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Correction: This article has been corrected to use the current name of “North Macedonia” for the country formerly known as Macedonia.

THE NEW COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM

Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way

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Nearly two decades ago, our article on “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism” appeared in these pages.¹ It introduced a type of regime in which the coexistence of meaningful democratic institutions and serious incumbent abuse yields electoral competition that is real but unfair. Today competitive authoritarianism remains alive and well. Membership in the category was relatively fluid during the post–Cold War period, as Christopher Carothers has observed.² Some competitive authoritarian regimes democratized (including Peru, Slovakia, and Taiwan), while others hardened into full-blown authoritarianism (such as Belarus, Cambodia, and Russia). Still others (including Albania, Benin, and Ukraine) careened back and forth between democracy and competitive authoritarianism.³

The 35 competitive authoritarian regimes we examined in our 2010 book *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* followed diverging paths between 1990 and 2019: Fifteen democratized;⁴ six democratized but later regressed into (usually competitive) authoritarianism;⁵ four slid into full-scale authoritarianism;⁶ and ten remained continuously competitive authoritarian.⁷

But as competitive authoritarianism has broken down in some countries, it has emerged in others. Some regimes, as in Guinea, Kyrgyzstan, and Uganda, liberalized from hegemonic to competitive authoritarian rule. Others, as in Bolivia, Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey, and Venezuela, decayed from democracy into competitive authoritarianism (Venezuela has since crossed the line to full authoritarianism).⁸ Overall, the number of competitive authoritarian regimes has remained relatively

steady over the last quarter-century. Whereas we counted 35 competitive authoritarian regimes in the 1990–95 period, we count 32 of them in 2019 (see the Table below). This figure is somewhat conservative, as we excluded formerly competitive authoritarian regimes that recently experienced turnover, in effect giving the new governments in countries such as Armenia, the Gambia, Malaysia, and Ukraine the benefit of the doubt.

The Waning of Western Liberal Hegemony

The persistence of competitive authoritarianism is somewhat surprising. Competitive authoritarianism was a post–Cold War phenomenon—a product of an international environment that was uniquely hostile to full-scale dictatorship. The collapse of Soviet communism gave rise to a roughly fifteen-year period of Western liberal hegemony, marked by unrivaled U.S. military, economic, and ideological power.⁹ During the 1990s, U.S. and European influence was so great that Western powers became virtually synonymous with the “international community.” This hegemony, together with unprecedented international efforts to promote democracy, created strong incentives for ruling elites across the world to adopt Western-style political institutions. For all but a handful of states (usually those with nuclear weapons, oil, or vast domestic markets), the cost of outright dictatorship became prohibitively high. External democratizing pressure was most intense where Western linkage (ties to the West) and leverage (dependence on the West) were highest, as in East-Central Europe and the Americas.¹⁰

The post–Cold War international environment favored the rise of competitive authoritarianism. As multiparty elections spread across the globe, countries with reasonably favorable domestic conditions (including Mexico, Poland, South Africa, and Taiwan) generally democratized. But multiparty rule also diffused to many states with highly unfavorable conditions for democracy: impoverished countries with dysfunctional states, tiny middle classes, and weak oppositions and civil societies (such as Benin, Haiti, Madagascar, and Mali); postcommunist countries with oversized states and undersized private sectors and civil societies (Armenia, Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine); or countries characterized by all of these conditions (Albania, Cambodia, North Macedonia, and Romania). These were countries that, according to nearly all existing social-science research, “should” have been authoritarian, but external pressure compelled their elites to permit a degree of pluralism and electoral competition. Thus, regimes that would very likely have been outright dictatorships in another historical context became hybrids during the post–Cold War era.

These conditions did not last. The international environment changed dramatically in the early twenty-first century. For one thing, the rise of China and Russia shifted the global balance of power, putting an end to

**TABLE—COMPETITIVE
AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES, 2019**

<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	
Benin	Mozambique
Botswana	Niger
Burkina Faso	Nigeria
Côte D'Ivoire	Senegal
Gabon	Sierra Leone
Guinea	Tanzania
Guinea-Bissau	Togo
Kenya	Uganda
Madagascar	Zambia
Malawi	Zimbabwe
Mali	
<i>East-Central Europe</i>	
Hungary	North Macedonia
Montenegro	Serbia
<i>Former Soviet Union</i>	
Kyrgyzstan	
<i>Asia/Middle East</i>	
Bangladesh	Turkey
Philippines	
<i>Latin America</i>	
Bolivia	Honduras
Haiti	

Western liberal hegemony. Russia aggressively contested liberal international norms, making its presence felt not only in neighboring Georgia and Ukraine, but also in Syria, Venezuela, and even Western democracies. China used its growing economic power to sponsor alternative international institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Bank and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It also launched the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, a trillion-dollar aid and investment project that sought to “bind countries economically to Beijing” and create a “China-friendly political community.”¹¹

At the same time, the power of Western liberalism waned. The U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the EU’s mounting internal troubles, and the 2008 financial collapse eroded Western states’ power, prestige, and self-confidence.

The crisis was reinforced by the ascent of illiberal forces within the West itself, most notably in the United States. In this new context, the will and capacity of Western powers to promote democracy declined. The EU, which had been so influential in Southern Europe in the 1970s and East-Central Europe in the 1990s, did little to combat resurgent authoritarianism in the early twenty-first century. Likewise, U.S. presidential support for democracy abroad waned under Barack Obama and virtually ceased under Donald Trump. In cases ranging from Honduras to Hungary to the Philippines, the Trump administration abandoned longstanding U.S. policy orientations and embraced autocrats.

By the early twenty-first century, then, Western linkage and leverage had lost much of their force. Leverage was undercut by the emergence of alternative sources of military, economic, and diplomatic support. Assistance from China, Russia, and in some cases Iran or Venezuela reduced authoritarian governments’ dependence on the West. Whereas China and Russia had acted as regional “black knights” during the 1990s, they became global ones in the 2000s.¹² The impact of linkage was diluted by the West’s diminished interest in democracy promotion. When local politicians, technocrats, and business leaders do not expect

their government's undemocratic behavior to put their ties to the West at risk, they have less of an incentive to oppose such behavior.

The waning power of linkage and leverage can be seen in Central America and East-Central Europe. In these regions, extensive ties to the West dramatically heightened the cost of authoritarianism during the 1990s, making even mild forms of competitive authoritarianism difficult to sustain. Indeed, nearly every competitive authoritarian regime that existed in East-Central Europe and the Americas between 1990 and 1995 had democratized by 2004. Today, however, authoritarianism has reemerged in both regions. Of the 32 cases of competitive authoritarianism that existed in 2019, six were in high-linkage countries in the Americas and East-Central Europe.¹³ Two additional high-linkage countries, Nicaragua and Venezuela, are now fully authoritarian.

The erosion of EU influence has been made manifest in the case of Hungary. The country had been a stable democracy since 1990, and in the early twenty-first century few observers believed it to be at risk. Beginning in 2010, however, the Fidesz government, headed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, used its parliamentary supermajority to tilt the political playing field. The Orbán government packed the Constitutional Court, limited opposition media access both by politicizing state-run media and by coopting much of the private media, and gerrymandered electoral districts to lock in the ruling party's control of parliament. In stark contrast to the 1990s, when strong European pressure helped to derail incipient authoritarian projects in Albania, Romania, and Slovakia, a divided EU took little punitive action against the Orbán government between 2010 and 2018.

The cases of Honduras and Nicaragua highlight the deterioration of U.S. democracy promotion in the Americas. Honduran democracy was derailed in 2009 when the military overthrew populist president Manuel Zelaya. The Obama administration condemned the coup and suspended nonhumanitarian aid, but the Honduran elite, backed by many U.S. Republicans, went along with the coup, rendering the administration's response ineffective. Although civilian rule was quickly restored and fair elections were held in 2010, the regime descended into competitive authoritarianism under President Juan Orlando Hernández (2014–present). Hernández, who had packed the Supreme Court while serving as president of the National Congress in 2012, flouted a longstanding constitutional ban on presidential reelection by having the loyalist Court rule it “inapplicable.” Hernández was reelected in 2018 in a vote marred by irregularities. Despite massive protests and calls by the Organization of American States for a recount, the Trump administration remained silent, which lent legitimacy to Hernández's increasingly authoritarian government. Because Honduras's standing with the United States was not perceived to be at risk, business leaders, military officials, and other

powerful elites felt little pressure to break with the government (as had occurred, for example, after the 1993 presidential coup in Guatemala and the 1994 stolen election in the Dominican Republic).

Western linkage and leverage also failed to deter authoritarian regression in Nicaragua. The breakdown of Nicaragua's fragile democracy began soon after Daniel Ortega of the left-wing Sandinista movement returned to the presidency in 2006. In 2008, progovernment authorities stripped one opposition party (the Sandinista Renewal Movement) of its legal status and forcibly replaced the leader of another party (the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance) with an Ortega loyalist. Mayoral elections held that year were marred by irregularities. In 2009, a packed Supreme Court overturned Nicaragua's constitutional ban on reelection, and two years later Ortega was reelected in a flawed vote whose results, according to credible observers, were "impossible to verify."¹⁴ The authoritarian turn accelerated after 2011. A 2014 constitutional reform allowed for unlimited presidential reelection, and in 2016 the main opposition force was stripped of its seats in the legislature. In 2018, a wave of opposition protest was brutally repressed, leaving hundreds of people dead. Today the regime is a full-scale dictatorship.

Even though the current Ortega government is more authoritarian than Sandinista rule was in the late 1980s, it has faced considerably less external democratizing pressure. Among other factors, "black knight" support from Venezuela in the form of subsidized oil and an estimated \$4.5 billion in aid helped to blunt international pressure. In addition, the Ortega government's cooperation with Washington on issues of trade, drugs, and border security diluted support for U.S. punitive action.¹⁵ Indeed, trade relations and U.S. assistance to Nicaragua remained steady through 2017.

The persistence of authoritarianism in high-linkage countries such as Honduras, Hungary, and Nicaragua shows how much Western democratizing pressure has weakened relative to the 1990s. Even in small states with extensive ties to the West, autocratic behavior no longer triggers a costly punitive response from the international community. In other words, the external cost of authoritarianism has diminished.

Why Competitive Politics Persists

Clearly, then, the world is less hostile to authoritarianism today than it was in the initial post-Cold War period. One might expect this change to encourage many regimes to shed their competitive elements and become fully authoritarianism. If the external costs of repression are now bearable for autocrats, why should they tolerate the uncertainties generated by allowing open opposition and multiparty elections? A few regimes have followed this logic. In Cambodia, for example, intense international pressure forced the government of Hun Sen to legalize op-

position and allow competitive multiparty elections during the 1990s. Over the last decade, however, declining Western pressure and support from China enabled Hun Sen to ban the main opposition party and jail or exile major opposition leaders, thereby reconsolidating a full-scale autocracy.

But such cases have been rare. Of the 35 competitive authoritarian regimes we identified in the 1990–1995 period, only five—Belarus, Cambodia, Cameroon, Nicaragua, and Russia—may be characterized as hegemonic or closed autocracies in 2019. The rest remain competitive: Fifteen have become democracies, while fifteen have remained competitive authoritarian.

Competitive regimes thus remain surprisingly robust in the “post–Cold War” era. Even countries with highly unfavorable conditions for democracy—Benin, the Gambia, Haiti, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mongolia, Sierra Leone—remain competitive authoritarian or even democratic. Given the increasingly unfavorable international environment, why has full-scale authoritarianism failed to make a comeback?

The resilience of competitive electoral regimes has both international and domestic roots. On the international front, the liberal West may be down, but it is hardly out. Western democracies remain the world’s most influential states. In 2017, the United States tripled China’s military spending and exceeded that of the next seven largest military powers combined.¹⁶ Nine of the world’s ten largest economies are established democracies, and the dollar remains the world currency.¹⁷

At the same time, challenges to liberal democracy remain weak and ineffective. During the Cold War, China and the Soviet Union engaged in serious efforts to spread communism in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. Contemporary China and Russia, by contrast, do relatively little to promote alternative regime models abroad. Both states have sought primarily to support geopolitical allies and weaken rivals, rather than to promote authoritarianism *per se*. In China, although Xi Jinping has pushed back aggressively against foreign actors—including businesses and universities—that criticize the regime, it is not clear that his government is intent on promoting autocracy abroad.¹⁸ Similarly, Russian support for authoritarianism is largely opportunistic—and often ineffective. The Putin government backed (pro-Russian) opposition forces in autocratic Kyrgyzstan and Moldova. And in some cases, including Ukraine, Russian intervention has been so ham-fisted that it has triggered an anti-Russian backlash that has strengthened democratic forces.

Unlike in previous periods in history, moreover, no legitimate alternative model has emerged to challenge liberal democracy in the early twenty-first century. During the 1920s and 1930s, fascism and communism enjoyed broad elite and mass support in countries across the world. Well-organized parties and movements endorsed these ideolo-

gies as superior alternatives to liberal democracy. During the 1960s and 1970s, Leninist single-party rule was embraced by prestigious Third World leaders such as Algeria's Ahmed Ben Bella, Cuba's Fidel Castro,

In many countries, the persistence of competitive politics is rooted in pluralism by default: Autocrats simply lack the organizational resources and coercive capacity they would need in order to consolidate hegemony.

Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, and Tanzania's Julius Nyerere. In other countries, particularly in South America and parts of Asia, right-wing military dictatorships were widely accepted as a legitimate, if less than ideal, means of staving off communism.

No such alternative model exists today. Rather, multiparty elections continue to be widely viewed as the most legitimate means of ascending to power. Public opinion across much of the world remains essentially

in line with Churchill's aphorism about democracy: Citizens do not necessarily love democracy, but outside of a handful of countries (including China and Singapore), they do not find the alternatives any better.¹⁹ Societies may not be deeply committed to the principles of liberal democracy, but people like competitive elections, and in particular they value the ability to vote out bad governments. This is why citizens across the world—most recently, in Algeria, Armenia, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Hong Kong, Nicaragua, Russia, Sudan, and Venezuela—continue to take to the streets to demand or defend competitive elections.

Although Western liberalism faces diverse challenges, then, the institution of multiparty elections remains remarkably strong.²⁰ Populist and ethnonationalist movements threaten liberal rights in many countries, but these challenges remain grounded in electoral politics. Populism weakens liberal institutions, often pushing democracies into competitive authoritarianism,²¹ but it seldom does away with electoral competition. Even military coups rarely give rise to dictatorship in the contemporary era. As Nikolay Marinov and Hein Goemans have shown, most post-Cold War coups have been followed by competitive elections.²² To a striking degree, elections continue to be the only game in town.

There are also important domestic reasons for the persistence of competitive politics in much of the world. Many contemporary autocrats lack the institutional capacity to eliminate opposition and to maintain the internal cohesion required for the consolidation of hegemonic rule.²³ For one thing, they lack minimally effective states. State weakness—which is pervasive in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of the former Soviet Union, Asia, and Latin America—undermines economic performance, limits governments' ability to deliver public services, and engenders widespread corruption. As a result, governments that preside over weak

states often face widespread public discontent, which can easily lead to opposition and protest. Just as democracies are prone to serious problems of governance and governability when the state is weak, so too are autocracies.

Crucially, moreover, autocrats in weak states often lack the coercive capacity to suppress opposition challenges. If the army, police, and other security units are ill-equipped, underfunded, and undisciplined, they cannot be relied upon to put down even modest protests. The sheer weakness of state bureaucracies and coercive agencies leaves autocrats vulnerable to “people power” uprisings. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, autocrat Kurmanbek Bakiyev fell in 2010 after a few thousand lightly armed protestors overwhelmed police and took over government buildings in the capital. As Scott Radnitz noted, “the Kyrgyz state was still so weak that a protester could drive a truck through the front gates of the White House, opening the way for mobs to flood into the building.”²⁴ Likewise, in Madagascar, Didier Ratsiraka fell from power in 2002 when the army stood aside and refused to repress protesters in the wake of a stolen election. Seven years later, his successor Marc Ravalomanana fell in a similar manner, abandoning power after army units mutinied amid antigovernment riots.

Weak ruling parties also can prevent incumbents from consolidating power, leaving them vulnerable to internal schisms and succession crises. For example, Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko came to power in 2014 with a party that was “no more than a myth,” with no website or known address or telephone number.²⁵ This limited Poroshenko’s ability to maintain—much less consolidate—power. In late 2018, following a Russian naval attack, Poroshenko declared martial law, which would have postponed upcoming presidential elections. Due in part to opposition from his own allies, however, he was forced to amend the declaration to ensure the elections would go forward as scheduled. He was then soundly defeated by political outsider Volodymyr Zelensky. Incipient competitive authoritarianism in cases such as Benin under Thomas Boni Yayi (2006–16), Ecuador under Rafael Correa (2007–17), Georgia under Eduard Shevardnadze (1992–2003), and Senegal under Abdoulaye Wade (2000–12) was similarly undermined by ruling-party weakness.

State and party weakness helps to account for the persistence of competitive authoritarianism—as opposed to full-blown dictatorship—in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, two-thirds of the world’s competitive authoritarian regimes (21 out of 32) are found in Africa, the region with the world’s weakest states. In countries such as Benin, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Sierra Leone, ineffective bureaucracies, underfunded security forces, and weak or nonexistent ruling parties have limited governments’ efforts to consolidate authoritarian control.

In many countries, then, the persistence of competitive politics is

rooted in pluralism by default: Autocrats simply lack the organizational resources and coercive capacity they would need in order to consolidate hegemony. Weak states and parties undermine the stability of all types of regimes. Democracies born under such conditions (as in Benin, Haiti, and Mali) are likely to be fragile, but so are new autocracies. In other words, state weakness has inhibited authoritarian consolidation in the post–post–Cold War era.

The New Face of Competitive Authoritarianism

We have argued that most competitive authoritarian regimes emerge under conditions that are highly unfavorable for democracy—low-income countries with little or no democratic tradition, weak institutions and rule of law, underdeveloped private sectors and civil societies, and feeble oppositions. In such environments, it is relatively easy to tilt the playing field. Weak state institutions are more readily packed and manipulated; impoverished media outlets, businesses, and opposition parties are more easily coopted. When abuse occurs, opposition protest is often limited and sporadic. As a result, even relatively unskilled and unpopular leaders are often able to subvert democracy (even if they cannot consolidate dictatorship). In such cases, competitive authoritarianism is largely a “top-down” affair, as leaders do not need to mobilize mass support bases or build sizeable electoral majorities.

In recent years, however, competitive authoritarianism has emerged in a handful of very different countries. In Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey, and Venezuela, democratic traditions and institutions were stronger than in cases of the kind described above. There existed reasonably independent judiciaries and the rule of law was more or less established. Economies were more developed, and there were robust private sectors, vibrant civil societies, and strong opposition parties. Moreover, these countries’ extensive ties to the West meant that their governments faced greater external scrutiny than those in most of sub-Saharan Africa and the former Soviet Union. In these new cases, then, tilting the playing field was considerably harder. Incumbents confronted independent judges, prestigious independent media outlets, and oppositions with the resources to effectively mobilize supporters both on the streets and at the ballot box.

Tilting the playing field in countries such as Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey, and Venezuela thus requires greater skill, more sophisticated strategies, and far more extensive popular mobilization than in, say, Benin, Madagascar, or Moldova. Prospective autocrats must first command sizeable electoral majorities, and then deploy plebiscitarian or hypermajoritarian strategies to change the constitutional and electoral rules of the game so as to weaken opponents and lock in the prospective autocrats’ own hold on power.

This is often achieved via polarizing populist or ethnonationalist strategies. For example, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, campaigning amid serious economic crises, used effective populist appeals that tapped into longstanding popular resentment against the established political elite. In Hungary, Fidesz achieved the landslide electoral victory that brought the party to power in 2010 by skillfully mobilizing anti-elite sentiments in the wake of a major corruption scandal. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte astutely tapped into widespread public disaffection over soaring crime rates and persistent corruption. Finally, in India, an established democracy that may be on the brink of competitive authoritarianism, Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party used religious nationalism to mobilize a large segment of the country's Hindu majority. In each of these cases, skillful populist or ethnonationalist appeals provided potential autocrats with the broad public support and parliamentary majorities needed to undertake constitutional and other changes aimed at tilting the playing field. Given relatively high levels of domestic and international scrutiny, moreover, these initiatives had to be more subtle and sophisticated than those employed in other competitive authoritarian regimes.

Hungary's Authoritarian Path

The clearest case of this new pattern of competitive authoritarianism is Hungary. As recently as 2010, Hungary was widely regarded as a consolidated democracy with strong institutions, a competitive party system, a vibrant civil society, and free and diverse media. Between 1990 and 2010, Hungary experienced five turnovers in which center-left and center-right parties succeeded one another through elections that "were about the political color of the government, not the nature of the regime."²⁶ In 2004, Hungary joined the European Union, a move that yielded billions of euros in agricultural subsidies and that a majority of Hungarians still support today.²⁷

Orbán and Fidesz first had come to power in 1998 on a liberal center-right platform. But beginning in the early 2000s, and especially after the party's 2002 electoral defeat, Orbán changed course, traded in liberalism for religious conservatism and nationalism, and skillfully began to polarize Hungarian politics. As with populist and ethnonationalist parties elsewhere, Orbán's anti-elite appeals tapped into hitherto dormant resentments, particularly among rural voters. Increasingly, he also embraced illiberalism, condoning a "calculated breaking of taboos" against anti-Semitic and anti-Roma rhetoric that helped to attract far-right support.²⁸

After returning to power with a parliamentary supermajority in 2010, Fidesz began to subvert democratic institutions in ways that were devastatingly effective but also sufficiently subtle to limit blowback from the

EU. Crucially, the Orbán government locked in power without overtly violating basic civil liberties by such means as arresting opponents or closing independent media. In 2011, claiming that the courts and other state oversight agencies had been captured by a “deep state” controlled by communists, Fidesz used its parliamentary majority to pass a “fundamental law” that removed key checks on the prime minister’s power. Most notably, the Constitutional Court was expanded and packed with Fidesz loyalists, after which it lost political relevance. The government also packed the National Election Commission with loyal partisans. As a result, virtually all subsequent elections-related complaints submitted through official channels were rejected on formalistic grounds. By 2012, Fidesz loyalists were “entrenched in every corner of the state—from the Constitutional Court, Budget Council, and National Judicial Office to the State Audit Office, Public Prosecutor’s Office, and National Bank.”²⁹

The Orbán government also gained effective control over much of the news media—not by shutting down newspapers or arresting journalists, but by working behind the scenes to politicize state media outlets, drive international media groups out of the Hungarian market, and help allied businesspeople to gain control of private-sector media. In 2014, for example, a progovernment media company borrowed funds from two banks with government ties in order to buy *Origo.hu*, a leading news website that had been highly critical of the government. As of late 2018, Fidesz allies controlled more than five-hundred media outlets, making it increasingly difficult for government critics to reach large audiences.³⁰

The Fidesz government has also shaped the media environment both through the selective distribution of state advertising and via state influence on other advertisers. For example, after 2010 many companies stopped advertising on the opposition broadcaster *Klubradio*, fearing political consequences. Starved of advertising revenue, many independent news outlets have been forced to close.³¹ The dearth of visible coercion allowed the government to portray such closures as a consequence of market forces affecting all media rather than of autocratic pressure aimed only at opposition media.

Finally, Fidesz used a series of electoral reforms to lock in its advantage. These included egregious partisan gerrymandering; the elimination of parliamentary runoff elections, which undercut the chances of weaker opposition parties; and a ban on campaign advertising on private media outlets, which effectively limited television campaigning to (biased) state-run media.³² These advantages allowed Fidesz to retain its two-thirds parliamentary supermajority in 2014 without resorting to outright fraud on election day, even though its vote share fell to 45 percent from 53 percent in the previous election.

Notwithstanding its clear slide into competitive authoritarianism, the Orbán government largely avoided EU censure by deftly using Fidesz’s

membership in the European People's Party (EPP)—the conservative bloc that dominates the European Parliament—to deflect criticism. Until his party's suspension from the EPP in March 2019, Orbán was shielded by EPP members—including Germany's Christian Democratic Union—because Fidesz “delivered votes that helped the EPP maintain its status as the dominant party in EU politics.”³³ Thus, the combination of subtle abuses and strategic alliances in the European Parliament enabled the Orbán government to avoid EU punitive action for nearly a decade. Pressure on Budapest from European regional actors increased in 2019, but given Hungary's tilted playing field and weak and divided opposition, Orbán's hold on power appears secure.

Diffusion to the West?

Other European leaders have sought to replicate Orbán's strategies. The closest example is in neighboring Poland. Jarosław Kaczyński has attempted, in his words, to create a “Budapest in Warsaw” since his conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) gained power in 2015.³⁴ Like Fidesz, PiS sought to purge and pack the courts, undermine the independence of the election commission, seize control of public broadcasting, and purge the army and intelligence forces of personnel deemed insufficiently loyal to the party. These efforts have not always succeeded. Due to robust civic opposition, PiS's failure to achieve solid electoral majorities, and greater pushback from the EU, Polish democracy survived through 2019. The threat of a slide into competitive authoritarianism remains very real, however, particularly in light of PiS's easy reelection in October 2019.

Even more surprising than the assault on democratic institutions in Hungary and Poland is the evidence that these strategies may be diffusing to established Western democracies. Amid deepening polarization around issues of national identity, illiberal or populist right-wing forces in the West have established close ties with Orbán as well as with Russia and have embraced some of their authoritarian practices. Prior to Austria's 2017 election, for example, leaders of the Austrian Freedom Party were videotaped seeking Russian assistance and expressing interest in replicating Orbán's manipulation of the media playing field. In the video, Freedom Party leader (and future vice-chancellor) Heinz-Christian Strache declared, “We want to build a media landscape like Orban did,” and embraced the idea of a Russian takeover of Austria's leading tabloid newspaper, *Krone*.³⁵ As a junior partner in the Austrian government between 2017 and 2019, the Freedom Party worked to politicize state-run television and used the interior ministry to shut out critical media outlets and reward friendly ones. Italy's popular far-right leader Matteo Salvini has likewise described Orbán as a political role model. Salvini's friendly ties with Russia, harsh nativist and antiminority discourse, and use of

defamation suits against critics raise concerns that a future government led by him could move in an illiberal and even autocratic direction.

Similar tendencies have even reached the United States, where the Trump administration borrowed the “deep state” discourse that autocrats in Hungary and Turkey used to justify purges and the packing of the courts and other key state institutions. Although Trump’s efforts to purge law-enforcement, intelligence, and other public agencies achieved only modest success, the Republican Party has taken a range of other steps to tilt the electoral playing field to its advantage, including the adoption of more than a dozen state-level “voter ID” laws that make it harder for lower-income and minority citizens to register and vote.³⁶

Systematic efforts to tilt the playing field against political opponents were widely believed to be a thing of the past in established Western democracies. The notion that openly illiberal and even autocratic leaders might ascend to power, or that governing parties would seek to replicate Orbán’s authoritarian media strategies, was virtually unthinkable just a decade ago. Western states possess strong democratic antibodies, including robust political and legal institutions, highly developed private sectors and civil societies, and well-organized oppositions. The extensive financial and organizational resources available to oppositions in established Western democracies make it much harder to tilt the playing field in these states than it is in, say, Kenya, Turkey, Ukraine, or Venezuela. Nevertheless, the emergence of more subtle and sophisticated authoritarian strategies, along with the evolution of effective nationalist and populist discourses capable of building majority support for such practices, is a major cause for concern. Competitive authoritarianism is not only thriving but inching westward. No democracy can be taken for granted.

NOTES

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1. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 52–65. See also Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), from which many of the points below are drawn.

2. Christopher Carothers, “The Surprising Instability of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29 (October 2018): 129–35.

3. Dan Slater, “Democratic Careening,” *World Politics* 65 (October 2013): 729–63.

4. As of December 2019, we classify Albania, Armenia, Croatia, Dominican Republic, Georgia, Ghana, Guyana, Malaysia, Mexico, Moldova, Peru, Romania, Slovakia, Taiwan, and Ukraine as democracies.

5. These are Benin, North Macedonia, Mali, Nicaragua, Senegal, and Serbia.

6. These are Belarus, Cambodia, Cameroon, and Russia.
7. These are Botswana, Gabon, Haiti, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.
8. At the time of this writing in November 2019, Bolivian president Evo Morales has stepped down in response to widespread protests following allegations of fraud in the 2019 presidential election. Pending further developments, we have retained our categorization of Bolivia as a competitive authoritarian regime.
9. Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).
10. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
11. Cooley and Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony*. On the effects of the changing international environment see also Larry Diamond, *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).
12. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 41; Larry Diamond, Marc Plattner, and Christopher Walker, eds. *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).
13. These are Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Two other new competitive authoritarian cases, the Philippines and Turkey, are also characterized by extensive ties to the West.
14. Kai M. Thaler, "Nicaragua: A Return to Caudillismo," *Journal of Democracy* 28 (April 2017):159.
15. Thaler, "Nicaragua: A Return to Caudillismo," 165, 163.
16. Cooley and Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony*, chapter 1.
17. See www.focus-economics.com/blog/the-largest-economies-in-the-world.
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