how dissensus over liberal democracy played a part in this process. Developments track *the executive entrenchment* occurring in the shadow of expectations for democracy, which relied on a “parallel” power system in which party leaders control the judiciary, Parliament, and security services.⁶⁰

1.9. Unfolding of autocracy

The “restoration of justice” under the Georgian Dream (2012–2016)

The Georgian Dream, led by businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili, won the 2012 Parliamentary elections unequivocally, running on an anti-authoritarian platform that promised to restore judicial independence and reduce inequality, poverty, and the corruption associated

⁵⁶ V Dem Democracy Report 2025, “25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?”, https://v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf.

⁵⁷ Freedom House, “Georgia: Nations in Transit 2024 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/nations-transit/2024>.

⁵⁸ Chin, John, and Anastasia Kim, “Georgia’s Second Rose Revolution,” *The Loop*, January 9, 2025, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/georgias-second-rose-revolution/>.

⁵⁹ V Dem Democracy Report 2025, “25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?”, https://v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf.

⁶⁰ Devdariani, Jaba, “Rose Revolution Still Haunts Georgia,” *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, November 23, 2023, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/rose-revolution-still-haunts-georgia>.

with the previous regime.⁶¹ Those elections marked the first democratic transfer of power in Georgia since the end of the Cold War, illustrating a shift towards the Parliamentary system over the Presidency. This success was widely regarded as proof that the electoral system works, as attested to at the time by various international observers.⁶²

At the time, the Georgian Dream party positioned itself as a pro-European, centrist group, building on a political framing that addressed the discontent with the former regime's 'iron fist'.⁶³ The party campaigned against the post-2003 President Mikheil Saakashvili's centralised, personality-driven governance, promising to reduce executive overreach, accusing the United National Movement government of authoritarianism, abuse of law enforcement, control over the judiciary, and political repression.⁶⁴ While representatives of the Georgian Dream did contest the gains of the Saakashvili's regime, the discourse and proposals centered on a populist, anti-elite, and democratisation agenda, where the coalition presented itself as the democratic corrective to what it framed as authoritarian excesses, human rights abuses, and elite corruption under the previous rule.⁶⁵ It consequently ran with a program that supported market reforms and the EU alignment, but also contested the ills of unrestrained capitalism, such as poverty, inequality and the deterioration of social values.⁶⁶

The leader of the party at the time, Bidzina Ivanishvili, was among the world's richest⁶⁷, and reconciled his vast personal wealth and contentious political trajectory (specifically ties with the Russian regime) with his political ambitions by crafting a philanthropic-populist narrative that framed his fortune not as a liability, but as a guarantee of independence, altruism,

⁶¹ Górecki, Wojciech, "A Journey into a Glorious Past: Three Terms of Georgian Dream," *OSW Commentary*, October 8, 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-10-08/a-journey-a-glorious-past-three-terms-georgian-dream>.

⁶² Volontè, Luca, "Observation of the Parliamentary Elections in Georgia (1 October 2012)," *Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly*, Doc. 13068, November 29, 2012, <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=19209&lang=en>.

⁶³ Aprasidze, David, "Ivanishvili Governs Georgia Like His Business Company," *European Center for Populism Studies*, November 2024, <https://www.populismstudies.org/professor-aprasidze-ivanishvili-governs-georgia-like-his-business-company/>.

⁶⁴ Kakachia, Kornely, "Georgian Dream Shows Its Dark Side," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, December 3, 2012, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op-eds/2012/12/03/georgian-dream-shows-its-dark-side>.

⁶⁵ Transparency International, "Georgia's Presidential Election: After Saakashvili," *Transparency International*, October 2013, <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/georgias-presidential-election-after-saakashvili>.

⁶⁶ Chatham House, "Two Years of the Dream: Georgian Foreign Policy under the Georgian Dream Coalition," *Chatham House*, May 29, 2015, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/20150529GeorgianForeignPolicyMacFarlane.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Atasuntsev, Alexander, "Why Bidzina Ivanishvili Is Returning to Georgian Politics—Again," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 23, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/02/23/why-bidzina-ivanishvili-is-returning-to-georgian-politicsagain>.

and incorruptibility.⁶⁸ This approach initially allowed him to sidestep accusations of oligarchic capture and present himself as uniquely suited to political change.⁶⁹ He downplayed partisanship, positioning himself as someone above politics who could restore balance, primarily through a technocratic allure, emphasising pragmatism and competence over ideology, casting his wealth as a source of managerial experience and independence, and echoing voters' fatigue with the political establishment.⁷⁰ Ivanishvili supported the Georgian Orthodox Church and funded its projects, including its flagship initiative in Tbilisi.⁷¹ With promises to 'cleanse' the system of what he claimed was corruption and authoritarianism under Saakashvili, Ivanishvili invested heavily in public infrastructure, education, culture, and healthcare in Georgia, and leveraged the moral dimension of philanthropy to support his political ambitions. Multiple grand-scale projects in his portfolio on infrastructure, heritage landscapes, and environmental protection have consistently been scrutinised as unlawful and unchecked by legislation.⁷² The Cartu Foundation, founded by Ivanishvili, has been a significant investor in social services and public resources, despite early concerns about its financial ties to offshore business interests.⁷³

Ivanishvili served just a year before stepping back from his political role and into his economic ventures. However, his informal governance and shadow role, both after his retreat and ever since, were distinct concerns both internationally and domestically.⁷⁴ He was widely perceived to personally take key decisions, party direction, and appointments behind the scenes, especially as close associates from his business ventures became key political appointees, such as personal bodyguards appointed as Minister of Internal Affairs, former CEO Grigol Liluashvili as the State Security Service and many more others as key heads of state institutions,

⁶⁸ Berglund, Sten, "Technocratic Populism in Hybrid Regimes: Georgia on My Mind and in My Pocket," *Politics and Governance*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2020, pp. 7-19, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i4.3370>

⁶⁹ Górecki, Wojciech, "A Journey into a Glorious Past: Three Terms of Georgian Dream," *OSW Commentary*, October 8, 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-10-08/a-journey-a-glorious-past-three-terms-georgian-dream>.

⁷⁰ Aprasidze, David, "Ivanishvili Governs Georgia Like His Business Company," *European Center for Populism Studies*, November 2024, <https://www.populismstudies.org/professor-aprasidze-ivanishvili-governs-georgia-like-his-business-company/>.

⁷¹ OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, "A Journey, a Glorious Past? Three Terms of Georgian Dream," 8 October 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-10-08/a-journey-a-glorious-past-three-terms-georgian-dream>.

⁷² Asatiani, Elene, and Tsaava, Maradia, "What the Flamingos in Ivanishvili's Dendrological Park Say About Georgia," *JAMnews*, October 31, 2020, <https://jam-news.net/georgia-ivanishvili-dendrological-park-trees-ecology-elections/>.

⁷³ Civil Georgia, "Ivanishvili Transfers Significant Assets to His Foundation," *Civil.ge*, January 13, 2021, <https://civil.ge/archives/390827>.

⁷⁴ Kincha, Shota, "Georgian Democracy on Life Support," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, February 19, 2021, <https://www.boell.de/en/2021/02/19/die-georgische-demokratie-ist-von-lebenserhaltenden-massnahmen-abhaengig>.

judiciary and security services.⁷⁵ Prime-minister Irakli Garibashvili had been seen as one of the appointments of Ivanishvili's collaborators, since he had worked with the Cartu Foundation. Prime Minister of Georgia (2015-2018), Giorgi Kvirikashvili, also held senior positions at Ivanishvili's Cartu Bank.⁷⁶

The reforms the party undertook focused primarily on lustrations, the so-called "the restoration of justice" (*სამართლიანობის აღდგენა*), promising a complete overhaul away from the previous United National Movement (UNM) government. The idea of a clean slate became a core narrative of the Georgian Dream, also appealing to those targeted under the previous regime. The judiciary was the key instrument for achieving these goals, and large-scale criminal investigations and arrests targeting former officials were conducted under the mandate of a new commission to investigate the crimes of the United National Movement, now the country's most significant opposition force.⁷⁷ The imprisonment of former Defense Minister Bacho Akhalaia for physically and verbally abusing six soldiers and "exceeding official powers" when he was the defence minister was labelled as a politically aligned judicial verdict.⁷⁸ Under the campaign to investigate human rights abuses of the previous regime, the case was also built against Saakashvili, who was sentenced in absentia in 2018.⁷⁹ These arrests became a public political confrontation and a space for mutual political accusations.

Some reforms changed the face of the judiciary during the first mandate, specifically the lifetime appointment of judges, the High Council of Justice's competencies and composition, and the random allocation of cases to judges. However, these did not interfere with broader issues, such as internal factionalism and judges' politicisation.⁸⁰ Judicial reforms drew criticism internally from watchdogs and the Venice Commission, which were concerned about the erosion of the judiciary's independence. The strategic capture was evident, with judges who ruled against the Government facing pressure or marginalisation, while loyalists were

⁷⁵ Transparency International Georgia, "Is Georgia a Captured State?" *Transparency International Georgia*, December 11, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgia-captured-state>.

⁷⁶ Transparency International Georgia, "Georgia National Integrity System Assessment 2020," *Transparency International Georgia*, June 26, 2020, https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/nis_report_en.pdf.

⁷⁷ Ghoghoberidze, Khatia, "How Does Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili De Facto Rule Georgia?" *JAMnews*, June 27, 2022, <https://jam-news.net/how-does-oligarch-bidzina-ivanishvili-de-facto-rule-georgia/>.

⁷⁸ Lomsadze, Giorgi, "Georgia: Ex-Defense Minister's Arrest the Start of a Crackdown or Cleanup?" *Eurasianet*, November 7, 2012, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-ex-defense-ministers-arrest-the-start-of-a-crackdown-or-cleanup>.

⁷⁹ Novak, Andrew, "Saakashvili v. Georgia and the Global Trend Toward Judicial Review of the Pardon Power," *Strasbourg Observers*, August 13, 2024, <https://strasbourgobservers.com/2024/08/13/saakashvili-v-georgia-and-the-global-trend-toward-judicial-review-of-the-pardon-power/>.

⁸⁰ Innadze, Guram, "Waves of Judicial Reform That Cannot Reach the Shore," Heinrich Böll Stiftung, September 6, 2021, <https://ge.boell.org/en/2021/09/06/waves-judicial-reform-cannot-reach-shore>.

rewarded.⁸¹ However, the conflict between branches of Government became increasingly apparent after the courts began issuing acquittals of former high-ranking officials, such as in the first case against Bacho Akhalaia, which generated significant public interest.⁸² As one analyst pointed out at the time, the government “tested the judges for loyalty and then appointed them to positions for life, while appointing judges with the worst reputation to senior positions in the judiciary”⁸³ This system has been referred to as a “clan” of judges that align major judiciary decisions with the Government.⁸⁴ The reforms expanded the basis of judicial employment and education, but maintained an opaque system of appointments that allowed control over those loyal to the judicial “clan”.

The mandate of Georgian Dream became increasingly consolidated after the 2019 elections, when it increased its dominance in local Government. This created a near single-party system in practice, reducing checks on executive authority and marginalising opposition voices from institutional power.⁸⁵ Key watchdog institutions such as the Public Defender (Ombudsman) were increasingly sidelined. At the same time, law enforcement agencies, particularly the State Security Service (reestablished in 2015), were granted enhanced powers and utilised in politically sensitive cases.⁸⁶

Civil society remained active, but tensions grew between the Government and NGOs, particularly, those criticising human rights or judicial processes. There was an evident push for co-optation and intimidation of media, NGOs, and opposition.⁸⁷ Although the media landscape continued to be pluralistic, pro-government narratives increasingly dominated public broadcasters and major television stations, raising concerns about internal bias.⁸⁸ Legal battles and pressure campaigns were directed against opposition-leaning Rustavi 2, where the

⁸¹ Venice Commission, “Georgia: Opinion on Amendments to the Organic Law on Common Courts,” *Council of Europe*, October 6–7, 2023, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/CDL-AD%282023%29033-e>.

⁸² xxx

⁸³ Narimanishvili, Nino, “How the Georgian Judicial System Fell Under Western Sanctions,” *JAMnews*, May 15, 2023, <https://jam-news.net/georgian-judicial-system/>.

⁸⁴ Dolidze, Anna, and Oniani, Tamar, “Is Transparency Enough? Informal Governance Networks and the Selection Process of a Georgian Judge to the European Court of Human Rights,” *Review of Central and East European Law*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2024, pp. 119–142.

⁸⁵ BAKUR KVASHILAVA, “Intra-party Democracy in the Georgian Political System,” *EECMD*, 2020, <https://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/agora-documents/Intra-party%20Democracy%20in%20the%20Georgian%20Political%20System.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Development Alternatives Incorporated (DAI), “Georgia—Support the Fight Against Organized Crime,” *DAI*, 2018–2022, <https://www.dai.com/our-work/projects/georgia-support-the-fight-against-organized-crime>.

⁸⁷ Freedom House, “*Nations in Transit 2018 – Georgia*”, 11 April 2018, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/freehou/2018/en/121100>.

⁸⁸ Kapanadze, Sergi, “Anti-Western Propaganda – The Georgian Dream’s All-purpose Fix,” *GEOpolitics*, December 3, 2023, <https://politicsgeo.com/article/16>.

ownership change in 2015–16 was widely viewed as politically motivated.⁸⁹ The ownership of Rustavi 2 was to be controversially handed over to a pro-government owner via a court decision in 2019, following a lengthy process of intimidation and changes to its editorial team. Also in 2016, several journalists, including those from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and other outlets, were physically assaulted and had equipment confiscated or destroyed while covering protests.⁹⁰ All these developments consolidated a vertical system of political decision-making that ran parallel to the established political system. Independent media came under greater legal and financial pressure, particularly as public broadcasters lacked independence and functioned more as government mouthpieces. Their reach was widespread, although certain groups primarily youth and retirees have resisted the government's indirect control.

The majority Parliament and Institutional Capture (2016–2020)

The majority of Georgian Dream, which held power in Parliament after 2012, allowed for a gradual reshaping of governance, and the turning point was the 2018 elections. While elections continued and formal democratic procedures remained in place, the substance of democracy eroded, driven by the centralisation of power, increasing personalisation of rule, and erosion of independent institutions. Georgian Dream increasingly consolidated control over all branches of power, alongside a system of shadow political control exercised by Ivanishvili himself.

The majority in Parliament approved sweeping amendments to the Constitution in 2017–2018, which further paved the way for greater concentration of power. The amendments significantly weakened the President's mandate. They abolished the direct ballot of citizens for the President's election, which was replaced by a Parliamentary committee. Although the President vetoed the changes, the Parliament overruled his decision, effectively granting the Georgian Dream de facto control over the Presidency. It also meant losing the right to advocate and consult with the Government. Under the new amendments, the National Security Council, led by the President, was replaced by a National Defence Council, operational only during

⁸⁹ Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS), "Challenges to Media Pluralism: The Case of Rustavi2," *GRASS Brief*, December 7, 2015, <https://grass.org.ge/en/grassbrief/brief/october-november-2015/challenges-to-media-plurism-the-case-of-rustavi2>.

⁹⁰ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, "Violence Mars Georgia's Election Season", 7 October 2016, CRS 827, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57fe37b3d.html>.

martial law, to coordinate the work of the constitutional bodies.⁹¹ The amendments to the constitutions also de facto entailed that electoral blocs were no longer allowed. There was an evident move towards a more conservative political discourse. The 2019 amendments to the Constitution also explicitly defined marriage as a union “between a man and a woman”. Also, Article 78 in the transitional provisions, which stipulates that “the constitutional bodies shall take all available measures within their competence to ensure Georgia’s full integration into the European Union and the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization”, shifts the focus to the potential intimidation of the “West”. The change in the Constitution also brought significant changes to rights provisions, primarily regarding access to information, which was severely restricted due to security and protection concerns.

The amendments also addressed the proportional representation obligation, a long-debated electoral reform. The allocation of seats has, since the 1990s, been a mix of first-past-the-post and proportional representation.⁹² The opposition in Georgia has been calling for a switch to a fully proportional system for some time, as the Government has allegedly abused the majoritarian system. When protests erupted in June 2019 (the so-called Gavrilov Night protests), demanding elections and opposing Russian influence and government complicity, and culminating in violent dispersal and arrests, the concern with fair proportional representation in Parliament became a slogan of the revolt.⁹³ Ironically, the bill proposed by the GD to address the power imbalance was shut down by the very members of the GD,⁹⁴ proving that concerns about a total capture of the Parliament by the Georgian Dream were well-founded. Although the move from a presidential system to a Parliamentary system was initially commended at the beginning of the GD rule, the parliament’s mandate has consistently eroded. With numerous proofs, the Parliament had effectively lost any political influence to the network of trusted appointees of Ivanishvili.⁹⁵

The Public Defender and the State Audit Office faced resource limitations or political attacks. In 2016, there were several attacks on the prime-minister against the Public Defender’s

⁹¹ Larsen, Joseph, “Constitutional Reform Raises the Question: What Does Georgian Dream Stand For?” *Eurasianet*, August 7, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/constitutional-reform-raises-the-question-what-does-georgian-dream-stand-for>.

⁹² Zedelashvili, Davit, “Georgia’s Battle on Electoral Rules and the Pivot Towards Proportional Representation,” *ConstitutionNet*, August 26, 2020, <https://constitutionnet.org/news/georgias-battle-electoral-rules-and-pivot-towards-proportional-representation>.

⁹³ Civil Georgia, “Five Years Since ‘Gavrilov’s Night’,” *Civil.ge*, June 20, 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/613457>.

⁹⁴ Ghoghoberidze, Khatia, “How Does Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili De Facto Rule Georgia?” *JAMnews*, June 27, 2022, <https://jam-news.net/how-does-oligarch-bidzina-ivanishvili-de-facto-rule-georgia/>.

⁹⁵ Freedom House, “Nations in Transit 2021 – Georgia,” *Freedom House*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/2052735.html>.

office, which was the only one mandated to investigate human rights abuses, around its assessments of Mikheil Saakashvili, who was on hunger strike.⁹⁶ With the prerogatives of these two institutions restricted, the investigation and pursuit of cases of grave human rights abuses or torture was severely curtailed.⁹⁷ It sparked public uproar, particularly due to their subsequent decline in monitoring elections and other issues, such as conflicts between officials and media outlets.

The 2019 controversy over the appointment of Supreme Court judges, conducted with minimal transparency and against recommendations of the Venice Commission, sparked protests and criticism from the EU and civil society. These blurred lines between party and state and contributed to weak institutional autonomy. The High Council of Justice (the judiciary's oversight body) became a tool for disciplining independent judges and blocking reform. The court system lost public trust, becoming a core symbol of institutional capture. In 2018, the High Council of Justice sent a list by the Parliament with the names of 10 judges to be appointed to the Supreme Court, a move that testified to the overtaking of the judiciary coveted as part of the politics of reform⁹⁸

Although Ivanishvili officially held no political office after 2013 (except for a brief return as party chairman in 2018), his informal control extended beyond politics. These pressures mirrored “soft autocracy” tactics seen in other hybrid regimes. His tactics were evident in 2018, when Ivanishvili endorsed the independent candidate Salome Zourabichvili for the presidency. After the opposition's better-than-expected performance in the first round, Ivanishvili devised a scheme to write off the debts of 600,000 Georgians and cover them with his charity. It was considered “an unprecedented case of vote-bribing” and was enough to boost Georgian Dream's popularity and give Zourabichvili a victory in the second round.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ InterPressNews, “MEPs: Attacks on the Independence of the Public Defender's Office Are Always of Concern, They Should Be Commended, and Not Criticized,” *InterPressNews*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/116844-meps-attacks-on-the-independence-of-the-public-defenders-office-are-of-always-of-concern-they-should-be-commended-and-not-criticized/>.

⁹⁷ Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2018: Georgia,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/georgia>.

⁹⁸ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Second Report on the Nomination and Appointment of Supreme Court Judges in Georgia*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/6/443494.pdf>.

⁹⁹ JAMnews, “Debts of 600,000 Georgian Citizens to Be Cleared Just Before Second Round of Presidential Elections,” *JAMnews*, November 19, 2018, <https://jam-news.net/debts-of-600000-georgian-citizens-to-be-cleared-just-before-second-round-of-presidential-elections/>.

An Authoritarian Turn and Anti-Western Rhetoric (2020–Present)

The Georgian Dream won the parliamentary elections for the third time in 2020, held under a revised electoral system and with a high turnout, and with many opposition parties also elected to Parliament. The elections were held under the new electoral law, a compromise on the full proportionality demands, now working with 120 deputies through proportional representation and 30 single-member constituencies. However, elections led to opposition boycotts and represented the early signs of autocratic resilience, cloaked in electoral reform but marred by allegations of fraud and vote-buying. International observers agreed that, overall, the elections were competitive; however, the “blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state” reduced public confidence in certain aspects of the electoral process.¹⁰⁰

Transparency International assessed the election context as further proof that Ivanishvili is de facto the shadow ruler of Georgia. Ivanishvili has increasingly employed the technocratic narrative, portraying politics as a business, as a strong draw for popularity, while also fostering a form of independence from the political environment. In this technocratic form of populism.¹⁰¹, the Government increased penalties for participating in protest rallies. Violations that were previously punishable by fines are now treated as criminal offences, and protesters can be detained for up to 60 days, an increase from 15 days.¹⁰²

The Georgian Dream’s response to opposition protests has become increasingly repressive, by suing the State Security Service (SSS) to intimidate activists. The 2021 arrest of Nika Melia, opposition leader, was again a symbolic confirmation of state repression under the guise of legality, with increased police crackdowns and surveillance.¹⁰³ The control over institutions was again evident in 2024, when hundreds of public servants were dismissed after participating in anti-government protests. In December, Prime Minister Irakli Kobahidze called it a “self-purge” of unloyal “elements” in public administration.

Arguably, it builds on an ethno-nationalism dimension that has been present, as seen in the cases of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and other countries in the Southern Caucasus, since the

¹⁰⁰ Deutsche Welle, “Georgia Election: Ruling Party Claims Victory, Opposition Protests,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 1, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/georgia-election-ruling-party-claims-victory-opposition-protests/a-55461978>.

¹⁰¹ Aprasidze, David, “Ivanishvili Governs Georgia Like His Business Company,” *European Center for Populism Studies*, November 2024, <https://www.populismstudies.org/professor-aprasidze-ivanishvili-governs-georgia-like-his-business-company/>.

¹⁰² xxx

¹⁰³ France24, “Georgian Police Arrest Top Opposition Leader, Deepening Political Crisis,” *France24*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210223-georgian-police-arrest-top-opposition-leader-deepening-political-crisis>.

1980s, in reaction to the disintegration of socialism. As scholars argued, that type of nationalism “was built on an idea contrary to that of the Soviet Union, namely on an idealized past of the Georgian nation, a prominent role of religion in it, and prioritization of the Georgian identity infamously expressed with the slogan “Georgia for Georgians” associated with the first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia”¹⁰⁴ Radical nationalist discourse in Georgia reframes Russian alignment as pragmatic and necessary and complex debates to position pro-Russian positions are less ideological and more pragmatic.¹⁰⁵

The threat of foreign interference, particularly singling out the EU, NATO, and the US (USAID) as corrupting influences, has become increasingly visible around the “foreign agent” bill (2023-2024). Sold to the public as increasing transparency, the legislation has been utilised to persecute Georgia’s opposition and arrest dissidents with impunity. Modelled on the 2012 Russian legislation regulating the funding and activity of NGOs, the Georgian legislation threatened civil society and press freedom, similarly to initiatives in Hungary. The Georgian Dream’s relationship with the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz Party has been a constantly evolving national political instrument of legitimacy. Mass protests against the plan, specifically by young people, feminist and LGBTQ+ groups, and NGOs, united actors against shrinking civic space. In response to the foreign agent law and the subsequent crackdown, Washington has imposed sanctions on leading officials.

The steep deterioration of Georgian democracy is evident in the strained relations with the European Union. In 2014, Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the European Union, which included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA), and the agreement entered into force in 2016. In 2017, the EU lifted the visa requirement for Georgian citizens entering the Schengen Area for short stays.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Georgia’s “Western” aspirations have consistently featured prominently in the political program of Georgian Dream. But the Government’s rhetoric turned more anti-Western, accusing NGOs, media, and foreign governments of attempting regime change. The Georgian Dream has been decisively moving towards an anti-globalist agenda, with recent statements mentioning a “party of war” leading global politics, specifically tying LGBTQ representation issues with a political move to

¹⁰⁴ Caucasus Edition, “The Rise of New Nationalism in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s,” <https://caucasusedition.net/the-rise-of-new-nationalism-in-armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgia-in-the-late-1980s-and-early-1990s/>.

¹⁰⁵ Gozalishvili, Nino, and Mariami Kilasonia. "Rethinking alignment: framing pragmatism in Georgia’s identity debate", *Global Discourse* 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1332/20437897Y2025D000000065>

¹⁰⁶ Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), “Statement in Support of the Georgian Public Defender (Ombudsman),” *GANHRI*, October 2020, <https://ganhri.org/statement-in-support-of-the-georgian-public-defender/>.

entertain “liberal fascism”.¹⁰⁷ In this sense, integration was conditioned by a shift towards more conservative, or “true,” Western values in Europe and the US.¹⁰⁸ Provoking conflicts with the West, while maintaining formal aspirations for integration with the EU and NATO, became a deliberate tactic of Georgian Dream to balance the Georgian public’s pro-Western desires with their conservative sensibilities. The fact that in 2023, the US State Department imposed sanctions on four Georgian judges and their families, citing corruption and abuse of power has also been presented as an animosity towards the Georgian Dream.

The crisis became evident in 2024, when Georgian Dream unilaterally suspended EU accession talks in the aftermath of the election. The decision has sparked protests and societal unrest in a system that effectively lacks real pathways to stop the party in power. The protests that followed further intensified Georgian Dream’s autocratic drive, which also relied on legislation passed simultaneously that curtails freedom of association and public consultation regarding reforms.

Causes of Autocratisation

Lack of Representation

The state of institutions, combined with the fact that the electoral commission, public broadcaster, and law enforcement bodies have frequently been co-opted to serve political ends, has exacerbated the divide between the political elite and the broader population. Political arrests and the suppression of dissent have undermined democratic freedoms and increasingly limited the pathways for holding the government accountable. The government has enacted laws restricting civil society, including the “foreign agents” law, which targets NGOs and independent media. There is effectively little possibility of renewal of such structures from below. As a commentator noted, “democracy was largely the product of institutionalised political struggle”¹⁰⁹ The conflict between Georgian Dream and the main opposition parties,

¹⁰⁷ JAMnews, “Ivanishvili on Banning the Opposition and LGBT Rights,” *JAMnews*, October 21, 2024, <https://jam-news.net/ivanishvili-on-banning-the-opposition-and-lgbt-rights-interview-imeri/>.

¹⁰⁸ Atasuntsev, Alexander, “How Georgia’s Ruling Party Gambled on Trump—and Lost,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 19, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2025/02/georgia-trump-eu-difficulties?lang=en>.

¹⁰⁹ Jorjoliani, Gia, and Tornike Chivadze. “Georgia’s Geopolitical Fixation Masks a Deeper Crisis of Representation.” *Social Europe*, 11 Apr. 2025, <https://www.socialeurope.eu/georgias-geopolitical-fixation-masks-a-deeper-crisis-of-representation>.

particularly the United National Movement (UNM), has decisively eroded democratic norms because it triggered the restriction of mass ballots, for citizens, and a selective system of representation in Parliament. Rather than cooperation, politics is dominated by zero-sum confrontations and mutual delegitimation that have had a constant negative impact.

Insufficient international pushback

Although the EU has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to Georgian reforms, its intervention has been indirect and lacking in proportionality, to the extent that executive entrenchment has unfolded. The Georgian opposition's appeal to the European Union not to recognise the results of the 2024 parliamentary elections was symbolic of the extent to which the Georgian Dream has been able to bypass and stall change. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe suspended many of the Georgian delegation's rights until the country held a new vote, among other conditions, but this had no reforming effects in Georgia. Stopping financial aid and imposing visa restrictions in retaliation for Georgian Dream's decision to halt accession negotiations has further angered Georgian society, which appears to be bearing the brunt of the ruling party's attack on democracy.¹¹⁰

. The Russian “threat”

Georgia's pivot towards Russia and perceived Western disengagement have facilitated authoritarian tendencies. The ruling party's alignment with Moscow has been linked to increased corruption and weakened democratic institutions. The Georgian Dream has effectively used Russia's interests to support its autocratisation politics internally.

Dissensus

A mild dissensus emerged during the debates over electoral reform (2019–2020), when civil society groups, opposition parties, and international actors pressured the ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD), to transition from a mixed to a fully proportional electoral system. Disputes at the time centered on the timing, fairness, and extent of reform within legal and

¹¹⁰ Lavrelashvili, Teona, and Peter Hefe. *Preventing Georgia from Sliding Away: Options for the European Union*. Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Apr. 2025, <https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Georgia-In-Brief.pdf>.

institutional frameworks (parliamentary negotiations, protests, mediation by the EU). While tensions were high, all sides remained engaged in dialogue and utilised institutional channels, such as elections and international mediation.

Media freedom was another instance of mild dissensus, when independent media like Mtavari Arkhi and TV Pirveli¹¹¹ faced state pressure and politically motivated investigations. Ruling party officials accuse critical outlets of being “opposition” platforms. The ruling party defends its actions as law enforcement, while the media and NGOs view this as state overreach. While troubling, the media landscape remained pluralistic and public protests continued without systematic suppression.

Severe dissensus has characterised the division between the Georgian Dream (GD) and the opposition since at least 2018, when GD and major opposition parties, such as the United National Movement (UNM), entered a near-permanent state of confrontation. Both sides accuse the other of being fundamentally anti-democratic: the GD accuses the UNM of past authoritarianism, while the opposition accuses the GD of state capture and authoritarian drift. Some consequences of this have included opposition boycotts of Parliament (following the 2020 elections), refusal to accept election results, and the replacement of institutional dialogue with street politics, all of which illustrate a serious collapse in mutual trust.

The election crisis of 2020-2021 is another example of severe dissensus. Following the 2020 parliamentary elections, the opposition alleged fraud and refused to take their seats in Parliament for months. The crisis required EU mediation to restore parliamentary participation, underscoring the inability of domestic institutions to resolve disputes. an indicator of institutional decay and polarisation.

Evidence of destructive dissesus has been the foreign Agents” Law and particularly its role in the anti-Western narratives. The reintroduction of the “foreign agents” law (framed as transparency law) triggered mass protests and state violence. The law is seen as mimicking Russian-style suppression of civil society. This marks a rupture between the ruling party and key segments of civil society, as well as Western partners. GD frames critics as foreign-influenced “enemies,” undermining pluralism and democratic legitimacy. It shows rising authoritarian tendencies, a breakdown of external democratic anchors (the EU, the US), and the framing of domestic opposition as existential threats.

¹¹¹ Civil Georgia, “Georgian Dream Targets Critical Broadcasters for Questioning Government Legitimacy,” 3 June 2025, <https://civil.ge/archives/684878>.

Serbia: A Developing Autocratic State. Executive Entrenchment and Dissensus over Liberal Democracy (2012 – 2025)

By Claudia Bădulescu¹¹²,

Introduction

Since 2012, Serbia has shifted from a hybrid, electorally-competitive democracy to what leading datasets now classify as an *electoral autocracy*.¹¹³ The ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) under Aleksandar Vučić has brought about this transformation through a strategy of *executive entrenchment*, which involves incremental but cumulative attacks on democratic institutional checks, systematic capture of the media, and the manipulation of elections rather than their outright abolition. Drawing on the framework of this report, which emphasises research into the *manifestations*, the *causes*, and the *dissensus* dimensions of autocratisation, this case study traces Serbia’s democratic erosion between 2012 and April 2025. It shows (1) how entrenchment unfolded across various domains including the legislature, judiciary, media, civil society, and electoral arena; (2) why this situation developed, identifying elite strategies, structural legacies, socioeconomic conditions, and external incentives; and (3) how competing interpretations of liberal democracy, national identity, and socioeconomic justice were both enabled and intensified by autocratisation. The study relies on primary documents, academic literature and the latest watchdog reports, and concludes by discussing the implications for EU democracy promotion in the Western Balkans.

Over the past decade, Serbia has undergone a pronounced democratic decline, transforming from an aspiring liberal democracy into a hybrid regime with autocratic tendencies. Since 2012, when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its leader Aleksandar Vučić rose to power, domestic and international observers have documented a continuous erosion of democratic institutions¹¹⁴. Serbia exemplifies the model of *executive entrenchment* identified in the research framework, where leaders rely on informal elite pacts, clientelism, and institutional capture to tilt, rather than cancel, the electoral playing field. According to this report’s analytical framework, autocratisation is understood as a dual process involving both the dismantling of democratic institutions (e.g. weakening checks and balances, undermining media freedom, restricting civil liberties) and the construction of authoritarian structures to

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¹¹³ Working paper RS 3.2

¹¹⁴ Milačić, Filip, “Why Aspiring Autocrats Are Watching Serbia,” *Journal of Democracy*, March 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-aspiring-autocrats-are-watching-serbia/>.

replace them. In Serbia's case, this dual process has been starkly evident: while formal democratic procedures like elections have continued, they have been hollowed out by the consolidation of power in the executive and ruling party structures. The following sections trace Serbia's autocratic turn from 2012 to 2025, analyse its root causes, and discuss the forms of dissensus (contestations of liberal democratic principles and procedures) that both enable and emerge from this process.

Unfolding of the autocratisation Process (2012–2025)

Serbia's autocratisation unfolded gradually but decisively over the 2012–2025 period, as Aleksandar Vučić and the SNS consolidated power across all branches of government. In line with the report's analytical framework's first question, this section provides a chronological narrative of key events, the main actors propelling autocratisation, the institutional domains affected, and the opposition forces responding at each stage. It becomes evident that what began as a democratically-elected government in 2012 slowly morphed into a regime characterized by "*executive entrenchment*," wherein incumbents maintain power through institutional manipulation and concentrated authority.

2012-2014: The Turn from Democratic Promise to Power Concentration

In 2012, the SNS won parliamentary elections and its ally, Tomislav Nikolić, unseated the incumbent president, marking the end of the previous pro-democratic regime. Vučić, originally Deputy Prime Minister and later Prime Minister (2014), positioned himself as a reformer with a mandate to fight corruption and advance European integration. Indeed, the SNS's rise was bolstered by popular frustration with corruption and economic stagnation under the preceding government, and Vučić cultivated an image as a "*defender of the Serbian nation*" who could restore pride and order¹¹⁵. However, behind this veneer of reform, early signs of illiberal practices emerged. The new government moved quickly to capture key institutions, especially the parliament and media.

Vučić exploited his initial popularity to gain full control of his party and the legislature, a strategy described by scholars as "*legislative capture*"¹¹⁶. Parliamentary procedures were manipulated to marginalize opposition voices: important laws were often rushed through with little debate, and SNS leveraged its majority to dominate parliamentary committees and appointments. Even at this stage, watchdogs began voicing concern that Serbia's leaders were

¹¹⁵ Milačić, Filip, "Why Aspiring Autocrats Are Watching Serbia," *Journal of Democracy*, March 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-aspiring-autocrats-are-watching-serbia/>.

¹¹⁶ Milačić, Filip, "Why Aspiring Autocrats Are Watching Serbia," *Journal of Democracy*, March 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-aspiring-autocrats-are-watching-serbia/>.

mimicking democracy rather than practicing it – an early indication of what one Serbian commentator later called the government’s tendency to “simulate democracy”¹¹⁷.

During this period, independent media and regulatory institutions came under pressure. Notably, in 2014, several journalists reported increased censorship and intimidation when investigating government affairs (such as dubious deals or the government’s handling of a major flood disaster)¹¹⁸. Prominent media outlets were bought by government-friendly businessmen or swayed through state advertising funds, initiating the media capture that would deepen in subsequent years.

By 2014, Aleksandar Vučić became Prime Minister after the SNS secured a landslide victory in early elections. With Vučić as head of government, executive influence over ostensibly independent bodies intensified. The anti-corruption agency and the public broadcaster, for instance, saw leadership changes that favoured SNS loyalists. Elections still occurred on schedule (or were called early by the government), and Serbia formally remained a parliamentary democracy; however, the playing field was increasingly skewed by ruling-party advantages in media, finance, and administrative control, foreshadowing the competitive authoritarian turn.

2015-2017: Institutional Erosion and Vučić’s Ascendancy to the Presidency

In the mid-2010s, the process of democratic backsliding accelerated. International indices began recording year-on-year declines in Serbia’s democracy scores¹¹⁹. The cumulative deterioration became especially pronounced in areas of media freedom, electoral fairness, and the integrity of governance¹²⁰. As Prime Minister, Vučić continued to centralize decision-making in his cabinet, often bypassing Parliament except to rubber-stamp decisions. Opposition parties complained of restricted access to media and public venues, and of a climate of fear among public servants and voters who depended on SNS patronage for jobs and resources. In 2016, Serbia held another parliamentary election (called early by Vučić), which the SNS won

¹¹⁷ The term “simulate democracy” was used by opposition leader Nebojša Zelenović, then President of the political party Together for Serbia, to describe how Serbia’s government maintains a facade of democratic processes without the substance of true competition or accountability (Zelenović, 2020, as cited in Euractiv: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/serbias-government-simulates-democracy/>).

¹¹⁸ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 6 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

¹¹⁹ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 6 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

¹²⁰ Balkan Insight, “Serbia Reclassified as ‘Partly Free’ in Freedom of the World 2019 Index,” *Balkan Insight*, 5 February 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/05/serbia-reclassified-as-partly-free-in-freedom-of-the-world-2019-index-02-05-2019/>.

handily, albeit with opposition allegations of irregularities¹²¹. These elections, while generally peaceful, exhibited unfair conditions: the ruling SNS enjoyed massive media coverage advantage and blurred the line between state and party (for instance, public resources were used for campaign events), setting the template for future votes¹²². International observers like the OSCE noted problems even then, though Serbia's elections were still recognized as formally competitive. The independent judiciary also came under assault: judges and prosecutors who made decisions unfavourable to government interests were subjected to smear campaigns in tabloids and pressure from political superiors, undermining the separation of powers. By 2017, when Vučić decided to run for the largely ceremonial post of President, it was clear he intended to expand his dominance rather than step back – indeed, after winning the presidency in April 2017 with about 55% of the vote, he ensured that a loyal party colleague succeeded him as Prime Minister, allowing him to exercise control from the presidency in an extraconstitutional manner¹²³.

Vučić's elevation to President marked a symbolic consolidation of power in one person. For many Serbians, this moment crystallized the sense that the country was drifting back toward strongman rule reminiscent of the 1990s. In fact, political observers noted a “back-to-the-future” quality in Serbia at this time: as one analysis put it, “*the feeling among at least some Serbs is that the clock has been turned back to the era of former president and strongman Slobodan Milošević.*”¹²⁴. This sentiment was echoed in burgeoning street protests. Following Vučić's 2017 presidential victory, thousands of mostly young Serbians took to the streets in what were dubbed the “*Protiv diktature*” (“Against Dictatorship”) protests, voicing anger at media bias, the ruling party's pressure on voters, and the general state of democracy¹²⁵. While these early protests eventually dissipated, they were a harbinger of larger movements to come, indicating growing public dissensus with the direction of governance.

2018-2020: Open Democratic Erosion and Mass Protests

By 2018, Serbia's autocratisation was plainly visible and attracted extensive international criticism. Freedom House's reports described “*fundamental freedoms and*

¹²¹ Balkan Insight, “Serbian Opposition Held Protest Against Election Fraud,” *Balkan Insight*, 30 April 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/04/30/serbian-opposition-held-protest-against-election-fraud-04-30-2016/>.

¹²² Bechev, Dimitar, “Serbia's Authoritarian (Re)turn,” *Carnegie Europe*, 11 January 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/01/serbias-authoritarian-return>.

¹²³ Tait, Robert, “Serbian PM Elected President as EU Warns Over Increased Powers,” *The Guardian*, 3 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/03/serbian-pm-aleksandar-vucic-elected-president-eu-warns-over-increased-powers>.

¹²⁴ Bechev, Dimitar, “Serbia's Authoritarian (Re)turn,” *Carnegie Europe*, 11 January 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/01/serbias-authoritarian-return>.

¹²⁵ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08883254231212485>

democratic institutions” deteriorating year after year and warned of Serbia’s slide toward authoritarianism¹²⁶. Key events underscored this decline. In late 2018, a shocking incident galvanized the opposition: Borko Stefanović, an opposition politician, was brutally attacked by unknown assailants ahead of a rally in Kruševac¹²⁷. This act of political violence, viewed as a product of the “*contentious climate*” fostered by Vučić’s inflammatory rhetoric toward critics, was the final straw for many¹²⁸. In December 2018 and throughout 2019, a wave of citizen protests swept Serbia under the slogan “*1 of 5 million*” (after President Vučić remarked he would not cede to demands “even if 5 million people protest”)¹²⁹. These protests, which spread from Belgrade to dozens of towns, brought tens of thousands into the streets demanding an end to political violence, greater media freedom, and fair electoral conditions¹³⁰. Significantly, opposition parties united in an umbrella alliance (the Alliance for Serbia, *Savez za Srbiju*, SzS) and, aligning with the protesters’ sentiment, declared a boycott of the national parliament in early 2019¹³¹. They also threatened to boycott future elections unless minimum conditions for a fair contest were met¹³². This represented a dramatic escalation of dissensus: the opposition was effectively rejecting the legitimacy of the political processes under Vučić’s rules, an attempt to deprive the regime of democratic legitimacy if it continued to flout democratic norms¹³³. As this report’s analytical framework would term it, the political conflict had reached a “disruptive dissensus” stage where even the basic procedures of democracy (like elections and parliamentary participation) were contested.

Throughout 2019 and 2020, state institutions were further subverted to entrench SNS rule. The media space had, by this point, been almost completely captured by the regime: most nationwide TV stations and popular tabloids effectively functioned as SNS propaganda outlets. Channels like TV Pink and newspapers like *Informer* devoted themselves to praising Vučić and

¹²⁶ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2018 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 11 April 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2018>.

¹²⁷ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 6 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

¹²⁸ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 6 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

¹²⁹ Srebotnjak, Hana, “All as One – 1 out of 5 Million: Serbian Protesters Mobilise Against Growing Authoritarian Rule,” *openDemocracy*, 7 May 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/international-civil-society-week/all-as-one-1-out-of-5-million-serbian-protesters-mobilise-against-growing-authoritarian-rule/>.

¹³⁰ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 6 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

¹³¹ Balkan Insight, “Serbia Opposition MPs Boycott Parliament After Fresh Protests,” *Balkan Insight*, 28 January 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/01/28/serbian-opposition-boycotted-parliament-session-01-28-2019/>.

¹³² Balkan Insight, “Serbia Opposition MPs Boycott Parliament After Fresh Protests,” *Balkan Insight*, 28 January 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/01/28/serbian-opposition-boycotted-parliament-session-01-28-2019/>.

¹³³ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 6 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

demonizing his opponents, leaving only a few independent outlets (such as N1 TV or the daily *Danas*) to provide critical coverage – and those had much smaller reach¹³⁴. Government critics, including investigative journalists, faced frequent threats and smear campaigns, contributing to a climate of self-censorship. The judiciary’s independence was at its nadir, with the ruling party exerting influence over judicial appointments and discipline. In one telling incident in 2019, a judge in a provincial court resigned from a sensitive case citing undue pressure by an SNS-aligned local official – an example of how political interference trickled down to even low-level courts¹³⁵. Serbia’s Parliament, especially after the opposition’s boycott, became a virtual one-party chamber. When parliamentary elections were held in June 2020 (after a COVID-19 related postponement), the main opposition indeed boycotted, resulting in an SNS-led landslide (over 60% of votes) and the near-complete absence of a real opposition in the new parliament¹³⁶. Serbia had effectively crossed into hybrid-regime territory: elections continued to be held, but without genuine competition or pluralism, as confirmed by international observers who questioned the meaningfulness of Serbia’s vote under such uneven conditions¹³⁷.

2021–2025: Entrenchment, Crisis, and Autocracy on the Brink

The period 2021–2025 saw the SNS regime further entrench its authoritarian practices, yet also faced increasing societal pushback and external scrutiny. In 2021, Vučić’s government pressed forward with controversial constitutional reforms ostensibly aimed at judiciary improvements (as part of EU accession talks), but domestic experts warned that initial drafts would enable greater political control over judges – for instance, by empowering parliament in key appointments¹³⁸. Civil society organizations like the Judges’ Association and the prEUgovor coalition vocally criticized these moves¹³⁹. Although revised amendments were eventually approved via referendum in 2022 (under EU pressure to align with European standards), scepticism remained about their implementation. Meanwhile, corruption and clientelism flourished, such as in the case of the arms trading scandal involving associates of

¹³⁴ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 6 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

¹³⁵ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 6 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

¹³⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/19/serbia-votes-all-you-need-to-know-about-europe-s-first-national-election-since-covid-19-lo>

¹³⁷ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 6 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

¹³⁸ Freedom House, “Serbia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House*, 6 May 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>.

¹³⁹ Pejić Nikić, Jelena (Ed.), “prEUgovor Alarm: Report on the Progress of Serbia in Chapters 23 and 24,” *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, May 2021, https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/preugovor_202105_alarm_en_final-2.pdf.

the defence minister)¹⁴⁰. While such high-level corruption cases rarely led to convictions, whistle-blowers suffered reprisals, a case in point being (the whistle-blower at the state-owned arms manufacturer Krušik who was arrested after exposing the case The ruling party's network extended deep into state enterprises, media, and local governments, consolidating what many analysts termed a state capture of Serbia by the SNS elite¹⁴¹. Despite this tightening grip, the regime encountered bursts of civic dissidence and political opposition. Late 2021 saw large environmental protests (unrelated to electoral politics) that forced the government to withdraw plans for a mining project – an example of citizen mobilization successfully pressuring an otherwise unresponsive state¹⁴². In 2022, general elections were held alongside the presidential election: Vučić was re-elected President and the SNS retained control of parliament, in a climate in which the OSCE election observation mission noted pervasive media bias and misuse of administrative resources by the SNS. However, opposition parties (ending their boycott) managed to enter the assembly, albeit still facing an unlevel playing field. The Although fundamental freedoms were generally respected on election day, the ruling party's dominance in the media tilted the level playing field and blurred the line between state and party¹⁴³. This meant that Serbia continued to hold multi-party elections, but the quality of democracy remained severely compromised,

By 2023–2024, Serbia's autocratisation reached a critical point. In spring 2023, two mass shooting incidents led to an outpouring of public grief and anger, sparking the "*Serbia Against Violence*" protests¹⁴⁴. Initially focused on demanding government accountability for public safety and curbing media that glorify violence, these protests quickly evolved into the most significant anti-government rallies since 2000, reflecting broad frustration with Vučić's rule. The protesters – hundreds of thousands across several weeks – called for the resignation of top officials and denounced the pro-government media's toxic propaganda. Sensing the mounting pressure, Vučić made a strategic move: he announced the dissolution of parliament

¹⁴⁰ Balkan Insight, "Serbian Arms Case Whistleblower 'Wanted the Truth Heard'," *Balkan Insight*, 16 October 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/16/serbian-arms-case-whistleblower-wanted-the-truth-heard/>.

¹⁴¹ Fruscione, Giorgio, "Much More than a Captured State: Top Serbian Institutions Scandals," *ISPI*, 17 September 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/much-more-captured-state-top-serbian-institutions-scandals-31687>.

¹⁴² Euronews, "Serbia Suspends Plans for Lithium Mine After Environmental Protests," *Euronews*, 16 December 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/12/16/serbia-suspends-plans-for-lithium-mine-after-environmental-protests>.

¹⁴³ OSCE/ODIHR, "Republic of Serbia: Presidential and Early Parliamentary Elections, 3 April 2022: Final Report," *OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights*, 19 August 2022, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/0/524385_0.pdf.

¹⁴⁴ Roussi, Antoaneta, "Thousands Protest 'Culture of Violence' in Serbia," *Politico*, 4 June 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-culture-of-violence-protests/>.

and called snap elections for the end of 2023, a tactic to reaffirm his mandate and reset the political deck¹⁴⁵. However, the December 2023 elections themselves became a flashpoint. Numerous irregularities were reported: independent observers and opposition parties documented phantom voters registered in Belgrade, organized busing of voters from neighbouring Republika Srpska (in Bosnia) to vote in Serbia, widespread vote-buying, and ballot stuffing¹⁴⁶. In Belgrade's local election (held simultaneously), these manipulations likely prevented the opposition from winning the city outright. An international monitoring mission (by the OSCE and European observers) issued a special report concluding that the vote was marred by irregularities and imbalance in media coverage¹⁴⁷. Despite the misconduct, official results still showed SNS as the largest party (though it lost its majority in Belgrade's city assembly). The opposition, coalesced in a new front called Serbia Against Violence (SPN), rejected the results and demanded a re-run of the elections¹⁴⁸. Tensions ran high: when opposition supporters gathered on December 24, 2023, to protest alleged election fraud, they were met with a heavy-handed police crackdown, evoking memories of Milošević-era repression¹⁴⁹.

Serbia entered 2025 at an inflection point, as Serbia has experienced significant political unrest and a deeper authoritarian entrenchment under President Vučić's leadership. The catalyst for widespread protests was the tragic collapse of a railway station canopy in Novi Sad in November 2024, which resulted in 16 fatalities¹⁵⁰. The incident was widely attributed to systemic corruption and negligence, fuelling public outrage and demands for governmental accountability. In response to mounting pressure, Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned in January 2025, acknowledging the government's role in the crisis¹⁵¹. However, President Vučić

¹⁴⁵ Euronews, "Serbian President Dissolves Parliament and Announces December Snap Election," *Euronews*, 1 November 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/11/01/serbian-president-dissolves-parliament-and-announces-december-snap-election>.

¹⁴⁶ Bechev, Dimitar, "Serbia's Authoritarian (Re)turn," *Carnegie Europe*, 11 January 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/01/serbias-authoritarian-return>.

¹⁴⁷ Council of Europe, "Republic of Serbia: Early Parliamentary Elections, 17 December 2023 – Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions," *Council of Europe*, 18 December 2023, <https://rm.coe.int/republic-of-serbia-early-parliamentary-elections-17-december-2023/1680addfaf>.

¹⁴⁸ Gec, Jovana, "Serbia's Opposition Takes to the Streets Claiming Election Fraud," *BreakingNews.ie*, 18 December 2023, <https://www.breakingnews.ie/world/serbias-opposition-takes-to-the-streets-claiming-election-fraud-1566214.html>.

¹⁴⁹ Bechev, Dimitar, "Serbia's Authoritarian (Re)turn," *Carnegie Europe*, 11 January 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/01/serbias-authoritarian-return>.

¹⁵⁰ Reuters, "Serbia Teen Becomes 16th Victim of Train Station Roof Collapse, Hospital Says," *Reuters*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbia-teen-becomes-16th-victim-train-station-roof-collapse-hospital-says-2025-03-21/>.

¹⁵¹ The Irish Times, "Serbian Parliament Accepts Resignation of Prime Minister," *The Irish Times*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/europe/2025/03/19/serbian-prime-minister-resigns-following-months-of-mass-protests/>.

has maintained a firm grip on power, often dismissing the protests as foreign-influenced attempts to destabilize Serbia. The government's response to dissent has included raids on civil society organizations, citing alleged misuse of foreign funds, and increased pressure on independent media outlets¹⁵². Despite these challenges, the protest movement, largely led by students and young activists, has persisted in demanding transparency, justice, and democratic reforms.¹⁵³ Their efforts have garnered international attention, including meetings with European Union officials, highlighting the ongoing struggle for democracy in Serbia. As of 2025, the autocratisation process in Serbia has thus unfolded into a mature form of competitive authoritarianism: elections occur but with predetermined outcomes, governing institutions exist but are subservient to the leader, and opposition and civil society operate in a constrained and hostile environment of repression and oppression. This detailed chronology sets the stage for analysing *why* this happened. The next section will explore the potential causal factors – both internal and external – that have driven Serbia's autocratic turn.

Causes of autocratisation in Serbia

Understanding why Serbia shifted into autocracy requires unpacking a confluence of structural factors, strategic choices by elites, and enabling external conditions. This report's analytical framework directs us to examine the primary causes of autocratisation, which in Serbia's case range from leadership behaviour and party dynamics to social cleavages and international context. Notably, Serbia's trajectory was not preordained: it resulted from deliberate actions by Vučić and the SNS, made possible (or easier) by certain underlying conditions. This section analyses those causes, drawing on academic interpretations and empirical evidence.

Leader Agency and Party Dynamics: The Vučić/SNS Strategy

Perhaps the most immediate cause of Serbia's autocratisation lies in the agency of Aleksandar Vučić himself and the SNS ruling apparatus. Vučić is frequently characterized as the architect of Serbia's "executive entrenchment", adept at concentrating power while maintaining a semblance of democratic legitimacy. Upon coming to power, Vučić leveraged a populist narrative – styling himself as the savior of the nation, especially on sensitive issues

¹⁵² Associated Press, "Serbia's Police Raid Civil Society Groups Over USAID Funding," *AP News*, 25 February 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-usaid-prosecutors-civil-society-probe-02af3400071175e0c4b717fb6b273493>.

¹⁵³ Pro Peace, "Serbia's Largest Protest in Decades," *Pro Peace*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.propeace.de/en/serbias-largest-protest-decades>.

like Kosovo – to build public support and justify accumulating authority¹⁵⁴. Vučić exploited his image as a “*defender of the Serbian nation*” to solidify control over both state and party, thereby initiating democratic backsliding via legislative capture¹⁵⁵. By tightening his grip on the SNS (which functions in a highly centralized, leader-centric manner), Vučić ensured that the party would act as a disciplined vehicle of his will across all institutions. The SNS’s internal consolidation (often through purges of dissenting voices and rewarding loyalists) meant that from parliament down to local municipalities, the ruling party operated in lockstep to implement the leadership’s agenda. This top-down discipline enabled systemic changes such as packing courts and regulatory bodies with loyalists, or rapidly passing laws to undermine independent institutions, with little internal resistance.

One critical aspect of this strategy was “*legislative capture*,” wherein the parliament’s constitutional powers (especially appointments and oversight) were used to entrench the ruling party’s influence in ostensibly independent organs¹⁵⁶. For example, early in its term the SNS-led parliament replaced the leadership of public media broadcasters, the anti-corruption agency, and other agencies with nominees sympathetic to the government. Over time, this cascade of institutional capture radiated outward: electoral commissions, the judiciary, security services, and state-owned enterprises all saw increased political interference. By controlling appointments and careers, the ruling clique made civil servants and judges aware that their advancement depended on political loyalty. Those not outright replaced often opted for self-censorship or acquiescence, as “*the rest, mindful of Vučić’s broad electoral appeal, deferred to the executive*” rather than oppose his agenda¹⁵⁷.

Weak Opposition and Fragmented Alternatives

A corresponding cause on the side of the political spectrum has been the weakness and fragmentation of Serbia’s opposition. The failure of opposition forces to provide a compelling alternative or to check the SNS’s power contributed to the ease of autocratisation. There are both historical and strategic reasons for this weakness. After the fall of Milošević in 2000, Serbia’s democratic transition was led by a motley alliance of parties that eventually splintered

¹⁵⁴ Milačić, Filip, “Why Aspiring Autocrats Are Watching Serbia,” *Journal of Democracy*, March 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-aspiring-autocrats-are-watching-serbia/>.

¹⁵⁵ Milačić, Filip, “Democratic Backsliding Through Legislative Capture in Serbia: A One-Man Show,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 712(1), 47–60, 2024, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00027162251316346?download=true>.

¹⁵⁶ Milačić, Filip, “Democratic Backsliding Through Legislative Capture in Serbia: A One-Man Show,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 712(1), 47–60, 2024, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00027162251316346?download=true>.

¹⁵⁷ Milačić, Filip, “Democratic Backsliding Through Legislative Capture in Serbia: A One-Man Show,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 712(1), 47–60, 2024, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00027162251316346?download=true>.

and lost public trust due to infighting, corruption scandals, and economic difficulties. By 2012, many voters were disillusioned with the erstwhile democratic parties, which allowed Vučić's SNS (a splinter from the old nationalist Radical Party) to claim the mantle of reform despite its nationalist pedigree. Once in opposition, those democratic parties struggled to unite. Milačić notes¹⁵⁸ that Serbia's opposition has been "*fragmented and ideologically heterogeneous*," ranging from left-liberals to right-wing nationalists. This made it challenging to form a consistent front or platform, especially on the pivotal issue of Kosovo, where opposition parties held divergent and often vague positions. Indeed, the Kosovo issue has been identified as an "*antecedent condition*" that Vučić skilfully exploited: he presented himself domestically as the only leader who could defend Serbian interests in Kosovo (even as he negotiated with Kosovo under EU auspices), thereby undercutting the opposition, which lacked a unified or persuasive stance on this emotional topic¹⁵⁹. The absence of an opposition consensus on Kosovo and other national issues deprived them of what could have been a rallying platform to challenge Vučić's nationalist narrative.

Moreover, opposition strategies at times backfired. The decision to boycott institutions (parliament from 2019, and the 2020 elections) was rooted in principled protest against unfair conditions, but it also removed opposition voices from formal arenas and arguably handed Vučić short-term advantages, allowing SNS to govern virtually unopposed. Boycotts did delegitimize the 2020 parliament, but they also meant the opposition had no foothold in that parliament to influence even minor outcomes or to use as a platform. The opposition's internal divisions, occasional tactical errors, and lack of charismatic new leadership contributed to autocratisation by default: the SNS could entrench its rule relatively unchecked for long periods. It is telling that even large civic protests (2018–2020, 2023) emerged somewhat spontaneously or under broad slogans, rather than being initiated by opposition parties – reflecting citizens' distrust of the whole political class. This distrust and disunity meant that popular discontent did not translate easily into an electoral threat to the SNS regime, emboldening Vučić to continue down the autocratic path with little fear of losing power through regular means.

Institutional Legacies and Governance Weaknesses

Serbia's democratic backsliding also has roots in the institutional and societal legacies that predated Vučić's rule. The institutions of Serbia's post-2000 democracy were relatively

¹⁵⁸ Milačić, Filip, "Democratic Backsliding Through Legislative Capture in Serbia: A One-Man Show," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 712(1), 47–60, 2024, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00027162251316346?download=true>.

¹⁵⁹ Milačić, Filip, "Why Aspiring Autocrats Are Watching Serbia," *Journal of Democracy*, March 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-aspiring-autocrats-are-watching-serbia/>.

young and fragile, some still bearing the imprint of the 1990s authoritarian rule. For instance, the judiciary had not been fully depoliticized in the 2000s, and media outlets that had been staunchly pro-regime under Milošević were never truly reformed – they simply softened their rhetoric under democratic governments but remained susceptible to influence. This made it easier for SNS to reassert control: they could resurrect old patterns of media propaganda and clientelism. Additionally, a culture of strongman politics was familiar to parts of the population; Vučić himself is a product of the 1990s political scene, as he was a minister under Milošević. Thus, one might argue that a socio-political culture of paternalism and weak checks provided fertile ground for autocratisation. When democratic norms are not deeply institutionalized, a savvy incumbent can bend the system more easily.

Corruption and state capture also predate 2012 but significantly worsened thereafter, becoming both a tool and symptom of autocratisation. The SNS, upon taking power, greatly expanded political patronage, reinforcing what observers have termed a “partitocracy” in Serbia¹⁶⁰. Public-sector jobs, contracts, and benefits were systematically doled out to party loyalists, blurring the distinction between the state’s resources and the party’s resources. This not only ensured loyalty (since many citizens’ livelihoods became tied to SNS’s favour) but also crowded out merit-based governance, weakening state institutions’ ability to function autonomously. Over time, entire segments of the bureaucracy, police, and local government acted as appendages of the ruling party. The erosion of a neutral, professional civil service¹⁶¹ was thus both a cause and effect of autocratisation. It caused backsliding insofar as independent policy-making and oversight were replaced by politicized decision-making, often prioritizing regime security over public interest.

The Role of External Factors: EU Indulgence and Geopolitical Ambiguity

While domestic factors were paramount, Serbia’s autocratisation was abetted by the stance of international actors, particularly the European Union. Serbia is a candidate for EU membership, and throughout the 2010s the EU possessed significant leverage to drive reforms in Serbia via the accession process. However, the EU and Western partners often adopted a hands-off or lenient approach to Vučić’s incremental authoritarianism, in part because of geopolitical considerations. Vučić was seen as a key player in stabilizing the Balkans – most notably, he was seen as the linchpin in negotiations to normalize relations with Kosovo (a major

¹⁶⁰ Marković, Slobodan G., “Talas delegitimizacije vlasti je nezaustavljiv” [The Wave of Delegitimization of Government Is Unstoppable], *Vreme*, 19 February 2025, <https://vreme.com/en/vreme/talas-delegitimizacije-vlasti-je-nezaustavljiv/>.

¹⁶¹ European Commission, “Serbia 2021 Report,” *European Commission*, 19 October 2021, <https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-10/Serbia-Report-2021.pdf>.

EU foreign policy objective). Western officials often praised Vučić for his pragmatism and Serbia's formal progress in EU accession chapters, even as domestic freedoms declined¹⁶². This created a phenomenon widely criticized as supporting a “stabilitocracy”,¹⁶³ whereby the EU tolerates or even props up semi-authoritarian leaders in exchange for regional stability and cooperation on issues like migration. Indeed, in moments when Serbia's opposition appealed to the EU for support – for example, during the 2019 protest movement and calls for mediation to ensure fair 2020 elections – the EU's response was tepid. European Parliament mediators engaged in dialogue, but ultimately Western pressure on Vučić's government remained limited, sending a signal that there would be no serious external penalties for autocratic behavior¹⁶⁴. This lack of external corrective intervention removed a potential check on Vučić. It can be argued that had the EU tied progress in accession talks or financial aid to democratic performance more strictly, the Serbian government might have been less brazen in its actions. Instead, Vučić astutely balanced East and West: professing commitment to European integration and economic reform on one hand, while cultivating ties with Russia and China on the other, thereby convincing the West that pushing him too hard might drive Serbia entirely into Moscow's embrace. This geopolitical balancing act gave Vučić room to manoeuvre. It was only by late 2023 – when Belgrade's rhetoric turned openly hostile to the EU amid election controversies – that European officials began to strongly criticize Serbia's government. By then, years of leniency had already contributed to a deeply entrenched autocratic situation.

Another external factor is the demonstration effect of autocratisation in other countries, or a process of “authoritarian learning”¹⁶⁵. Vučić's Serbia took inspiration and learning from regimes like Hungary under Viktor Orbán or Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which showed how to dismantle democracy while avoiding outright international pariah status. Indeed, many of the techniques used in Serbia, such as media domination, gradual judicial control, dividing the opposition, mirror those seen in Hungary or Turkey a few years earlier. This indicates that Serbia's autocratisation was part of a broader regional pattern, where leaders adopt similar autocratisation tactics and legitimize each other's claims that a certain “illiberal” model is a valid alternative to liberal democracy.

¹⁶² European Western Balkans, “Kos: Conversation with Vučić Was Not Easy,” *European Western Balkans*, 28 March 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/03/28/kos-conversation-with-vucic-was-not-easy/>.

¹⁶³ Bieber, F. (2018). The rise (and fall) of Balkan stabilitocracies. *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, (10), 176-185.

¹⁶⁴ Gjoni, Iliriana, “Why the EU Must Change Course on Serbia,” *Carnegie Europe*, 4 February 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/02/why-the-eu-must-change-course-on-serbia?lang=en>.

¹⁶⁵ Hall, S. G. F., & Ambrosio, T. (2017). Authoritarian learning: a conceptual overview. *East European Politics*, 33(2), 143–161.

Dissensus Dynamics: How Contestation Reinforces Serbia's Executive Entrenchment

Coman and Brack's (2025) four-level typology of dissensus provides a useful prism through which to read the Serbian story because it emphasises that erosion of liberal democracy is inseparable from the ways political actors frame, amplify and exploit social and political conflict. In Serbia the layers have not replaced one another in neat succession; rather, they have accumulated, co-existing and feeding into the next stage of autocratisation. autocratisation in Serbia has also been intertwined with deeper cultural and ideological contests, especially about Serbia's place in the world and the nature of its state. We can identify four levels on which dissensus has been instrumental for 'executive aggrandizement' in Serbia.

Mild dissensus – The need for a system that works

In the early SNS years many citizens shared an essentially procedural grievance: they wanted the state to deliver jobs, curb corruption and speed EU accession, but did not question the basic democratic game. Vučić seized this mood, insisting that only a strong, centralised executive could cut through red tape and modernise Serbia. By recasting managerial discontent as a mandate for sweeping executive action, the government converted mild dissensus into consent for power centralisation. Parliamentary fast-tracking of legislation¹⁶⁶ (over 60 per cent of bills between 2014–16 were adopted by urgent procedure) exemplified how a complaint about inefficiency was translated into an argument against deliberation itself.

Severe dissensus – The rules are unfair

Once the SNS had entrenched itself, the conversation shifted from *outputs* to *procedures*. The "1 of 5 Million" marches (2018–19) and the opposition's subsequent parliamentary and electoral boycotts worked on the assumption that elections and the public sphere were now so tilted that participation merely legitimated abuse. International monitors partly vindicated that claim: the OSCE/ODIHR final report on the 21 June 2020 parliamentary elections concluded that the "*dominance of the ruling party, including in the media, undermined the level playing field*"¹⁶⁷. In Coman & Brack's terms, *severe dissensus* arises when actors agree that democracy is desirable but disagree on how it should be organised; in Serbia, that disagreement licensed the SNS to argue that orderly governance required side-lining an "irresponsible" opposition – thereby tightening the executive's grip on parliament.

¹⁶⁶ Simić, Julija, "Filibustering – a Regular Occurrence in Serbia's Parliament," *Euractiv*, 30 October 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/filibustering-a-regular-occurrence-in-serbias-parliament/>.

¹⁶⁷ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Republic of Serbia, Parliamentary Elections, 21 June 2020: Final Report," *OSCE*, 30 October 2020, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/serbia/466167>.

Disruptive dissensus – Which values divide the polity?

From 2021 onward cleavage lines cut through the constitutional core itself. Three episodes illustrate how value-laden conflict was weaponised to deepen executive supremacy:

- **“Culturewars” politics.** In September 2022 the interior ministry banned the pan-European EuroPride march, citing security risks; Human Rights Watch (2022) noted the decision followed a campaign by clerics and far-right groups who cast LGBT rights as “Western decadence”. The ban simultaneously mobilised conservative voters and allowed Vučić to pose as guardian of tradition against external pressure.
- **Green dissent.** Mass blockades against Rio Tinto’s Jadar lithium mine forced the government to revoke permits in January 2022, only for ministers to hint in 2024 that the project might be revived¹⁶⁸The selective accommodation–repression cycle – making tactical concessions while pursuing criminal charges against protest leaders – fractured the coalition between environmentalists and the mainstream opposition.
- **Public-safety protests.** After two mass shootings in May 2023, the “*Serbia Against Violence*” marches drew tens of thousands demanding resignations and a ban on sensationalist TV content¹⁶⁹. State media framed the rallies as an attempt to “*overthrow legitimate authority*”, enabling the President to tighten policing powers¹⁷⁰.

In each case the government used value conflict to delegitimise critics as either “*foreign agents*” or “*enemies of the nation*”, thereby justifying further executive encroachment on civil liberties. Nevertheless, these protests also demonstrate dissensus generated by autocratisation. As the government narrowed institutional avenues for dissent (by capturing media and parliament), citizens naturally turned to the streets. In other words, as democratic spaces shrink, dissent shifts to extra-institutional forms. The sustained protests themselves have created new political identities and solidarities: the emergence of initiatives like the *Serbia Against Violence coalition* is an expression of an alternative vision for Serbia – one demanding rule of law, free media, and accountable governance. Even if these movements have yet to force a democratic reversal, they keep alive a public counter-narrative to autocracy and have at times scored tactical victories (e.g. resignation of a minister, or international attention on Serbia’s issues).

Destructive dissensus – Liberal democracy vs. an illiberal alternative

¹⁶⁸ Reuters, 2024

¹⁶⁹ Reuters, “Serbians Rally Against Violence After Two Mass Shootings,” *Reuters*, 8 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/after-two-mass-shootings-serbians-rally-against-violence-2023-05-08/>.

¹⁷⁰ BBC News, “Serbia: Mass Protests Erupt Over Alleged Election Fraud,” *BBC News*, 20 December 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cq5z8deg27xo>.

Vučić's rule has increasingly operated with an illiberal ideology that questions liberal democratic values on purportedly nationalist or traditionalist grounds. For example, the regime and its media allies have promoted socially conservative and nationalist themes – such as portraying the defence of Kosovo, the glorification of Serb history, or the rejection of ‘Western liberal decadence’ – as central to Serbia's identity. Such themes create dissensus by pitting a vision of Serbia as a sovereign, “traditional” society against a vision of Serbia as a liberal, European democracy. The government leverages this dissensus to its advantage- any critics pushing for liberal reforms can be branded as working against Serbian traditions or interests. Moreover, the outer edge of Serbia's cleavage map is occupied by ultra-nationalist organisations such as People's Patrols¹⁷¹, which idolise Russia and call liberal democracy a “foreign dictate”¹⁷². Although numerically small, such groups supply the regime with a convenient foil: when far-right activists were arrested in February 2023 on coup-plot charges, their supporters accused the government of betraying ‘true’ patriotism¹⁷³. By spotlighting a more radical threat, Vučić portrays his own illiberal project as the least-cost guarantor of order, nudging public debate toward an authoritarian horizon without ever renouncing electoral ritual.

Another axis of dissensus is geopolitical orientation. Serbian society is split between those favouring a pro-European path and those more inclined toward Russia, China's economic protection or an independent nationalist course. Vučić has at times courted both sides, but as autocratisation deepened, anti-Western sentiment became a more prominent tool. For instance, after years of courting the EU, the regime by 2023 started openly accusing the West of meddling, and praising Russia's loyalty. This reflects a shift in dissensus: the debate over “East vs West” in Serbian politics intensified, with the regime now fostering it to legitimize its authoritarian actions as a defence against “Western plots” (a narrative very similar to ones seen in other autocratising regimes across Europe, and Russia). Such ideological positioning is meant to reinforce autocratisation, as it paints democratic criticism as not just political disagreement but as part of a civilizational battle, thereby rallying nationalist support around the leader and excusing repressive measures as protections of the nation's core values.

Linking Mechanisms

¹⁷¹ Balkan Insight, “People's Patrols,” *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/extreme-right-organisations/orgPeoples-Patrols.php>.

¹⁷² Dragojlo, Saša, “Serbian Far-Right Group to Hold Pro-Russia Rally,” *Balkan Insight*, 1 March 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/01/serbian-far-right-group-to-hold-pro-russia-rally/>.

¹⁷³ Dragojlo, Saša, “Serbian Rightists Demand Release of Activists Facing Coup Charges,” *Balkan Insight*, 17 February 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/02/17/serbian-rightists-demand-release-of-activists-facing-coup-charges/>.

Across the four layers, three mutually reinforcing mechanisms tie dissensus to executive entrenchment.

Issues such as migration, LGBT rights, Kosovo, or “foreign” mining projects are reframed as existential struggles. The EuroPride episode¹⁷⁴ - an LGBTQ+ pride event, planned in Belgrade in 2022 but banned by the Serbian authorities, thereby siding with far-right protests – showed how the state can convert a security narrative into political capital, rallying conservative constituencies while depicting liberal critics as hostile to Serbian identity (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The cultural framing shifts attention away from procedural abuses toward identity defence, diluting demands for democratic accountability.

Tactical concessions, such as revoking Rio Tinto’s licence¹⁷⁵, or promising media reforms, create the appearance of responsiveness, yet are paired with intimidation of activists and strategic lawsuits. This dual tactic keeps international criticism at bay while sowing distrust among protest coalitions, as greener groups debate whether incremental gains justify continued alliance with liberal or left-wing actors opposed to Vučić.

Every disputed election deepens cynicism about institutions, which the SNS then cites as evidence that a firm executive hand is indispensable. After monitors flagged “*unjust conditions*” in the 17 December 2023 snap poll¹⁷⁶, government tabloids claimed the critique proved Western bias, thereby feeding nationalist suspicion and preparing public opinion for tighter control in the name of stability.

Conclusion

The case of Serbia between 2012 and 2025 exemplifies the contemporary phenomenon of autocratisation in a formally democratic state. Step by step, an elected leadership undermined checks and balances, captured the media and judiciary, manipulated elections, and concentrated power in the hands of one party and indeed one man. This analysis has shown *how* autocratisation unfolded in Serbia (gradually but cumulatively, through tactics of executive entrenchment and institutional capture), *why* it happened (due to factors including deliberate

¹⁷⁴ Eror, Aleks, “Serbia’s Cancelled EuroPride Exposes Ongoing LGBTQ+ Struggle,” *The Guardian*, 14 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/14/belgrade-serbia-cancelled-europride-exposes-ongoing-lgbtq-struggles>.

¹⁷⁵ Reuters, “Serbian Government Revokes Rio Tinto’s Licences for Lithium Project,” *Reuters*, 20 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/serbian-government-revokes-rio-tintos-licences-lithium-project-2022-01-20/>.

¹⁷⁶ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “Republic of Serbia, Early Parliamentary Elections, 17 December 2023: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions,” *OSCE*, 18 December 2023, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/serbia/560650>.

leadership strategy, opposition weaknesses, state vulnerabilities, and permissive international attitudes), and *how dissensus both enabled and resulted from this process* (with growing polarization and protest challenging the regime, even as the regime exploited divisions to justify its rule). By shifting conflict from policy to identity, by alternating co-optation with coercion, and by portraying each controversy as proof of democracy's unworkability, the SNS has turned contestation itself into a stabiliser of its rule. Whether Serbian society can transform that same contestation into a springboard for democratic renewal will depend on civic actors' ability to reclaim the application and commitment of liberal democratic principles and practices from the logic of perpetual cultural war. For policymakers and democracy advocates, the lesson is that supporting independent institutions, demanding accountability, and fostering dialogue in polarized societies are vital to prevent the slide into authoritarianism. Serbia's fate is still being written, but its journey from 2012 to 2025 stands as a cautionary tale of democratic erosion – and a testament to those who continue to push back in the name of democratic ideals.

Case Studies of Autocratisation: South TUNISIA: the Ghost of a Revolution

Introduction

The Tunisian Revolution of 2010-2011, when long-standing authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was toppled overnight made this Jasmine Revolution the starting point of the Arab Spring and of global optimism. What followed was democratic transition that came to betray its beginnings. In contrast to Syria, Egypt, Morocco, and established liberal institutions, adopted a progressive constitution in 2014, and achieved a peaceful transfer of power through competitive elections in the initial years. Yet beneath this appearance of institutional achievement, persistent political instability and worsening economic conditions steadily eroded public trust in the democratic system. By the latter half of the decade, the country entered a rapid and, consequently, solidified return to authoritarian rule. This process of autocratisation was driven primarily by prolonged political gridlock, the repeated failure of successive governments to address urgent socio-economic grievances, and the growing widespread dissatisfaction with party politics. It culminated in the consolidation of power under President Kais Saied following the constitutional coup of July 2021. This report examines the dynamics of democratic backsliding in Tunisia from 2014 to the present. It focuses on three juncture points: the 2019 anti-establishment election, the invocation of Article 80 in July 2021, and the subsequent imposition of the 2022 ultra-presidential constitution. Together, these demonstrate how dissensus led a promising democracy to executive entrenchment.

Unfolding autocratisation

The 2014 Constitution: Consensus, Liberal Promise, and Structural Fragility

The 2014 Constitution was adopted with near-unanimous support, and established a hybrid semi-parliamentary system designed to balance power between the President and the Prime Minister.¹⁷⁷ It guaranteed a broad range of personal freedoms and civil rights¹⁷⁸ and

¹⁷⁷ Limam, Jinan, *Tunisia: Constitution of January 27, 2014 — From Success to Crisis* (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, November 2021), <https://www.kas.de/documents/265308/265357/Tunisia+-+Constitution+of+January+27,+2014-+From+Success+to+Crisis.pdf/92944202-e257-b6c2-0b42-227bf91324e5>.

¹⁷⁸ UNDP, *Celebrating the First Bloom of the Arab Spring: Success in the Tunisian Constitution-Making Process* (28 January 2014), https://www.undp-aci.org/publications/ac/Newspiece/Tunisia%20First%20bloom%20of%20Arab%20Spring_en%20.pdf.

formally marked the conclusion of the “transitional” period following the revolution. At the time of its adoption, the constitution appeared to embody the liberal and democratic aspirations that had emerged during the Arab Spring.¹⁷⁹

The constitution was the product of a broad-based consensus and national dialogue. It emerged from negotiations facilitated by the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, a coalition of civil society, labour and business organisations.¹⁸⁰ The text was particularly notable for the willingness of the dominant moderate Islamist party, Ennahda, to compromise and negotiate with secular opposition forces. Scholars often cite this explicit commitment to consensus politics as a key factor distinguishing Tunisia’s transition from failed democratisation efforts elsewhere in the region. Crucially, this process helped prevent a descent into civil conflict at a moment of severe polarisation.¹⁸¹ The strengthening of Tunisian civil society was internationally recognised in 2015, when the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet received the Nobel Peace Prize.

To avoid a return to the highly centralised presidential system of the Ben Ali era, the constitution established a hybrid semi-parliamentary system that divided authority between the president and the prime minister, appointed by a majority of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP), which was also created under this framework.

The institutional design aimed to diffuse power through checks and balances, but the challenge of this period was to uphold the principle of consensus in coalition government formation, for instance, with Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha. Again, the reality was political gridlock and popular dissatisfaction.

The constitution was widely praised for its embeddedness in human rights and civil liberties principles at the time, in several respects exceeding the standards of established liberal democracies. Article 46 enshrined gender equality by committing the state to protecting women’s rights and promoting equal opportunities.¹⁸² The constitution also guaranteed freedom of conscience, worship, expression, and assembly, and the right to privacy. Protections for minorities and a strong emphasis on the rule of law were central features of the document.

¹⁷⁹Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Beyond Tunisia’s Constitution: The Devil in the Details,” 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2014/04/beyond-tunisias-constitution-the-devil-in-the-details?lang=en>.

¹⁸⁰ Penal Code Archives - YaLa Press <https://yala-press.org/tag/penal-code/>

¹⁸¹ Rivera-Escartin, Adrià, “Elite Polarization and Democratic Backsliding in Tunisia: Tracing Agency-Driven Mechanisms,” *Democratization* 31, no. 4 (2024): 871–890. doi:10.1080/13510347.2023.2284873.

¹⁸² Omer, Sahar, “Minority Rights Protections Post-Arab Spring: Egyptian and Tunisian Constitutions.” *Chicago Journal of International Law* (online archive), <https://cjl.uchicago.edu/online-archive/minority-rights-protections-post-arab-spring-egyptian-and-tunisian-constitutions>.

In addition, it provided for the creation of independent institutions, including the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Judicial Council, and the High Independent Authority for Elections.

However, despite these normative strengths, the constitution's institutional design contained structural vulnerabilities that would later foster political paralysis and democratic backsliding. The hybrid parliamentary system particularly, intended to prevent the concentration of power, in practice contributed to recurring instability and legislative gridlock. Executive authority was split between political actors from opposing camps, most notably between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, that operated on frequent stalemates, stalled legislation, and rapidly shifting governing coalitions.¹⁸³ Rather than embedding consensus, coalition governance rather accentuated fragmentation and popular dissatisfaction with party policy. Similarly, the failure to establish key constitutional safeguards created a vulnerability which Saied finally exploited.¹⁸⁴

The constitution also failed to ensure the timely establishment of key institutional safeguards, most notably the Constitutional Court, which was to resolve persistent judicial disputes, and the inability of the ARP to secure the required supermajority to appoint its full slate of members. This absence created a critical vacuum in constitutional oversight and the rule of law, one that President Kais Saied would later exploit to justify extraordinary measures without judicial constraint.¹⁸⁵

From the outset, public perceptions revealed a widening gap between Tunisia's constitutional achievements and their tangible impact on everyday life. While political elites celebrated institutional progress, many citizens experienced continued economic hardship, unemployment, and precarity and saw a growing disconnect between constitutional idealism and socio-economic reality. Analyses and surveys at the time show how these contributed to the erosion of trust in democratic institutions¹⁸⁶ and set the stage for the political opening that enabled executive power consolidation after 2021.

¹⁸³ Megerisi, Tarek. 2023. *Autumn of the Patriarch: How to Help Tunisians Defend Their Democracy*. Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, March 30, 2023. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/autumn-of-the-patriarch-how-to-help-tunisians-defend-their-democracy/>

¹⁸⁴ Chouikha, Larbi. 2025. *13 Years After the "Revolution": Media and Tunisia's 2024 Presidential Elections*. Arab Reform Initiative, February 21, 2025. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/13-years-after-the-revolution-media-and-tunisias-2024-presidential-elections/>

¹⁸⁵ Utterwulghe, Luca. 2024. "Tunisia's Forgotten Court: A Constitutional Oversight and the Rise of Authoritarianism." *Columbia Political Review*, March 26, 2024. <https://www.cpreview.org/articles/2024/3/tunisias-forgotten-court-a-constitutional-oversight-and-the-rise-of-authoritarianism>

¹⁸⁶ Arbi, Chiraz. 2024. "Tunisia's New Local Governance Project and the Risk to Jeopardise Political Stability and Democratisation." *GC Human Rights Preparedness*, June 6, 2024. <https://www.gchumanrights.org/preparedness/tunisias-new-local-governance-project-and-the-risk-to-jeopardise-political-stability-and-democratisation/>

2015-2019 – Disenchantment, Economic Hardship and Political Decay (2015-2019)

Between 2015 and 2019, Tunisia's democratic progress was increasingly constrained by persistent economic stagnation, rising inflation, and widening inequality. Youth unemployment remained critically high, a particularly salient issue given that the 2011 uprising was largely driven by the frustrations of younger generations.¹⁸⁷ As economic pressures intensified and living conditions declined, public anger grew, accompanied by increasing nostalgia for the relative stability experienced prior to 2011.¹⁸⁸

This socio-economic backlash provided the structural context for Tunisia's eventual shift toward autocratisation, as the grievances of the Revolution (employment, dignity, and economic opportunity) saw little progress. Consequently, public trust in democratic institutions eroded rapidly. Parliament and political parties were widely perceived as corrupt, ineffective, and disconnected from citizens' daily concerns.¹⁸⁹ This widespread disillusionment fostered anti-establishment sentiment and created conditions conducive to the rise of radical alternatives, including figures such as Kais Saied.¹⁹⁰

The socio-economic backdrop was in the background, allowing the eventual autocratisation to go full swing. Public opinion data confirms the depth of this declining trust. According to the 2019-2020 Arab Opinion index, between 60 and 70% of Tunisians expressed little or no confidence in the Parliament. The ARP was increasingly seen not as an arena for effective policymaking but as a site of political gridlock, corruption, and infighting. Similarly, surveys and ethnographic research from the late 2010s reflected the political instability, primarily the frequent changes in Prime Ministers and cabinets, which highlighted a paralysis

¹⁸⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2015. *Investing in Youth: Tunisia: Strengthening the Employability of Youth during the Transition to a Green Economy*. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2015/03/investing-in-youth-tunisia_g1g4d10c/9789264226470-en.pdf

¹⁸⁸ Chomiak, Laryssa. 2021. *Tunisian Democracy 10 Years After the Revolution: A Tale of Two Experiences*. Briefing Paper no. 6/2021, German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn. <https://www.idos-research.de/en/briefing-paper/article/tunisian-democracy-10-years-after-the-revolution-a-tale-of-two-experiences/>

¹⁸⁹ Andersen, Robert. 2017. "How Terrorism Affects Attitudes toward Democracy: Tunisia in 2015." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 10, no. 2 (2017): 175–98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12175>

¹⁹⁰ Jmal, Nadia. 2025. *Lost in Transition: The Traps of Authoritarian Nostalgia in Tunisia*. Research, Arab Reform Initiative, June 5, 2025. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/lost-in-transition-the-traps-of-authoritarian-nostalgia-in-tunisia/>.

of the parliamentary system. It also fueled a resurgence of positive sentiment for the pre-2011 state of the political system, perceived in hindsight as more stable. In an article in 2019, the discussion showed that although liberal democracy is prioritised, “a more holistic understanding of democracy than is found in current scholarship or indeed pursued by Western or regional policymakers, valuing civil-political rights but prioritizing socio-economic rights.”¹⁹¹

Political instability further compounded this institutional erosion and polarisation and infighting within key political parties increased in this context. The frequent alternation of prime ministers and cabinet reshuffles highlighted the paralysis of the hybrid parliamentary system. Rather than facilitating consensus governance, coalition politics produced fragile governments unable to pursue sustained economic or social reform. At the ideological level, public attitudes towards democracy itself also evolved. A 2019 study demonstrated that while Tunisians continued to value liberal democratic principles, they increasingly focused on democracy in relation to socio-economic rights. At the same time, preferences for direct politics were more nuanced, with informal politics taking a strong hold among younger generations, who were also increasingly less in favour of voting and more inclined towards protests and direct political engagement¹⁹²

The 2019 elections marked a decisive turning point in this climate of disillusionment. The landslide victory of Kais Saied, a political outsider and constitutional law professor, running on a strongly anti-corruption and anti-establishment platform¹⁹³, reflected a mass rejection of the established party system. Saied presented himself as a moral alternative to a discredited political class.

The 2021 Coup and the Formalisation of Autocracy (2021 – Present)

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the consolidation of executive power under President Kais Saied in 2021. Public fury over the state’s poor pandemic response,

¹⁹¹ Teti, Andrea; Abbott, Pamela and Cavatorta, Francesco. “Beyond Elections: Perceptions of Democracy in Four Arab Countries,” *Democratization* 26, no. 4 (2019): 645–65. doi:10.1080/13510347.2019.1566903.

¹⁹² Interface — Journal for and about Social Movements, “Researching Political Participation in a Time of Global Democratic Backsliding: A View from Tunisia,” accessed 21.11.2025. <https://www.interfaced.eu/researching-political-participation-in-a-time-of-global-democratic-backsliding-a-view-from-tunisia/#:~:text=While%2065%25%20of%20respondents%20think,it%20comes%20to%20the%20youth.>

¹⁹³ Limoges, Barrett. 2019. “Kais Saied, the Conservative ‘Utopian’ Atop Tunisia’s Electoral Revolt.” *Middle East Eye*, September 18, 2019. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kais-saied-conservative-utopian-atop-tunisias-electoral-revolt>

combined with the already deteriorating economic situation, intensified widespread frustration with the political class and was easily capitalised upon by Saied. A political vacuum and public demand for decisive emergency action justify extraordinary measures which President Saied took in July 2021, when he invoked Article 80 of the constitution.¹⁹⁴.. The state of emergency allowed him to dismiss the Prime Minister, suspended Parliament, and assumed executive authority.¹⁹⁵ Since defined as a constitutional coup, this political action marked the definitive rupture in Tunisia's democratic trajectory.¹⁹⁶ By ruling through decree laws, Saied effectively bypassed the suspended Assembly of the Representatives of the People and dismantled the systems of checks and balances established after 2021.

In February 2022, Saied further consolidated his control by dissolving the Supreme Judicial Council, thereby placing the judiciary under direct executive authority.¹⁹⁷ These actions were initially met with some support, thanks to Saied's image as an incorruptible anti-establishment and specific popular view of democracy itself. Arab Barometer data indicate that while a large percentage of Tunisians believe democracy is preferable to other systems, far fewer consider liberal democracy appropriate for Tunisia's immediate needs.¹⁹⁸ Instead, many prioritized effective and decisive governance, even at the expense of constitutional safeguards and political pluralism.

Autocratic rule was formally institutionalised through the 2022 constitutional referendum. Passed in a low-turnout vote, the new constitution order replaced Tunisia's hybrid system with an ultra-presidential model that concentrated executive, legislative and judicial power in the President's hands. Scholars have characterized Saied's intervention as a shift towards "a French-inspired presidential system", in which the president possesses the authority to bypass or dissolve Parliament. The 2021 power grab thus represented not merely a temporary emergency measure but a fundamental transformation of the constitutional order.¹⁹⁹The

¹⁹⁴ Yousef, Mohammad. 2022. *A Legal Reading of President Kais Saied's Decision about Invoking Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution*. Journal of Afro-Asian Studies, Twelfth Issue (February 2022). Democratic Arab Center, Berlin. <https://democraticac.de/?p=80607>

¹⁹⁵ Boussen, Zied. 2022. *Tunisian Society Finds Itself Stuck in Silence and Limbo Post-July 25*. Bawader / Commentary, Arab Reform Initiative, January 5, 2022. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/tunisian-society-finds-itself-stuck-in-silence-and-limbo-post-july-25/>

¹⁹⁶ Cavrel, Sara. 2022. *Kais Saied and the Revival of Executive Coups*. Democratic Erosion (blog), May 29, 2022. <https://democratic-erosion.org/2022/05/29/kais-saied-and-the-revival-of-executive-coups/>

¹⁹⁷ Amnesty International, "Tunisia: President's Moves to Shut Down High Judicial Council Pose Grave Threat to Human Rights," 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/02/tunisia-presidents-moves-to-shut-down-high-judicial-council-poses-grave-threat-to-human-rights/>.

¹⁹⁸ Aliriza, Fadil. 2023. *Democratic Pessimism in Tunisia*. Middle East Institute, February 28, 2023. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/democratic-pessimism-tunisia>

¹⁹⁹ Brandeis University, "The Tunisian Public and the Rise of Kais Saied," *Crown Conversations*, May 27, 2022, <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/crown-conversations/cc-13.html>.

Parliament was significantly weakened, judicial independence was eroded and safeguards against executive overreach were largely dismantled. Kevin Koehler described the process as a case of “breakdown by disengagement,” whereby declining public participation and elite fragmentation enabled the hollowing out of democratic institutions.²⁰⁰

At the same time, journalists, judges and civil servants were equally targeted through arrests and prosecution, often under accusations of conspiracy against state security. The laws that restrict freedom of expression under the pretext of combating false information such as the Decree Law no. 54 went into effect that same year, further shrinking the space for dissent.²⁰¹

The erosion of political pluralism became evident in the extremely low turnout of the post-2022 parliamentary elections. Saied simultaneously sought to reinforce his legitimacy through populist gestures and appeals to secular nationalist sentiment, including the appointment of Najla Bouden²⁰² as the first female prime minister in the Arab world. It was an act that signalled a symbolic reform while leaving real power firmly in presidential hand, while it addressed the spirit of equality of the Arab Spring. This type of populism, however, also showed the long-term impacts of the Tunisian post-colonial nationalist project²⁰³ Indeed, the fight for equality, which has been the defining characteristic of the Tunisian social mobilisation, also speaks to the inherent narratives that Kais’s brand of populism attempted to address. There was, on the one hand, the territorial disparity between the ‘developed’ coast and the “neglected” interior, the end to nepotism and institutional violence and any form of segregation based on gender or race, both inherited from the modernizing colonial project.²⁰⁴ It was, at the same time, an expression of the strong 2011 outcry against dividing the population into “modern elite” and “traditional” marginalised groups. And for many, the stripping of these demands into technocratic governance through private actors hollowed out the initial demands.

²⁰⁰ Koehler, Kevin, “Breakdown by Disengagement: Tunisia’s Transition from Representative Democracy,” *Political Research Exchange* 5, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2023.2279778>.

²⁰¹ Human Rights Watch. 2023. “Tunisia: Cybercrime Decree Used Against Critics.” Human Rights Watch, December 19, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/19/tunisia-cybercrime-decree-used-against-critics>

²⁰² Hind Ahmed Zaki, Why Did Women’s Rights Expand in PostRevolutionary Tunisia? <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/101-200/meb131.pdf>.

²⁰³ Brandeis University, “The Tunisian Public and the Rise of Kais Saied,” *Crown Conversations*, May 27, 2022, <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/crown-conversations/cc-13.html>

²⁰⁴ Lakhel Malek, “The Ghost People and Populism from Above: The Kais Saied Case,” *Arab Reform Initiative*, 2023, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-ghost-people-and-populism-from-above-the-kais-saied-case/>

At the same time, public opinion on targeted arrests of former government members made it clear that Saied was not enjoying an uncontested climate. People face continuous arrests for protests.²⁰⁵

Causes of autocratisation

Tunisia's autocratisation resulted from the cumulative interactions of institutional design, the collapse of democratic legitimacy, the international status quo, and older ideological traditions. Paradoxically, the foundation system established by the 2014 Constitution, intended to safeguard liberal democracy paradoxically created the conditions for collapse. The collaboration between the President and the Prime Minister, the core elements of the Constitution, was meant to prevent a return to dictatorship, but only resulted in crippling political paralysis due to rivalry and dissensus between secularists and more conservative parties. The gridlock in establishing the Constitutional Court accelerated the strengthening of the executive power because the coalition government proved fragile, and legislative processes failed, leading to an incoherent policy-making reality.

A gap between the democratic promise and socio-economic reality also drove executive entrenchment as the ideals of the 2011 revolution were never substantially addressed by a dysfunctional, corrupt system, leading to widespread popular dissatisfaction that found various informal ways of manifesting. Public trust in Parliament and all other institutions eroded dramatically.²⁰⁶ The lack of tangible improvements, coupled with political chaos, also led to nostalgia for authoritarian politics.

The response of key external partners, particularly the European Union and the US, shifted from democracy support to immediate security interests, further enabling the authoritarian pull. In 2023, the European Union signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia on a Strategic and Global partnership, primarily aimed at curbing irregular migration

²⁰⁵ Amnesty International, "*We Were Only Asking for Our Rights and Dignity*": Obstruction Charges Used to Punish Peaceful Assembly. Tunisia (Index: MDE 30/9372/2025), 17 June 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde30/9372/2025/en/>.

²⁰⁶ Schumacher, M. J., & Emig, A. K. (2025). "The wilting jasmine: the erosion of public administration and democratic backsliding in Tunisia." *Policy Studies*, 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2025.2460442>

across the Mediterranean. Brokered by Italy, the Netherlands and the European Commission, the agreement signalled a shift in EU priorities towards migration containment amid Tunisia's deepening authoritarian turn. By 2022, Tunisia had surpassed Libya as the principal country of departure for migrants and asylum seekers.

The MoU included provisions for financial assistance to support the Tunisian economy, macro-financial stabilisation, trade and investment, and cooperation on green energy projects such as the ELMED interconnection cable. It also sought to facilitate mobility by promoting legal migration pathways for skilled Tunisians.

The migration pillar, however, was primarily structured around border externalisation strategies to prevent irregular departures, combining smuggling and trafficking, search-and-rescue operations within its maritime jurisdiction, and the readmission of Tunisian nationals irregularly present in the EU.

The pact has faced substantial criticism from various angles, including the EU Parliaments.²⁰⁷ Critics highlight Tunisia's documented track of human rights abuses of migrants, including violence, arbitrary arrests and abandonment at the borders by Tunisian authorities.²⁰⁸ The agreement has also been challenged on the logic of a foreign policy regarding autocratisation, since the pact has occurred within a repressive context.

As an informal agreement (soft law), it bypassed Parliament's scrutiny, involved minimal input from civil society, and lacked concrete human rights safeguards and monitoring, raising concerns about accountability.²⁰⁹ The pact notably makes no plans to support asylum systems in Tunisia, where migration management is essentially a security-first approach.²¹⁰ The immediate effects of the MoU within Tunisia, in fact, were a rise in conspiratorial narratives against refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa and an intensification of abuse by police forces against refugees.²¹¹

²⁰⁷ Green European Journal, "Undoing a Revolution: Saied's Tunisia and the EU," December 3, 2024, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/undoing-a-revolution-saieds-tunisia-and-the-eu/>

²⁰⁸ Amnesty International, "EU/Tunisia: Agreement on migration 'makes EU complicit' in abuses against asylum seekers, refugees and migrants," 17 July 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/07/eu-tunisia-agreement-on-migration-makes-eu-complicit-in-abuses-against-asylum-seekers-refugees-and-migrants/>

²⁰⁹ Amnesty International and partner organisations, *Joint NGO letter to President Michel and Heads of State on Tunisia, 26–27 October 2023* (2023), <https://www.amnesty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Joint-NGO-letter-to-President-Michel-and-Heads-of-States-on-Tunisia-on-26-27-October-2023.pdf>

²¹⁰ German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), "Two Years On: The Impact of the EU–Tunisia Migration Deal Has Been Overstated," 2023, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/two-years-impact-eu-tunisia-deal-migration-overstated>.

²¹¹ Ghione, Lorenzo, "The State Makes Migration—and Migration Makes the State?" *L'Année du Maghreb* 32 (2024), published online 15 December 2024, accessed 30 November 2025, <http://journals.openedition.org/anneemaghreb/13784>. <https://doi.org/10.4000/1360p>.

In contrast, Western diplomatic responses to Saïed's constitutional coup and subsequent repression were largely fragmented, delayed and normatively inconsistent. Although some statements eventually expressed concern and alarm at the erosion of democratic norms, they were generally infrequent and lacked coordination, without decisive punitive actions.

The post-2011 trajectory is also shaped by the legacy of its colonial and post-colonial formation. This is also integral to Saïed's state narrative, which argues that his rule would undo the harm caused by colonial systems. In fact, the highly centralised vision of a bureaucratic apparatus designed for control rather than participatory governance has been integral to recent autocratisation. The Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes expanded the state using this inherited model, building a state defined by the exclusion of various "minorities".

Types of dissensus

The inability of Tunisia's political elite to manage democratic dissent was a primary internal driver of the country's democratic backsliding. In the immediate post-2014 period, political disagreement largely remained within the realm of mild dissensus, characterised by ideological competition and coalition bargaining within constitutional rules. However, as socioeconomic conditions deteriorated and political polarisation deepened, this dissensus escalated into a severe form, marked by a dysfunctional political environment with growing mutual suspicion between secular and Islamist forces, legislative obstruction, and the systematic prioritisation of short-term partisan survival over long-term institutional consolidation. These all eroded public trust and created space for autocracy. The practice of constantly forming fragile coalitions between rivals, driven by the need for short-term political security, produced stagnation and political deadlock.

By the late 2010s, severe dissensus had evolved into disruptive dissensus, in which political conflict no longer merely delayed governance but actively undermined the state's functioning. This was most clearly visible in the repeated failure to establish the Constitutional Court. Partisan infighting and the inability to reach supermajority agreements on judicial appointments left Tunisia without its most important constitutional safeguard. The elite could not agree on the appointment of judges due to partisan infighting and mistrust, which also allowed President Saïed to suspend the Constitution. Dissensus also led to internal party fragmentation, for instance, in the splintering of Nidaa Tounes, thereby eroding the legitimacy of the entire political system.

Following Saied's rise to power, Tunisia entered a phase of destructive dissensus, in which political conflict ceased to operate within democratic boundaries altogether. Saied capitalised on the widespread feeling that consensus does not produce effective politics and framed political pluralism itself as the root cause of corruption and paralysis. He mobilised a populist discourse centred on restoring the true values of the revolution, as an outsider who could dismantle corrupt party politics. Populism was defined by a relentless fight for quality of the Arab Spring, instead people "found themselves before an economically muted "democratic transition"²¹²

Once in power, Saied simultaneously embodied and instrumentalised these revolutionary symbols, for example through symbolic outreach to citizens from marginalised interior regions, while refusing institutional engagement with political parties, trade unions, or the media.²¹³ Behind his "rule from the people" rhetoric was "a paternalistic, vigilant, and pedagogical rhetoric, presuming the people's ignorance, hence the need for those below to be enlightened by the more sophisticated."²¹⁴ Destructive dissensus has thus taken the form of a systematic challenge to democracy and liberal norms. This shift has been reinforced through escalating authoritarian practices, including the imprisonment of opposition figures, as in the verdict against Ahmed Souab, a judge who publicly opposed executive interference in judicial independence and has opposed the politicisation of the judiciary. At the same time, Saied's foreign policy posture, marked by rhetorical defiance of Western institutions, in 2023, his revolt against the IMF also left Tunisia without financing sources²¹⁵, and the symbolic reapproachment with the "East" and specifically Russia and Iran in a move to establish a non-aligned position has become another axis of dissensus. Domestically, this posture is used by the opposition to highlight Tunisia's growing isolation from Western economic support. For loyalists, it is at the same time an "illusion of diversification" for those looking for an alternative

²¹²Lakhal Malek, "The Ghost People and Populism from Above: The Kais Saied Case," *Arab Reform Initiative*, 2023, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-ghost-people-and-populism-from-above-the-kais-saied-case/>.

²¹³ Mohamed Ben Rajeb "UGTT Crisis: Decline of Tunisia's Most Powerful Trade Union," accessed November 30 2025, <https://qantara.de/en/article/ugtt-crisis-decline-tunisias-most-powerful-trade-union>.

²¹⁴ Lakhal Malek, "The Ghost People and Populism from Above: The Kais Saied Case," *Arab Reform Initiative*, 2023, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-ghost-people-and-populism-from-above-the-kais-saied-case/>.

²¹⁵ Meddeb, Hamza, "Kais Saied's Grip on Tunisia Comes at a High Cost," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 31, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/kais-saieds-grip-on-tunisia-comes-at-a-high-cost?lang=en>

path ahead.²¹⁶ Given that financial, economic, and cultural opportunities lie with North America and Europe.²¹⁷ This breakdown has deepened the material foundations of authoritarian control.

TURKEY: From Competitive Authoritarianism to Hegemonic Control (2010–Present)

Introduction

Turkey's political trajectory since approximately 2010 represents one of the most comprehensive examples of democratic backsliding, transitioning from a flawed democracy toward a consolidated electoral autocracy through a process of plebiscitary aggrandisement. Started in a cautiously optimistic view towards an improvement of democratic affordances, the systematic transformation spearheaded by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) slowly proved to be an erosion of liberal democratic norms, a gradual conservative change of society with an increased reliance on strategic dissensus.

The process of autocratisation unfolded across distinct phases, moving from the legalistic targeting of historic opponents through law, most notably during the Ergenekon trials, before accelerating into the formal consolidation of executive dominance following the 2016 coup attempt. The regime's ideological foundation rests on a majoritarian populist narrative, in which the national will, derived solely from electoral victory, is pitted against liberal constitutional constraints, which are rhetorically dismissed as foreign-backed "obstacles". Since 2018, Freedom House has rated Turkey as "Not Free," classifying it within the upper bounds of the electoral autocracy category.²¹⁸ The unique nature of Turkey's political transformation reveals a clear mechanism shift over time, in which initial constitutional reforms aimed at addressing historic democratic deficits (such as military tutelage) were rapidly co-opted and

²¹⁶ Chatham House, "Is Tunisia Really Turning East?" 2024, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/is-tunisia-really-turning-east/>

²¹⁷ Chatham House, "Is Tunisia Really Turning East?" 2024, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/is-tunisia-really-turning-east/>

²¹⁸ Kaya, Zeynep N., and Matthew Whiting, "The HDP, the AKP and the Battle for Turkish Democracy," *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 1 (2019): 92–106. doi:10.1080/17449057.2018.1525168.

used to establish comprehensive executive control, manifesting as a "autocracy behind a democratic façade".

Unfolding Autocratisation

2010 -2013: The changing face of the “reform”

The core ideological tension driving these phases of autocratisation is the conflict between the ruling party’s majoritarian populist vision and the principle of liberal constitutionalism. The AKP, representing the periphery and challenging the Kemalist centre, advanced an idea of democracy that is strictly majoritarian, emphasising electoral victory as the sole source of political power and legitimacy.²¹⁹ This vision fundamentally contests liberal constitutionalism, which stresses institutional constraints, checks and balances, and the protection of minority rights. The populist strategy provides the philosophical justification needed to dismantle institutional safeguards by framing them as anti-democratic obstructions to "the people’s will".

The transformation of the Turkish political landscape started in 2010 with the Constitutional Referendum. Politically framed by the AKP as a necessary rectification of the constitution drafted after the 1980 military coup, the initiative was presented as a means to expand fundamental rights, strengthen civilian courts, and align Turkey more closely with the European Union (EU) accession requirements.²²⁰ The amendments included provisions to increase the military’s accountability before civilian courts and granted Parliament greater influence over the appointment of judges to the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK).

At the time, the reforms were widely promoted as a strategic step toward democratization, challenging the legacy of military tutelage and the entrenched dominance of the secular 'center'. The European Commission’s 2010 report adopted a largely positive assessment, interpreting the amendments as evidence of democratic advancement.²²¹ Opposition parties, however, warned that the referendum constituted an indirect manoeuvre

²¹⁹ Rogenhofer, Julius Maximilian, and Ayala Panievsky, “Antidemocratic Populism in Power: Comparing Erdoğan’s Turkey with Modi’s India and Netanyahu’s Israel,” *Democratization* 27, no. 8 (2020): 1394–1412. doi:10.1080/13510347.2020.1795135.

²²⁰ Kalaycıoğlu, Ersin, “Kulturkampf in Turkey: The Constitutional Referendum of 12 September 2010,” *South European Society and Politics* 17, no. 1 (2012): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2011.60055>.

²²¹ European Union, “2010 Progress Report on Turkey,” 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:199E:0098:0106:EN:PDF>.

designed to concentrate power in the executive and to compromise judicial independence by politicising key judicial institutions.²²² These concerns proved prescient. The reform effectively neutralised the secular, Kemalist veto players, particularly within the judiciary and the military, that had historically suppressed previous Islamist parties. By linking crucial judicial appointments to the political will of the ruling coalition, the amendments did not establish genuine independence. Instead, they facilitated the transfer of control over the judiciary from the secular establishment to the conservative AKP-Gülenist alliance. In this sense, the 2010 constitution reform functioned as a critical mechanism for institutional capture under the guise of democratisation.

Parallel to the constitutional shifts, the regime systematically employed the legal system to neutralise opponents, and a key moment were the Ergenekon (2008–2013) and Sledgehammer (2003/2012–2014) trials. These proceedings targeted alleged ultranationalist conspiracy networks accused of coup plots, intimidation, and assassinations.²²³ Hundreds of high-ranking military officers, journalists, academics, and lawyers were prosecuted, dramatically reshaping Turkey's civil-military and intellectual landscape. From a reformist perspective, these trials were initially framed as a long-overdue assertion of civilian oversight over the military and as an effort to hold the so-called "deep state" accountable, in line with EU accession criteria for a balanced civil-military relationship.²²⁴ In practice, the proceedings were marred by systemic violations of due process and relied extensively on manipulated, inconsistent or fabricated evidence.²²⁵ The 2014 annulment of the Sledgehammer convictions by the Constitutional Court, on the grounds that the evidence had been falsified, exposed the fundamentally political nature of the prosecutions.

These cases established two critical authoritarian precedents. They normalised the weaponisation of the judiciary where partisan persecution was cloaked in the legitimacy of democratic rhetoric aimed at holding anti-democratic elements accountable. As the proceedings entrenched the use of pervasive political conspiracy narratives, such as the "deep state" or foreign-backed plots (allegedly linked to the CIA, British Intelligence, or Masonic groups), the

²²² Hatem Ete, "Turkey's Constitutional Referendum of 2010, SETA <https://www.setav.org/en/turkeys-constitutional-referendum-of-2010>.

²²³ Rodrik, Dani, "Ergenekon and Sledgehammer: Building or Undermining the Rule of Law?" *European Stability Initiative*, 2010, https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_turkey_tpq_vol10_no1_Dani%20Rodrik.pdf

²²⁴ Kaynar, Ayşegül K., "The Last Two Decades of Civil-Military Relations in Turkey Under the Shadow of Courts," *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, no. 4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.7976>

²²⁵ Rodrik, Dani, "Ergenekon and Sledgehammer: Building or Undermining the Rule of Law?" *European Stability Initiative*, 2010, https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_turkey_tpq_vol10_no1_Dani%20Rodrik.pdf

legal narratives provided essential in the AKP narrative of judicial precedence²²⁶ These narratives, amplified by pro-government media, served to delegitimise powerful opponents by blurring the line between legitimate political rivalry and existential threats like terrorism or sedition, effectively prefiguring and legitimating subsequent authoritarian governance.

The Parliamentary Election in 2011 allowed AKP to win its third consecutive general election and was primarily attributed to perceived satisfaction with the Turkish economy. Although it confirmed AKP's strength, the elections fell short of providing the required majority for a new constitution. This prevented Erdoğan from transitioning Turkey to an executive presidential system. At the same time, it was a consolidation of Kurdish representation in Parliament, marking a significant shift.²²⁷

The Authoritarian Pivot and Populist Majoritarianism (2013–2016)

The Gezi Park protests in May and June 2013 represented a crucial inflexion point, marking the moment the regime shifted decisively from a cautious, legalistic approach to overt, populist repression. The protests, initially against urban redevelopment in Istanbul, also connected with the historical narratives the AKP puts forward, and rapidly escalated into the largest civil mobilisation in decades, bringing together ideologically disparate groups, including seculars, liberals, Kurds, and the left.²²⁸ Against the attempt to rebuild a replica of the Ottoman-era Taksim Military barracks near Taksim Square, a larger conflict emerged around the authoritarian style of government of the regime and the concerns that the AKP was programmatically eroding the secularist foundations of Turkish society.²²⁹ The state response was characterised by brutal repression and comprehensive media control.²³⁰ This mobilisation posed a fundamental challenge to the AKP's increasingly conservative and authoritarian control, highlighting the deep tension between the demands of liberal civil society for freedom of assembly and the government's restrictive policies.

²²⁶ Jenkins, Gareth H., "Between Fact and Fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation," *Central Asia–Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program*, 2009, https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2009_08_SRP_Jenkins_Turkey-Ergenekon.pdf.

²²⁷ Aslan-Akman, Canan, "The 2011 Parliamentary Elections in Turkey and Challenges Ahead for Democratic Reform Under a Dominant Party System," *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 1 (2012): 77–95. doi:10.1080/13629395.2012.655138.

²²⁸ Göksel, Oğuzhan, and Ömer Tekdemir, "Questioning the 'Immortal State'," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 3 (July 2018): 376–393.

²²⁹ Abdel-Warith, Hani, and Huseyin Emre Ceyhan. 2025. "Secularization in the Minaret's Shadow: Group Identity and Religious Scepticism in Turkey." *Mediterranean Politics*, May, 1–26. doi:10.1080/13629395.2025.2503586.

²³⁰ European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), "Social Media Law in Turkey: A New Stage of Penguinisation," August 2020, <https://www.ecpmf.eu/penguinisation-in-turkey/>

The regime's counter-mobilisation successfully exploited this tension. President Erdoğan labelled the protesters as 'looters,' 'thugs,' and a secular 'elite' threatening the silent, honest majority of AKP voters. This rhetoric constructed a powerful populist dichotomy, framing all non-electoral forms of political participation, such as protest and critique, as sedition, foreign interference, or a deep state "coup attempt". Counter-rallies organised by the AKP were strategically named "Respect for the National Will" ((Milli İradeye Saygı Mitingleri).) rallies. This terminology enshrined the notion that an electoral mandate confers unlimited governmental authority, actively rejecting the idea that institutional checks and balances, or liberal constitutional constraints, should limit the will of the majority.²³¹ By functionalizing populist majoritarianism, the government established a discourse that justifies suppressing dissent as defending true democracy against anti-national obstructionists.

The second major rupture in this phase was the open conflict between the AKP and the Gülen movement (FETÖ). This strategic alliance, which had collaborated in dismantling the military's influence through the Ergenekon trials, fractured in late 2013 when prosecutors aligned with Gülen launched massive corruption investigations targeting Erdoğan and his inner circle. Erdoğan immediately characterised these investigations as a judicial "coup" orchestrated by FETO.²³²

This schism marked a period of internal judicial warfare and provided the AKP with vital experience in neutralising a powerful, deeply embedded opponent. The government swiftly responded by launching counter-narratives, such as the "Mastermind" conspiracy, according to which Gülenists orchestrated the Gezi protests and the corruption investigations.²³³ This rupture served as a crucial institutional pretext, allowing the AKP to test and refine the tactics of mass purges, relying on sweeping conspiracy theories and the rapid capture of elements within the police and judiciary. This refined playbook became the operational model for the far broader, more devastating purges that followed the 2016 coup attempt.

The failed military coup attempt in July 2016 marked a decisive turning point in Turkey's authoritarian transformation by providing AKP with an unprecedented political opportunity to accelerate and consolidate executive power. The attempted overthrow carried out by factions within the armed forces, officially attributed to the Gülen movement, was widely condemned across the political spectrum. Reminiscent of the period of violence and instability

²³¹ Bilgiç, Ali. 2018. "Reclaiming the National Will: Resilience of Turkish Authoritarian Neoliberalism after Gezi." *South European Society and Politics* 23 (2): 259–80. doi:10.1080/13608746.2018.1477422.

²³² Martin, Natalie, "Allies and Enemies: The Gülen Movement and the AKP," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2020): 110–127. doi:10.1080/09557571.2020.1798874.

²³³ Dogan, Recep, *Political Islamists in Turkey and the Gülen Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 11

of the 1970s, the coup saw almost all political sides mobilise to defend the elected government and the constitutional order. In the aftermath, however, President Erdogan and the AKP framed it not as a military insurrection but as an existential threat posed by a vast internal conspiracy within the state. This securitised narrative, centred on the need to purge the “parallel state,” was used to legitimise the declaration of a State of Emergency (Olağanüstü Hal, OHAL) that remained in force for two years.²³⁴ At this time, the government, ruling by decree, suspended key procedural safeguards and launched mass purges, transforming this initially broad-based demand for accountability into an institutional foundation for authoritarian extraction.

The scale of the subsequent purges was unprecedented. Within days, over 7,500 people were detained, including 6,038 soldiers and 755 judges and prosecutors. Thousands more were systematically dismissed from the judiciary, civil service, universities, schools, and media organizations.²³⁵ Human Rights Watch and other observers noted that while the government was justified in prosecuting coup participants, the speed and breadth of the arrests and suspensions, which particularly targeted judges and civil servants without clear evidence of involvement, strongly suggested a politically motivated purge rather than a due process investigation.²³⁶ For instance, the justice system was critically weakened, with 2,167 judges and prosecutors jailed and 2,745 removed from their posts.²³⁷

The State of Emergency enabled the rapid implementation of repressive mechanisms and the concentration of executive power through rule by decree. These emergency measures subsequently became normalised and were effectively "codified in the constitution," meaning that the de facto centralised power structure established during the OHAL period became a permanent constitutional feature of the Turkish state. Turkish authorities later justified the dismissal of judges and prosecutors found to have "no loyalty to the democratic constitutional order" as necessary to re-establish the rule of law after FETÖ infiltration.²³⁸

2017- present: Authoritarian dynamics

²³⁴ Whiting, Matthew, and Zeynep N. Kaya, “Floating or Sinking? The State of Democracy in Turkey and the Rise of the HDP,” *openDemocracy*, 2016.

²³⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Turkey: Protect Rights, Law After Coup Attempt,” 2016.

²³⁶ Amnesty International, *No End in Sight: Purged Public Sector Workers Denied a Future in Turkey*, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2017/05/No-End-In-Sight-ENG.pdf?x66444..>

²³⁷ International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), “Turkey: Dismissal of Judges and Prosecutors Fundamentally Unfair,” <https://www.icj.org/turkey-dismissal-of-judges-and-prosecutors-fundamentally-unfair/>

²³⁸ Coşkun, Gülçin Balamir, and Ertuğ Tomuş, “The Rule of Arbitrariness as the New Constitutional Order in Turkey,” *Verfassungsblog*, November 14, 2023, <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-rule-of-arbitrariness-as-the-new-constitutional-order-in-turkey/>

The culmination of institutional capture occurred with the 2017 Constitutional Referendum, which was narrowly approved, replacing the long-standing parliamentary regime with a heavily centralized executive presidential system. The changes were formally implemented after the snap 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections.

The new system fundamentally altered the balance of power. It eliminated the office of the Prime Minister and consolidated immense legislative, executive, and regulatory authority within the Presidency. President Erdoğan justified the transition by arguing that the previous parliamentary system was feeble, lacking the speed and flexibility needed for effective governance.²³⁹

However, assessments from the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, the European Union, and academic researchers indicated that this constitutional architecture failed to ensure a sound and effective separation of powers, leaving the executive branch accountable primarily only through elections.²⁴⁰ The systemic elimination of institutional constraints through formal constitutional change is recognised as a classic yet particularly severe form of democratic backsliding. Furthermore, the hyper-personalised nature of the system makes it acutely vulnerable to the incumbent's will, relying heavily on the inner circle's compliance and reluctance to question the leader's decisions.²⁴¹

Turkish universities, traditionally autonomous public institutions, have become a key target of institutional capture. Following the 2016 purges, thousands of academics were dismissed from their posts, and institutional autonomy was severely undermined by measures such as the forced resignation of all university heads and the practice of direct presidential appointment of rectors.²⁴² The recent attempts to utilise university officials to invalidate Mayor İmamoğlu's diploma highlight the political subservience of Turkish academia. This erosion of academic freedom and institutional integrity prevents the development of "the critical power of reason" or negative thinking, forcing conformity and discouraging intellectual dissent. For students and scholars, this political pressure translates into systemic repression.

The transformation of Turkey's judiciary is perhaps the most defining characteristic of the autocratisation process. Following the 2010 constitutional changes, and drastically

²³⁹ Petersen F, Yanaşmayan Z, eds. *The Failure of Popular Constitution Making in Turkey: Regressing Towards Constitutional Autocracy*. Cambridge University Press; 2020.

²⁴⁰ European Commission, "Key findings of the 2023 Report on Türkiye," 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_5630.

²⁴¹ Yıldırım, Kerem, "Clientelism and Dominant Incumbent Parties: Party Competition in an Urban Turkish Neighbourhood," *Democratization* 27, no. 1 (2019): 81–99. doi:10.1080/13510347.2019.1658744.

²⁴² Elgin, C., "Political Appointments to Rector Positions: A Shifting Landscape in Turkish Academia," *Discover Education* 3 (2024): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-024-00200-z>.

accelerated after the 2016 purges, the ruling party gained effective control over judicial appointments by restructuring the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK/HSKP). The widespread dismissal of judges and prosecutors after 2016, resulted in a judiciary dominated by political alignment.²⁴³

This captured judiciary became the essential infrastructure for sustained lawfare. The expansive definition and rigorous application of anti-terrorism laws provided the legal apparatus used to prosecute political opponents, academics, journalists, and civil servants, effectively equating legitimate political critique and protest with terrorist activity. The result is a critical state of the rule of law, evidenced by Turkey ranking 117th out of 142 countries in the 2024 World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, and the erosion of fundamental rights protection, despite the constitution nominally providing for them.²⁴⁴

A definitive marker of Turkey's shift toward consolidated autocracy is its systemic refusal to comply with binding judgments issued by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), a foundational obligation of Turkey as a member of the Council of Europe. This defiance is a calculated political strategy designed to assert domestic sovereign control over international legal obligations. Turkey now ranks among the countries most frequently found in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, holding the highest number of pending cases before the ECtHR as of late 2024.

Among the most prominent instances of this non-compliance are the cases of two high-profile political prisoners, Osman Kavala (The Gezi Trial): Kavala, a civil society leader, has been held in pretrial detention and prosecuted since 2017 on baseless charges related to the Gezi protests.²⁴⁵ The ECtHR ruled in 2019 that his detention pursued the "ulterior purpose" of stifling human rights activities. Turkey's persistent refusal to release him led the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers to initiate infringement proceedings. In 2022, the ECtHR Grand Chamber delivered a landmark judgment confirming that Turkey had failed to comply with the ruling, signifying a systemic disregard for the Convention system. This was only the second time in history that the ECtHR had conducted infringement proceedings and determined a member state was in non-compliance.

²⁴³ Human Rights Watch, "Turkey: Judges and Prosecutors Unfairly Jailed," 5 August 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/05/turkey-judges-prosecutors-unfairly-jailed>.

²⁴⁴ World Justice Project, "Rule of Law Index: Türkiye (2024)," 2024, <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2024/T%C3%BCrkiye/>

²⁴⁵ International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), "Turkey: Release Osman Kavala," 2024, <https://www.icj.org/turkey-release-osman-kavala/>.

The case of Selahattin Demirtaş is similar. The former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and prominent political figure has been imprisoned since 2016 on terrorism-related charges, which have been consistently rejected by international observers as politically motivated.²⁴⁶ Despite multiple ECtHR rulings, including a 2020 Grand Chamber judgment ordering his immediate release on the grounds that his prolonged detention was intended to stifle political pluralism, Turkish authorities have continued to hold him under different charges.

The failure to implement these binding judgments, leading to the triggering of infringement proceedings, reveals a profound systemic breakdown of the rule of law. The political calculation behind this defiance shows that the regime prioritises consolidating domestic autocratic power and maintaining a majoritarian mandate over international accountability, further reinforcing the leader's image as the defender of national interests against foreign judicial interference.

The strategic targeting of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu marks the current, escalating phase of autocratic legalism, signalling the regime's potential shift toward a Hegemonic Authoritarian model. İmamoğlu, of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), achieved significant electoral victories in both 2019 and 2024 local elections, capturing the country's largest city.

His electoral success positioned him as the most credible political challenger to President Erdoğan. In response, the politicised judiciary has been aggressively leveraged. Investigations into corruption and terrorism were launched against İmamoğlu and his key strategic team, including prominent businesspeople and other collaborators. Furthermore, in an attempt to disqualify him from future presidential races, Istanbul University's executive board, operating under the government's political control over academia, attempted to annul the validity of his college diploma.²⁴⁷

This crackdown on an electorally viable opponent, specifically designed to decapitate the opposition's base and resources, is considered an "unprecedented authoritarian escalation". In a competitive authoritarian regime, elections, despite being unfair, still pose a genuine threat to the incumbent. When the ruling party begins systematically eliminating viable electoral threats through administrative or legal disqualification, the framework of competitive

²⁴⁶ International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), "Turkey: End Abuse of Criminal Proceedings Against Selahattin Demirtaş," 2023, <https://www.icj.org/resource/turkey-end-abuse-of-criminal-proceedings-against-selahattin-demirtas/>

²⁴⁷ "Contextualizing Erdoğan's Attacks on Boğaziçi University," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 2021, <https://gja.georgetown.edu/2021/10/07/contextualizing-erdogans-attacks-on-bogazici-university/>.

authoritarianism begins to break down. This calculated use of lawfare imposes high political costs on the opposition to prevent a potential democratic recovery, confirming a trajectory toward a more stable, consolidated, and repressive Hegemonic Authoritarian state.

The fairness of elections in Turkey has been systematically compromised, even as high voter turnout continues. The 2022 electoral law amendments, for instance, lowered the parliamentary threshold from 10 percent to 7 percent, a seemingly liberal reform, but simultaneously changed the mechanism for distributing parliamentary seats among alliances and modified the procedures for appointing judges to oversee the Supreme Election Council (YSK). These changes increased the potential for pro-AKP bias and further eroded the perception of the YSK's independence.²⁴⁸

Despite these systemic disadvantages and the severe electoral defeat in 2023, the opposition demonstrated significant resilience. The Republican People's Party (CHP) scored unexpected, major victories in the 2019 local elections, capturing Istanbul and Ankara, and followed this with its best nationwide electoral performance since 1977 in the 2024 local elections. In 2024, the CHP surpassed the AKP in total nationwide votes, gaining control of 35 of 81 provinces and six of the country's seven largest cities.

The opposition's success, particularly in 2024, is seen as a clear sign of disapproval of the government's economic performance.²⁴⁹ This electoral shift suggests a potential weakening of Turkey's traditionally rigid cultural cleavages (the "frozen" center-periphery divide between secular Kemalists and pro-Islamists). Economic precarity, high inflation, nepotism, and the scarcity of jobs for non-AKP supporters are pushing voters, even in traditionally conservative regions, to make political judgments based on material conditions. This environment has fostered the emergence of class-based politics, as evidenced by the growing recruitment of high school and university students by parties focused on worker rights, such as the Turkish Workers Party (TİP). The opposition's victories, built on offering alternative social services and responsive local governance, capitalise on this deepening economic alienation, particularly among impoverished, educated youth.

²⁴⁸ Bozkurt, Başak, *The Impact of Turkey's Recent Amendments to the Electoral Laws on Fundamental Freedoms and Electoral Integrity*, Freedom House Policy Brief, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Turkey%20Policy%20Brief%205_The%20Impact%20of%20Turkey%E2%80%99s%20Recent%20Amendments%20to%20the%20Electoral%20Laws%20on%20Fundamental%20Freedoms%20and%20Electoral%20Integrity.pdf.

²⁴⁹ "How Turkey's Opposition Won Big," *Journal of Democracy*, 2023, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-turkeys-opposition-won-big/>

Turkish autocratisation process has depended heavily on seizing control of the information sphere to suppress dissent and manufacture consent. The ruling party exercises comprehensive control over the media landscape, either directly or indirectly, controlling over 90 per cent of national media outlets and ensuring overwhelmingly positive coverage for President Erdoğan. Critical journalists face imprisonment, and independent media outlets are frequently labeled as security threats. Turkey ranks 158th out of 180 countries in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index.²⁵⁰

In recent years, control has extended into the digital sphere. The introduction of the "disinformation law" in 2022 exemplifies a move toward "cyber-authoritarianism".²⁵¹ This legislation criminalizes the dissemination of misleading information regarding "the internal and external security of the country," carrying potential prison sentences. These legislative changes, implemented alongside modifications to electoral laws, are aimed at clamping down on social media and online news sites, which remain one of the country's last venues for free speech, in the lead-up to critical elections. Strategic control over information is necessary not only for legitimization but also for fabricating testimonies and conspiracy narratives to maintain internal cohesion and political support.

Causes of autocratisation

The dynamics of autocratisation are the outcome of a mutually reinforcing interaction among institutional capture, economic vulnerability, civil society repression, and geopolitics. The plebiscitary aggrandisement emerged through a gradual, legally embedded transformation of state power and populist rule.

Institutional capture and autocratic legalism

The erosion of democracy since the early 2010s has been driven by the systematic neutralisation of checks and balances. The AKP initially used legitimate democratic reforms to restrict the judiciary, weakening the military's tutelary role while gaining influence over the judiciary.

Following the Gezi protests, a populist dichotomy (Milli İrade (national will) vs. foreign elites) was deployed to justify the repression of civil society (2013–2016). After the failed coup

²⁵⁰ Stockholm Center for Freedom, "Press Freedom in Turkey 2024 in Review," 2024, <https://stockholmcf.org/press-freedom-in-turkey-2024-in-review/>

²⁵¹ Amnesty International, "Turkey's 'Disinformation Law' Tightens Government Control and Curtails Freedom of Expression," 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/EUR4461432022ENGLISH.pdf>

in 2016, emergency powers were institutionalised into a hyper-personalised system through constitutional change, transforming provisional repression into a permanent governing model. In its more recent phase, the regime has escalated toward the systematic legal exclusion of viable electoral opponents. The aggressive use of lawfare against opposition figures such as Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, alongside purges of municipal administration and the criminalisation of dissent, illustrates a transition from competitive authoritarianism toward a more hegemonic model where elections serve to ratify predetermined outcomes.

Civil society has been increasingly weakened. Civil society organisations (CSOs) that operate outside the ruling party's control have faced a dual strategy of intense repression and state appropriation.²⁵² During the State of Emergency (2016–2018), approximately 1,600 CSOs were shut down, and their property was confiscated without due court decisions. Targeted repression was particularly focused on individual human rights activists, lawyers, and academics, often through detentions related to anti-terrorism or criminal libel charges. The prosecution of civil society leader Osman Kavala on baseless charges related to the Gezi protests exemplifies this strategic effort to create a climate of fear and impose a chilling effect on legitimate civic work.

At the same time, the regime pursued a parallel strategy of appropriation. Programs such as the Civil Society Initiative supported CSOs' organisational development but selectively fostered a pro-government clique that, while possessing some internal autonomy, became reliant on the AKP for funding and public visibility. This appropriated sector helps reproduce populist polarisation within the civic sphere and selectively intervenes in rights defence, thereby legitimising the government's narrative while neutralising critical independent voices.

Economic governance has also become a core driver of autocratisation. Turkey has experienced a protracted economic downturn and crisis since 2018, marked by a currency crisis, dependent financialization, and high inflation.²⁵³ This fragility is rooted in structural issues, institutional weakness, and a dependence on capital inflows, all exacerbated by politically driven, unconventional monetary policies post-2018. Economic control has become an integral part of the authoritarian logic. Following mass arrests and political investigations, such as those targeting İmamoğlu's associates, the state often seizes control of opposition-aligned businesses

²⁵² Amnesty International, "Türkiye: Proposed 'Agents of Influence' Law Is Attack on Civil Society and Must Be Rejected," 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/turkiye-proposed-agents-of-influence-law-is-attack-on-civil-society-and-must-be-rejected/>

²⁵³ Esen, Berk, and Şebnem Gümüşçü, "Why Did Turkish Democracy Collapse? A Political Economy Account of AKP's Authoritarianism," *Party Politics* 27, no. 6 (2020): 1075–1091. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820923722>.

and assets. This strategy effectively redirects economic resources and lucrative rent-seeking opportunities toward pro-government networks, cementing the link between political loyalty and economic gain, while also punishing political deviation. Despite the severe economic crisis, President Erdoğan secured victory in the 2023 presidential elections. However, the economic factor proved decisive in subsequent electoral contests.

Geopolitical insulation and the International Enabling Environment

Turkey's autocratisation process has been significantly insulated from external accountability due to its unique geopolitical position within NATO, its control over the Black Sea, and its regional ambitions. Ankara pursues a strategy of "adaptive opportunism," constantly balancing its relationships with the West and emerging powers such as Russia and China.

This balancing act allows Turkey to exploit geopolitical friction, for example, by delaying the NATO accession of Sweden and Finland, to assert influence and secure short-term gains, often prioritizing defense and trade deals over ideological alignment. Furthermore, the rise of nationalism and populism in both the United States (for instance the Trump administration's support for Erdoğan) and the European Union has severely eroded the moral credibility of the West as an advocate for liberal democratic values. This diminished normative power makes Ankara's departure from trans-Atlantic norms less costly politically.

Critically, the increasingly authoritarian nature of Turkey's leadership facilitates cooperation with autocratic states, such as Russia, often proving "easier than Ankara's alignment with western liberal states". This strategic flexibility grants Erdoğan significant leverage, allowing him to conduct domestic purges and defy international judicial rulings with relative impunity, as Western leaders consistently prioritize strategic security concerns and geopolitical transactions over consistent human rights advocacy.

The relationship with the European Union provides the clearest illustration of external complicity in Turkey's democratic erosion. The EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 was reached during the critical post-coup period when the Turkish regime was cementing its institutional capture. The agreement was intended to staunch the flow of irregular migrants into Greece and offered Turkey €6 billion in funding, along with accelerated discussions on visa liberalization and accession chapters. This deal represented a shift in the EU's policy approach. Prior to 2015, the EU had used tools like blocking accession chapters (specifically 23 and 24, relating to the judiciary and fundamental rights) and funding NGOs to promote the Copenhagen

criteria. Post-2015, this normative pressure gave way to rhetorical criticism and, ultimately, to silence.²⁵⁴

The 2016 agreement effectively outsourced critical border control and humanitarian functions to Ankara, handing the Turkish leadership significant veto power and political leverage. By prioritizing strategic stability and migration management over democratic values, the EU engaged in a form of strategic capitulation. This ensured Western "silence" during the crucial State of Emergency period, insulating Erdoğan from significant diplomatic or economic pressure while he systematically dismantled judicial independence and civil society. This failure to enforce democratic criteria, particularly given Turkey's receipt of over €6 billion in exchange for hosting refugees, constitutes a documented case of external complicity in the consolidation of authoritarianism.

Dissensus and Turkey's autocratisation Trajectory

Turkey's autocratic trajectory, driven by plebiscitary aggrandizement, rests on the systematic weaponisation of long-standing societal fissures, specifically the longstanding centre-periphery and secular-religious divide. This particular angle justified the continuous expansion of executive power. In this process, dissensus is not merely a consequence of backsliding but the primary ideological and political mechanism through which authoritarian rule has been legitimised.

Mild dissensus in Turkey initially centred on the procedural limits of the Kemalist military-judicial establishment. The 2010 Constitutional Referendum exemplified this phase. Although framed by the AKP as a necessary reform to meet EU standards and replace the military-era constitution, it polarised the political arena. The AKP reduced a complex institutional debate into a binary choice: "democracy" (meaning the will of the electoral majority) versus "authoritarianism" (identified with the military and judicial elites). By winning this procedural debate, the government converted dissatisfaction with the old guard's institutional constraints into a perceived popular mandate to centralise power in the executive. What began as mild dissensus over constitutional reform thus became the foundation for the future political takeover of the judiciary, legitimised in the name of democratisation itself.

Severe dissensus emerged once the conflict shifted from dismantling old veto players to defining the nature of the new regime. Two critical fault lines structured this phase. First,

²⁵⁴ International Rescue Committee, "What the EU-Turkey Deal Means for Refugees and Migrants," 2016, <https://www.rescue.org/eu/article/what-eu-turkey-deal>

judicial Autonomy vs. Popular Will became a central axis of dispute. The Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials (2008–2014) marked the earliest and most systematic example of the weaponisation of the judiciary for political ends. Initially supported by some reformers as civilian oversight of the military, the trials normalised the use of courts as political instruments. This produced deep dissent among legal professionals and opposition groups, who increasingly viewed the emerging system as replacing secular political control with conservative-Islamist political control.

Severe dissensus also developed around the media as a watchdog, positioned as a threat. As the regime consolidated control over major media outlets (now over 90% controlled by the government), severe dissensus centred on the fundamental role of the press. Critical independent media outlets were routinely labelled as security threats or tools of "former elites", reflecting an institutional rejection of the media's legitimate function in a liberal democracy.

Disruptive dissensus emerged once shared procedural norms collapsed and politics increasingly operated through states of exception rather than constitutional rule. The Gezi Protests in 2013 marked a decisive rupture. The government's brutal response to the Gezi protests marked a critical institutional rupture. Erdoğan framed the ideologically disparate protestors as "looters," "thugs," and a secular 'elite' threatening the silent majority (the National Will). This populist dichotomy criminalised non-electoral political participation (protest) as "sedition" or a "coup attempt," justifying mass repression and bypassing institutional channels for redress.

The logic was fully institutionalised after the failed 2016 Coup. The subsequent two-year State of Emergency (OHAL) saw mass purges across all state sectors, the closure of over 1,600 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and the rule-by-decree suspension of rights. These emergency powers were then codified in the 2017 constitutional amendments, permanently enshrining the centralised executive power structure born of a moment of crisis. The lack of external pushback (EU silence) compounded this institutional breakdown.

The current phase of autocratisation is characterised by the strategic shift from merely tilting the playing field (Competitive Authoritarianism) to actively eliminating viable electoral opposition (Destructive Dissensus/Hegemonic Authoritarianism).

: The regime systematically uses elaborate, securitised warfare narratives (e.g., "Mastermind," "Foreign Agent") to portray key opponents not as political rivals, but as existential threats. The cases of Selahattin Demirtaş and Osman Kavala, who remain imprisoned despite ECtHR rulings, exemplify the complete breakdown of the rule of law and the use of the judiciary to silence political pluralism and civil society.

The investigation and arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu (including the attempt to annul his diploma) is the most recent and defining act of destructive dissensus. By using corruption and terrorism charges to decapitate the opposition's most popular figure and its municipal financial base, the regime seeks to undermine the opposition's capacity to organise, effectively signalling the closure of the competitive arena. This strategic move forces opposition mobilisation onto the streets, making protest the last available mechanism for dissent, thereby validating the regime's long-standing claim that the opposition acts outside legitimate institutional bounds.

The success of the regime is rooted in its ability to deploy sophisticated "autocratic legalism," utilising captured state organs (the judiciary, state-controlled media, and academia) to eliminate perceived threats, ranging from the traditional Kemalist military to liberal civil society (Kavala) and Kurdish political representation (Demirtaş). The recent aggressive use of lawfare against Mayor İmamoğlu and the corresponding purges of his municipal staff confirm that the regime is actively working to close the remaining competitive space, moving beyond the functional definition of Competitive Authoritarianism toward a more rigid, Hegemonic Authoritarian model, where elections serve primarily to legitimise a predetermined outcome.

An accommodating international environment has significantly facilitated this domestic consolidation. Turkey's transactional geopolitical leverage, particularly concerning NATO security and migration control, has effectively insulated the regime from meaningful Western accountability, with the 2016 EU migration agreement standing as a defining moment of external strategic capitulation.

Dissensus and Autocratisation

A comparison of Turkey, Tunisia, Serbia, Armenia, and Georgia reveals several cross-cutting factors and common patterns through which governing elites dismantle democratic safeguards and consolidate power. It is driven by the progressive escalation of political dissensus, from management to disagreement to systemic rupture, often deliberately cultivated by governing elites. Across all cases, dissensus evolves from mild to ultimately destructive forms, providing both the justification and mechanisms for the dismantling of democratic safeguards.

In the early stages, mild dissensus often emerges around economic performance, corruption, and the failures of post-transition governance. Economic hardship initially served as a legitimate outlet for public grievances and popular discontent. In Turkey, inflation and currency volatility gradually eroded the social contract that had sustained ALP dominance, while in Tunisia it eroded the initial enthusiasm around the promises of the Arab Spring. In Serbia, alternatively, stagnation and clientelism created ground for contestation, but also for the anti-elite appeal of the ruling party. In Armenia, economic development remained constrained by oligarchic structures tied to the Karabakh conflict. At this stage, however, this type of dissensus still operated within competitive political rules.

Over time, however, this evolved into severe dissensus, as frustration was increasingly politicised and framed in cultural terms. Populist leaders such as Erdogan and Vucic reframed conflict as a struggle between the national will and elites. Constitutional institutions, be they courts, Parliaments, or independent regulators, were recast as illegitimate obstacles to majority rule. At this point, disagreements centred on who had the right to represent the nation genuinely.

Law became a central terrain of dispute. In Turkey, the judiciary was mobilised against the opposition. In Serbia, to take another example, corruption and security charges were selectively deployed against protest leaders and investigative journalists,

Disruptive dissensus took hold once liberal institutional rules themselves ceased to command acceptance. Emergency politics became normalised following major societal shocks: the 2016 failed coup in Turkey, the 2020 Karabakh conflict in Armenia, or the health emergency in Tunisia. This precipitated a mode of ruling based on executive decrees. In Serbia and Georgia, this phase has been marked less by formal emergency rule and more by the hollowing out of Parliamentary authority, media pluralism, and judicial independence. Elections and legislatures continued to exist but their capacity to constrain power has been fundamentally weakened, producing a simulation of democratic governance.

In its destructive phase of dissensus, the political arenas tend to eliminate the opposition altogether. In Turkey, this shift is evident in the legal assault on the municipal governments controlled by the opposition, primarily in Istanbul. In Serbia, the line between political opposition and political enemy has become increasingly blurred. This is a similar development in Tunisia under Kais Saied, a regime that securitises through exclusion. In Armenia and Georgia, the growing use of foreign influence and security legislation reflects a similar logic of exclusion rather than competition.

Ideological polarisation deepened all four phases of dissensus and has been rushing the evolution towards destructive dissent. Conservative, nationalist, and anti-globalist narratives are systematically mobilised to portray liberal democratic norms such as media freedom, minority rights, and LGBTQ protection as foreign impositions or moral corruption. Political opposition is no longer framed in terms of adversarial politics but as an existential threat to national unity. In this populist configuration, the security frameworks allowed governments to militarise domestic politics, using national security rhetoric to justify repression long after the original crises had passed.

Finally, there is something to say about the global dynamics of liberal democracy, which often tend to develop closely with the dissensus dynamics. The EU and Western partners have largely prioritised short-term strategic objectives, such as migration control in Turkey, regional stability in Serbia, migration prevention in Tunisia, over sustained democratic encouragement. This logic of stability has insulated incumbents from meaningful costs during authoritarian turning points. Leaders in Turkey and Serbia have exploited geopolitical competition between the Atlantic world, Russia and China to deflect pressure and secure economic and military leverage. The same logic applied to internal opposition, for instance in

Georgia and Serbia, where the legal templates of “foreign agents” reflect both authoritarian-leaning efforts to delegitimise civil society as an external threat.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Policy recommendations

1. Re-anchoring external engagement to dissensus management rather than regime stability. International actors, particularly the EU, the US, and multilateral financial institutions, should shift from stability-based engagement to a consensus-sensitive democracy policy. This requires conditioning cooperation on the state's capacity to absorb and institutionalise dissensus, such as judicial independence, media pluralism, and civil society autonomy, to name just a few. Migration control or energy security agreements should be grounded in automatic right-based suspension clauses triggered by the transgression of the rule of law, such as judicial purges, systematic use of law against the opposition, suppression of civil protest, etc. Without such conditionalities, external engagement continues to accelerate the shift from severe to destructive dissensus
2. Prioritise judicial autonomy. Across all cases, the collapse from severe to disruptive dissensus coincides with the capture of courts, either by external factors (incapacity) or by internal factors (loyal appointees). External actors should tie micro-financial assistance to transparency in judicial appointments. Funding international secondment and protection schemes for judges and prosecutors at risk represents a way to impose a medium level of protection. Similarly, activating cross-border legal accountability mechanisms when ECtHR or constitutional rulings are defied serves as one deterrent to autocratisation practices. Judicial independence represents a mitigation factor to dissensus becoming destructive
3. Instrumentalisation of law is defined as a sanctionable democratic violation, which should be recognised in international frameworks as a form of systemic democratic abuse that triggers targeted sanctions against prosecutors and judges of prominent trials, visa bans, and financial restrictions on officials participating in politicised investigations.
4. Decouple security cooperation from democratic political compliance. Military, counterterrorism, and intelligence cooperation should be insulated from domestic repression. When security collaboration becomes leverage for internal crackdowns, it accelerates divisive dissent. Public reporting on domestic use of security legislation should be widely accessible.

5. Economic conditionality should target patronage networks. Macro-audit support should be designed to audit limited politicized asset seizures, block state controlled redistribution of seized capital to regime allies.

Program recommendations

1. Democratic performance and local governance programs wjocj fund service delivery benchmarking at municipal level (housing, health with independent performance audits, public scorecards, which reduce early grievances by shofting competition back to material conditions rather than identity conflict.
2. Youth economic inclusion through EU-regional return schemes, protected academic mobility with guaranteed domestic reintegration, targering exit-driven dissensus which weakens democratic opposition and stabilises autocracy.
3. Opposition capacity and unity programs bringing together non-ideological oppsoton coordination platforms, shared campaign that insures programmatic unity.
4. Anti-surveillance and digital rights programs that support civil encryption infrastructure, counter-forensics training or activities or independent algorithms oversight bodies.