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Guardrails and Breakdown: Democracy in Ghana, Botswana, Mali, and Benin

Votes Are Not Enough: Democracy Beyond Election Day

FROM COAL AND STEEL TO CITIZENS: THE EU'S DEMOCRATIC STORY

By Luca Bianchi

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Editor's Note

Democracy today feels both indispensable and uncertain. Around the world, its institutions endure, but public trust, civic participation, and political accountability remain under pressure. This issue of The Catalyst explores that tension by asking not only whether democracy will survive, but what kind of future it can still offer.

The essays in this issue approach that question from several angles. Scarlett Hendy examines the gap between democratic ideals and political reality, while Daniil Alexander-Bastian argues that democracy must extend beyond elections alone. Luca Bianchi traces the European Union's democratic development, and Dana Koptleuova considers the prospects for renewal in a captured Hungary. Hiroshi Tanaka explores the politics of control through prohibition in Russia, Sofia Petrovà reflects on the democratic struggles of post-Soviet states, and Carlos Mendoza compares democratic resilience and breakdown across Ghana, Botswana, Mali, and Benin.

Together, these contributions show that democracy is never automatic. It depends on institutions, yes, but also on trust, participation, memory, and the willingness to defend public life against erosion. Its future will be shaped not by rhetoric alone, but by the hard work of reform, resistance, and renewal.

We hope this issue offers both clarity and challenge. If democracy has a future, it will be because people continue to question it seriously, protect it carefully, and imagine it boldly.

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Democracy Between Ideal and Institution: Theory and Practice

By Scarlett Hendy

Democracy is among the most admired and most disputed ideas in political life. It names an aspiration to popular self-government, a moral claim about equality, a constitutional form, a set of electoral procedures, and, increasingly, a fragile achievement that can erode without formally disappearing. Political theorists have never fully agreed on whether democracy should be understood primarily as the rule of the people, the fair aggregation of preferences, the institutionalization of political competition, the protection of equal status, or the public use of reason among free and equal citizens. That disagreement is not a sign of conceptual failure. It is evidence that democracy sits at the junction of several values that are mutually reinforcing but never perfectly identical: liberty, equality, participation, accountability, pluralism, and legitimacy. The difficulty of democracy begins with the fact that modern societies need all of these goods at once, while no single institution can realize them completely. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

The most useful way to approach the subject, therefore, is to distinguish between democracy in theory and democracy in practice without imagining that the two can ever be cleanly separated. In theory, democracy is an ideal of collective self-rule among political equals under conditions of disagreement. In practice, democracy is an institutional order that translates that ideal into large, unequal, conflict-ridden societies through elections, representation, rights, opposition, parties, courts, civil associations, and public administration. The core argument of this essay is that democracy cannot be reduced either to a moral slogan or to a voting mechanism. It is best understood as a regulated struggle over public power in which each adult member of the polity must count as an equal, governments must remain answerable to the governed, opposition must be legitimate, and public decisions must remain revisable. The gap between ideal and institution is not an accidental imperfection of democracy; it is the normal condition of democratic politics. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

At the theoretical level, democracy begins from a simple but demanding premise: where people must live under common rules and reasonably disagree about those rules, none has a natural title to rule the others. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy captures this point by defining democracy as a uniquely public way of treating persons as equals when they disagree about how their shared society should be shaped. On this view, democracy is not justified merely because it often produces good outcomes. It is justified because it offers a fair basis on which free and equal persons can authoritatively settle common questions without presuming that some are born to govern and others to obey. Democracy, in other words, is tied to public equality before it is tied to any specific procedure. Voting matters because it operationalizes an equal claim to political standing; it is important not as ritual but as a visible expression of equal membership. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

That theoretical core also explains why democracy is never equivalent to simple majoritarianism. A majority can decide many things, but it cannot democratically decide that some citizens no longer count as citizens. If democracy rests on public equality, then democratic procedures carry internal limits: the rights of speech, association, contestation, and inclusion are not external luxuries added after the fact. They are part of the very conditions under which majority rule can count as democratic rather than merely victorious. The

same philosophical tradition that defends equal say also identifies the danger of persistent minorities, groups that are formally included but systematically overruled in ways that mark them as inferiors. Democracy, then, is not just the arithmetical triumph of 50 percent plus one. It is a form of rule in which collective decision making is legitimate only so long as the equal status of those subject to it remains intact. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Historically, democracy first appeared in forms far more direct than those familiar to modern constitutional states. The Athenian case remains important not because it offers a model ready for imitation, but because it clarifies what later democracies had to abandon, and what they still seek to preserve. As the contemporary philosophical literature notes, Athenian democracy combined direct lawmaking with sortition for many offices, so that citizens had both an equal voice in assemblies and an equal chance of occupying certain public roles. That model made visible the democratic attraction of presence: the rulers and the ruled were, ideally, the same body of persons. Yet modern states are too large, too socially differentiated, and too administratively complex to reproduce that arrangement. The theoretical question since antiquity has therefore been how far democracy can survive once presence gives way to mediation, and the people can rule only through institutions that stand between them and power. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

This transition from direct to mediated rule is one reason representation stands at the center of modern democratic theory. Representation has often been treated as democracy's compromise with necessity, a second-best solution once genuine self-government becomes impossible. Yet that assumption is too crude. Nadia Urbinati argues that representative government should not be seen as merely an unfortunate substitute for direct democracy, but as a legitimate democratic mode of decision making in its own right. Her argument matters because it shifts attention away from the fantasy that a modern people can be politically present all at once. Democracy in practice depends on circulation between citizens and institutions, judgment and authorization, opinion and law. Representation is not democratic when it severs rulers from ruled, but neither is it undemocratic simply because the people do not govern in person. Modern democracy survives by making absence politically accountable. (OUP Academic)

Hanna Pitkin's classic analysis remains crucial here because it shows that representation cannot be collapsed into a single relation such as delegation or election. The structure of her book distinguishes formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and "acting for" conceptions of representation, indicating that democratic representation involves several dimensions at once. A representative may be authorized by election, resemble a constituency in some social respect, symbolize a political community, and act substantively on behalf of others, but none of these relations alone exhausts what representation means. This complexity is not a defect in the concept. It reflects the complexity of democratic rule itself, where citizens expect representation to be both responsive and independent, both socially legible and institutionally responsible. Democracy in theory must therefore confront an uncomfortable fact: the people can govern only through persons and bodies that are never identical with the people as a whole. (JSTOR)

One of the most influential attempts to redefine democracy under modern conditions came from Joseph Schumpeter. In *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Schumpeter explicitly set "the classical doctrine of democracy" against "another theory of democracy," and this alternative theory has

shaped much twentieth-century political science. Instead of imagining a unified people discovering and enacting a common will, Schumpeter treated democracy as an institutional arrangement for selecting leaders through competition for votes. What matters in this account is not continuous popular rule, but the orderly rivalry of elites under electoral uncertainty. The advantage of the Schumpeterian move is realism: it recognizes that most citizens cannot govern directly, do not form coherent preferences on every issue, and rarely control policy in detail. Its cost is normative thinning. Democracy risks being reduced to a method for hiring and firing governments, with equality, participation, and public reasoning subordinated to elite competition. (Routledge)

Robert Dahl's work can be read as both an acceptance of modern complexity and a refusal of Schumpeter's minimalism. *Polyarchy* and *Democracy and Its Critics* do not claim that actual states ever achieve pure popular rule. Instead, Dahl asks what institutional conditions bring societies closer to democratic government under real-world constraints. The very subtitle of *Polyarchy—Participation and Opposition*—is revealing. Democracy in practice requires not only broad inclusion but also organized contestation. Citizens must be able to enter politics, criticize rulers, support alternatives, and replace governments without violence. Dahl's later work deepens the point by linking democracy to political equality rather than to electoral procedure alone. In that sense, "polyarchy" is not a retreat from democratic theory but a disciplined translation of it: a recognition that modern democracy must be assessed by how well it institutionalizes equal inclusion and public contestability, not by whether it realizes impossible fantasies of immediate rule. (Yale University Press)

Carole Pateman represents a different corrective, one directed not against utopianism but against democratic passivity. Her *Participation and Democratic Theory* attacks what she calls elitist readings of democracy and argues that political science has too often ignored evidence about the educative effects of participation. The important claim here is not simply that more participation is morally pleasing. It is that democratic capacities are partly formed through democratic practice. Citizens do not arrive fully equipped for self-government and then enter politics; rather, they acquire efficacy, competence, and civic confidence by acting in settings where their action matters. Pateman's argument expands democracy beyond the ballot box toward workplaces, local associations, and other sites where authority is experienced. She thereby restores a classical insight often lost in procedural models: democracy is not only a way of making decisions but a way of forming democratic persons. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

The deliberative turn in democratic theory adds yet another dimension. John Dryzek's *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond* treats democracy not merely as preference aggregation or elite competition, but as a process in which legitimacy depends on public reasoning among those affected by decisions. Deliberative theory matters because it responds to a genuine weakness in both majoritarian and elitist models: they can tell us who wins, but not why the losing side should nonetheless regard outcomes as legitimate. Deliberation aims to address that question by requiring justification, reciprocity, and the testing of claims in public. Its promise is that democratic disagreement can be civilized without being suppressed. Its risk is that it may underestimate how inequality, ideology, and institutional power shape who gets heard, whose speech counts as reasonable, and which issues are declared open to contestation in the first place. Even so, deliberative theory rightly insists that democracy is not exhausted by counting

voices; it must also concern the conditions under which voices can speak and be heard. (Oxford University Press)

Recent empirical scholarship has, however, pushed back against idealized pictures of citizen competence. Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels argue in *Democracy for Realists* that the "folk theory" of democracy, in which informed individuals calmly connect policy preferences to electoral choices and thereby guide government, badly misdescribes how mass politics works. Their critique is unsettling but valuable. Citizens are often inattentive, shaped by social identities, and prone to retrospective judgments that are only loosely connected to policy responsibility. Parties and group attachments, not isolated rational reflection, do much of the work in democratic politics. This does not prove that democracy is impossible or worthless. It does show that democratic theory must be institutional, not anthropological. A workable democracy cannot depend on heroic assumptions about universally informed, consistently rational citizens. It must be designed for ordinary human beings as they are. (JSTOR)

Taken together, these theoretical traditions suggest that democracy is not one thing but a layered political ideal. From egalitarian theories it inherits the principle of equal status; from representative theories, the necessity of mediation; from Schumpeterian realism, the importance of competition and alternation; from participatory theory, the educative value of involvement; from deliberative theory, the demand for public justification; and from contemporary empirical realism, the warning that institutions must compensate for the limits of civic knowledge rather than deny them. The most plausible theory of democracy today is therefore mixed. It should reject both romantic immediacy and cynical reduction. Democracy is not the pure presence of the people, but neither is it only the periodic certification of elites. It is a constitutional and social arrangement that keeps public power open to challenge by those subject to it and treats them, however imperfectly, as co-authors rather than objects of rule. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

If theory identifies the values at stake, practice reveals the institutional compromises through which those values are pursued. In practice, democracy begins with elections, but it cannot end there. Competitive elections are necessary because they make government removable without bloodshed and allow rulers to become opposition. Yet elections alone do not settle whether a regime is democratic. Yascha Mounk's distinction between "rights without democracy" and "democracy without rights" is helpful precisely because it names two opposite pathologies of modern politics. A technocratic order may preserve civil liberties while insulating key decisions from popular control; a populist order may invoke the people while stripping away rights, checks, and pluralism. Both are democratic failures. To govern democratically is not merely to ask who won the last election, but whether losers remain protected, whether future competition remains meaningful, and whether public authority can be challenged without fear. (JSTOR)

For that reason, democratic practice depends on a wider constitutional ecology. Freedom House defines its annual assessment in terms of political rights and civil liberties, while V-Dem emphasizes that democracy is a multidimensional concept requiring historically sensitive and disaggregated measurement. These approaches differ methodologically, but they converge on a central point: democracy cannot be captured by turnout or election day alone. It requires freedoms of expression and association, legitimate opposition, access to information, and institutions that allow rulers to be monitored, criticized, and replaced. A government that wins

elections while disabling independent media, criminalizing dissent, or hollowing out opposition parties may preserve the shell of democracy while destroying its substance. Practice, then, confirms what theory already suggested: democratic institutions are interdependent, and erosion often starts where formal constitutions appear strongest because habits of contestation are mistaken for permanent guarantees. (Freedom House)

Representation is likewise more demanding in practice than the crude notion of "doing what voters want." Representatives do not simply transmit pre-formed popular preferences. They organize agendas, frame choices, interpret interests, and often act under conditions where constituents themselves are divided or uncertain. That fact has sometimes been used to justify paternalism, but it can also be understood democratically. Urbinati's account of representation as a continuum of influence and judgment, together with Pitkin's emphasis on multiple senses of representation, suggests that democratic representation is a relationship of ongoing claim and revision. Elections authorize, but they do not complete the representative relation. Legislators, parties, and executives must continue to render themselves intelligible and answerable to citizens whose consent is always provisional. Democracy in practice therefore requires a rhythm of authorization, criticism, explanation, and correction, not a single moment of popular will. (OUP Academic)

Political parties, though often distrusted, are indispensable to this rhythm. They simplify political choice, aggregate interests, recruit leaders, and create the organized opposition without which accountability becomes incoherent. A democracy of atomized citizens facing isolated candidates would be less, not more, democratic, because it would deprive voters of durable vehicles for coordination and responsibility. Here the empirical realism of Achen and Bartels intersects with the institutional insights of representative theory: citizens often rely on partisan and group cues because large-scale politics is too complex for purely individualized judgment. The democratic task is not to abolish mediation, but to make mediating institutions more transparent, competitive, and internally accountable. Practice cannot recover a mythical unmediated people; it can only ensure that mediation remains revisable and plural rather than oligarchic and closed. (JSTOR)

Participation beyond elections also matters in practice, and not only for symbolic reasons. Pateman's insight that participation can cultivate efficacy finds a contemporary echo in public-trust research. The OECD's 2024 survey reports that perceptions of having a say in government are more strongly associated with trust than many demographic variables: 69 percent of those who feel they have a say trust national government, compared with only 22 percent of those who feel they do not. That finding should not be read romantically; participation alone does not solve distributional conflict or misinformation. It does, however, reveal that democracy is experienced not merely as periodic authorization but as perceived agency. Citizens who believe politics is permanently done to them are less likely to regard institutions as their own, even when elections remain formally free. A democratic practice that confines popular influence to infrequent voting risks breeding precisely the alienation it later condemns. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

The relationship between constitutional limits and democracy is therefore better understood as internal rather than adversarial. Rights, independent courts, and legal restraints are sometimes portrayed as barriers erected against the people. In reality, they can be the

means by which the people continue to exist as a plurality of equals rather than collapse into a victorious faction. Democratic majorities need boundaries not because democracy mistrusts the public, but because democratic publics are internally diverse and temporally extended. Today's losers must remain tomorrow's possible winners. The legitimacy of self-government depends on preserving that reversibility. Institutions of restraint can certainly become anti-democratic when they entrench privilege or disable contestation, but they are no less anti-democratic when they vanish and leave minorities defenseless. Democracy in practice is a regime of constrained contest, not unlimited will. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

These institutional realities produce enduring tensions rather than neat resolutions. The first is the tension between majority rule and minority protection. A democracy that never allows majorities to govern ceases to be democratic; a democracy that allows majorities to stigmatize or immobilize minorities eventually undermines its own moral basis. The problem cannot be solved once and for all by a single constitutional formula because societies change, coalitions realign, and some minorities become "persistent" in precisely the sense discussed by normative theory. What democratic practice can do is disperse arenas of power, preserve multiple channels of influence, and maintain rights of association and speech that allow minorities to reorganize, persuade, and become future majorities. The health of democracy is often measured less by how it treats winners than by how it treats those who lose. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

A second tension lies between expertise and equality. Modern states govern financial systems, public health, digital infrastructures, climate transitions, and security arrangements that demand specialized knowledge. Yet if democratic authority is handed over entirely to experts, citizens cease to govern themselves in any meaningful sense. Schumpeter's realism and later empirical scholarship are right to puncture fantasies of universal competence, but democratic theory is right to resist technocratic replacement. The proper practical question is not whether expertise should matter, but how expert judgment can remain subject to public purposes, public explanation, and public revision. Expertise should inform democratic decision making without becoming a substitute sovereign. This balance is difficult because experts can become insulated while publics can become demagogically hostile to knowledge. Still, democracy fails in both directions: when it treats technical authority as self-justifying, and when it converts ignorance into a badge of authenticity. (PMC)

A third tension concerns responsiveness and responsibility. Citizens often want governments to react quickly to grievances, identities, and crises. But democratic governments must also act with some continuity, honor prior commitments, respect procedures, and govern for people who are absent, future, or temporarily unpopular. The OECD's findings on trust are useful here. Trust is shaped not only by perceptions of voice but also by assessments of fairness, integrity, and everyday institutional performance. A democracy that is highly expressive but administratively incompetent will lose legitimacy. One that is administratively competent but politically deaf will also lose legitimacy. In practice, democracy requires a state capable enough to act and open enough to be corrected. The fantasy of democracy without administration is as misleading as the fantasy of administration without democratic contestation. (OECD)

A fourth and increasingly central tension is between social inequality and political equality. Democracies formally assign equal votes, but citizens do not enter politics with

equal resources, time, security, or access to platforms of influence. The OECD reports that people who feel financially insecure, have lower education, are younger, are women, or belong to discriminated groups report lower levels of trust in government. These are not merely psychological findings. They point to a structural difficulty: equal citizenship is hard to sustain where large sections of the population experience politics as remote, unequal, or rigged. Democratic theory has long insisted that political equality cannot be completely isolated from social conditions. Practice confirms the point. Where inequalities harden into permanent asymmetries of attention and influence, democracy survives formally but thins substantively. (OECD)

Contemporary evidence on democratic decline makes these tensions impossible to ignore. V-Dem's 2026 Democracy Report argues that democracy for the average global citizen has fallen back to 1978 levels, that the world ended 2025 with 92 autocracies and 87 democracies, and that 74 percent of the world's population now lives in autocracies. It also reports that freedom of expression is the most attacked democratic component, worsening in 44 countries, and that 41 percent of the world's population lives in autocratizing countries. Whether one accepts every coding judgment in the report or not, the broader implication is unmistakable: the main contemporary danger is not simply the disappearance of elections, but the cumulative degradation of the institutions and liberties that make elections meaningful. (V-Dem)

Freedom House's 2026 report tells a strikingly similar story from a different measurement framework. It states that global freedom declined for the twentieth consecutive year in 2025, with 54 countries registering deterioration in political rights and civil liberties and only 35 improving. It also emphasizes a long-term shift in which many partly free states have slipped into more openly authoritarian forms. The significance of this finding is not that democracy has vanished everywhere; it is that the gray zone between democracy and autocracy has become a principal site of struggle. Regimes increasingly combine electoral legitimacy with harassment of opposition, restrictions on expression, and concentration of executive power. Practice again confirms theory: democracy is most vulnerable where citizens are invited to ratify authority while being denied the full conditions of contesting it. (Freedom House)

The OECD's trust data adds a social and perceptual dimension to this institutional picture. In 2023, only 39 percent across surveyed OECD countries reported trusting their national government, while 44 percent reported low or no trust. More revealing still, the strongest trust gap tracked whether people felt they had a say in government action. That result should caution against reducing democratic crisis to constitutional decline alone. A polity may retain competitive elections and still generate a widespread sense of powerlessness. Where that perception spreads, populist entrepreneurs gain traction by claiming that only they truly embody the people against institutions portrayed as alien. Democratic erosion thus feeds on both institutional weakening and experiential disaffection. Citizens must not only possess formal rights; they must be able to recognize those rights as effective forms of agency. (OECD)

This helps explain why contemporary democratic backsliding often occurs through elected leaders rather than against elections as such. Levitsky and Ziblatt's work on democratic erosion stresses that democracies now often die more gradually, as leaders with weak commitments to democratic norms win office and then use legal powers to undermine pluralism, opposition, and mutual toleration.

Mounk similarly warns that liberal rights and popular sovereignty can come apart, producing either insulated liberalism or illiberal populism. These diagnoses fit the recent data remarkably well. Democracy in practice is less often destroyed by an obvious coup than hollowed out by piecemeal moves that remain individually legal while cumulatively altering the regime. The lesson is sobering: democratic breakdown is no longer best imagined as a sudden fall off a cliff. It is often a slow transformation in which institutions remain standing while their democratic purpose is reversed. (Levitsky Lab)

What, then, does democracy require if it is to remain meaningful in practice while preserving its theoretical core? First, it requires renewed commitment to political equality as a lived condition rather than a constitutional abstraction. That means treating access to information, credible opposition, and meaningful participation as core democratic goods. Second, it requires institutions that preserve reversibility: independent electoral administration, protection of association and speech, and norms that accept opponents as legitimate adversaries rather than enemies. Third, it requires wider sites of participation so that citizens can develop efficacy outside rare national elections. Fourth, it requires administrative competence that can make democratic decisions consequential in everyday life. A democracy that cannot deliver ordinary fairness in public services invites cynicism; one that delivers services without accountability invites domination. These are not separate problems. They are the linked conditions of democratic durability. (OECD)

In the end, democracy in theory means rule among equals; democracy in practice means building institutions through which equals can govern without pretending that conflict, difference, and mediation will disappear. That is why democracy is both humbler and more demanding than its rhetoric often suggests. It is humbler because it cannot guarantee wisdom, harmony, or perfect responsiveness. It is more demanding because it asks citizens and institutions to preserve the standing of those who disagree, to accept the legitimacy of opposition, and to keep power open to peaceful revision. The best test of democracy is therefore not whether it expresses one unified popular will. No modern society possesses such a will. The better test is whether those subject to collective power remain included as equals in shaping, contesting, and correcting it. Democracy is not the end of politics. It is the political form that tries to make disagreement compatible with freedom and equality. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

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Votes Are Not Enough: Democracy Beyond Election Day

By Daniil Alexander-Bastian

For much of the modern era, elections have served as democracy's master symbol. Ballot boxes signify consent, peaceful competition, and the possibility that rulers can be dismissed without bloodshed. In democratic mythology, the vote is the decisive act: citizens speak, power listens, and government becomes legitimate because it has been chosen. That mythology contains an important truth. Without regular, meaningful, uncertain elections, there is no democracy worth the name. Yet the same mythology becomes dangerous when it hardens into a complete definition. To say that democracy means elections, full stop, is to confuse the doorway with the house. It is to treat authorization as accountability, counting as equality, and periodic voting as self-government.

That confusion matters because the contemporary democratic crisis is not mainly a crisis of formal voting. Elections still occur in many places. Parties still campaign. Incumbents still invoke the language of the people. But the wider ecology that gives elections democratic meaning is under strain. V-Dem's 2026 report says the world had 92 autocracies and 87 democracies at the end of 2025, while Freedom House reports that global freedom declined for the nineteenth consecutive year in 2024. International IDEA likewise warns that elections remain indispensable yet are increasingly contested, with losing candidates or parties rejecting results in almost one in five elections between 2020 and 2024. These patterns point to a central fact: the democratic problem today is less the disappearance of elections than the hollowing out of everything that makes elections matter. (V-Dem)

The argument of this essay is straightforward. Elections are necessary for democracy because they provide public authorization, peaceful succession, and a mechanism through which ordinary citizens can replace leaders. But elections are not sufficient. A political order becomes genuinely democratic only when electoral competition is embedded in a broader system of civil liberties, rule of law, institutional checks, political equality, plural sources of information, a credible opposition, and a constitutional culture in which both winners and losers accept uncertainty as legitimate. When those conditions are absent, elections can coexist with domination, clientelism, media capture, corruption, minority persecution, and executive aggrandizement. In such settings, elections may ratify power rather than restrain it. The result is not democracy fulfilled, but democracy simulated.

This is not an argument against elections. It is an argument against electoral minimalism. Robert Dahl's concept of polyarchy already implied that democracy requires more than a vote count: public contestation and participation depend on freedoms of organization, expression, alternative information, and inclusive citizenship (Dahl 1971). Amartya Sen later argued that democracy should be valued not only because it selects governments, but because it enables public reasoning and gives people voice over the conditions of their own lives (Sen 1999). Guillermo O'Donnell showed that democratic quality depends on a rule of law capable of protecting rights and constraining power, while G. Bingham Powell insisted that democracy must be judged by the chain of responsiveness connecting citizens' preferences to public policy. More recently, V-Dem has formalized the same intuition in empirical form by distinguishing electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian dimensions of democracy. The common lesson is clear: elections matter most when they are part of a larger constitutional and social order. (V-Dem)

Elections and Their Democratic Promise

Any serious case that elections are not enough must begin by acknowledging what elections do accomplish. At their best, elections convert political conflict into institutionalized competition. They provide a nonviolent means of changing governments. They allow citizens to punish incompetence, corruption, or arrogance. They turn coercive succession crises into ordinary public rituals. They also create a moral discipline for rulers: even powerful incumbents must, in principle, return to the electorate and ask again for permission to govern. That repetitive act of asking is not trivial. It affirms that power belongs to the public before it belongs to officeholders.

Elections also express a basic democratic insight about political equality. No matter how unequal citizens may be in wealth, education, or prestige, each receives a formally equal vote. That does not eliminate deeper inequalities, but it marks a profound normative break from hereditary or authoritarian rule. Sen's defense of democracy as a universal value rests partly on this recognition: people do not need to be declared "fit" for democracy by enlightened elites; they become political agents through democratic practice itself (Sen 1999). International IDEA's recent report makes a similar point in contemporary terms, noting that despite democratic decline, elections continue to deliver on their "inherent promise" as a means of ensuring that people retain control over decision-makers. A regime in which parties can lose elections remains categorically different from one in which rulers only stage their own acclamation. (Journal of Democracy)

Moreover, elections have educative value. They compel political actors to articulate public programs, build coalitions, and address a wider audience than the ruler's inner circle. They generate information about social preferences and grievances. They can integrate marginalized groups into the political community by making them visible as constituencies that must be heard. In that sense, elections do not merely aggregate preferences; they help constitute the people as a political body. The point is especially important in heterogeneous societies, where routine electoral competition can habituate citizens to the fact that disagreement is normal and that alternation in office need not mean regime collapse.

This capacity for peaceful conflict management should not be underestimated. Elections are one of the few institutions that can make the uncertainty of politics legitimate. Adam Przeworski's minimalist formulation of democracy as a system in which parties can lose elections captures something essential: democracy is a regime that domesticates uncertainty without abolishing it (Przeworski 1991). The uncertainty is not a design flaw. It is the point. Where rulers can truly lose, the state is not identical with the government, opposition is not treason, and defeat is not annihilation. These are enormous civilizational achievements.

Yet precisely because elections are so important, they are easy to fetishize. A procedure that can perform invaluable democratic work in one institutional setting can become decorative in another. Elections tell us who won office. By themselves, they do not tell us whether citizens had meaningful alternatives, whether public debate was free, whether the law constrained the winners afterward, whether minorities remained secure, or whether the state delivered policy through accountable institutions rather than executive whim. The vote answers one question—who governs for now—but democracy asks several more: under what constraints, by what means, with what protections, and in whose interests?

The Illusion of Electoral Sufficiency

The simplest reason elections are not enough is that they occur at intervals, while power is exercised continuously. A society may vote on one day and be governed arbitrarily for the next five years. If journalists can be intimidated, courts packed, legislatures bypassed, watchdogs defunded, and opponents harassed in the period between elections, then the ballot has not secured democratic government; it has merely inaugurated a temporary license. O'Donnell's early concept of delegative democracy named this danger well. Some elected leaders claim that a victory at the polls entitles them to rule as they see fit, treating institutions of oversight as obstructions rather than essential democratic features. On this view, once "the people" have spoken, the winner alone embodies their will. Accountability is then reduced to the next election, as though no abuse that occurs in the meantime counts as democratically relevant. (Journal of Democracy)

This is a category error. Elections authorize officeholders; they do not dissolve constitutional limits. A majority, even a genuine one, cannot convert arbitrary power into democratic power simply by winning first. The language of mandate often hides this problem. Mandates are real, but they are never blank checks. In liberal-democratic theory, winning office confers authority to govern within law, not authority to redefine law as personal preference. That is why the rule of law is not external to democracy. O'Donnell argued that high-quality democracy requires a democratic rule of law protecting political rights, civil liberties, and mechanisms of accountability that affirm citizens' political equality and constrain state abuse. Without those constraints, the electoral moment does not secure democratic citizenship; it merely selects the next administrator of unequal power. (Journal of Democracy)

Recent global evidence supports this distinction between elections and democratic substance. Freedom House found that in 2024, more than 40 percent of countries and territories holding national elections saw candidates targeted with assaults or assassination attempts, polling places attacked, or postelection protests suppressed with disproportionate force; in authoritarian settings, elections were also manipulated to prevent genuine opposition candidates from participating. V-Dem reports that freedom of expression was the democratic attribute most severely hit in 2025, declining in 44 countries. If opposition can be excluded, speech chilled, and coercion normalized, then an election may still happen, but its democratic value is sharply reduced. The procedure survives while the conditions of meaningful choice erode. (Freedom House)

The problem, then, is not only fraud in the crude sense. It is the more subtle construction of an uneven playing field. Elections cease to be fully democratic long before ballot boxes are literally stuffed. They begin to lose their democratic character when incumbents dominate media ecosystems, weaponize state resources, politicize prosecutors, redraw districts for partisan gain, selectively burden some voters, or saturate public discourse with lies that cannot be effectively contested because independent institutions have been weakened. In those circumstances, a citizen may cast a ballot and still not exercise equal political agency.

Illiberal Democracy and the Majoritarian Temptation

One of the most familiar names for this syndrome is "illiberal democracy." The term became influential because it described a regime type in which elections are preserved while the rule of law, rights protections, and pluralism decay. Sheri Berman's reformulation is especially useful because it avoids a simplistic opposition between "the people" and liberal restraints. She argues that democracy without

liberalism can indeed become dangerous, sliding into majoritarian abuses, but liberalism without democracy can just as easily harden into oligarchy or technocracy. The point is not that rights should tame democracy from outside. The point is that democracy and liberalism need one another because each corrects the pathologies of the other. (Journal of Democracy)

This is where electoral majoritarianism becomes misleading. Winning an election does not mean the winner represents the whole people in a morally exhaustive sense. It means only that under the rules in place, that coalition won the right to form a government. In a constitutional democracy, this outcome must coexist with enduring rights for those who lost, including the right to criticize, organize, litigate, publish, protest, and compete again. Majority rule is therefore only one democratic principle among others. If it is severed from equal rights and institutional contestation, it degenerates into a plebiscitary logic in which the majority treats itself as the nation and the opposition as internal enemies.

That logic is particularly dangerous in divided societies. Ethnic, religious, racial, or ideological majorities may invoke electoral victory to justify permanent domination. Once the majority claims not merely to govern but to define the authentic people, institutions protecting dissent begin to look illegitimate by design. Courts become "antidemocratic" if they defend minority rights. Universities and the press become "elitist" if they criticize the government. Independent bureaucracies become suspect if they refuse partisan commands. The rhetoric is familiar: unelected bodies must not stand in the way of the people's will. But in practice, this rhetoric means that no institution may stand in the way of the executive's interpretation of that will.

Recent cases illustrate the point. Freedom House's 2025 report on India still classifies the country as a multiparty democracy and notes that executive elections are generally regarded as free and fair, yet it also records increased harassment of journalists, NGOs, and other critics, the use of state institutions against political opponents, and discriminatory pressures affecting Muslims and other marginalized groups. The lesson is not that India lacks elections. It is that elections alone do not resolve questions about whether all citizens enjoy equal civic standing, whether criticism is safe, and whether opposition remains substantively viable. Formal competition can coexist with civic fear and unequal belonging. (Freedom House)

The same pattern was visible in Hungary during the Orbán era. Freedom House's 2024 Nations in Transit report described Hungary as an entrenched hybrid regime, noted that the government continued on an illiberal and authoritarian trajectory, ruled for years under an extended "state of danger," amended electoral rules to its advantage, and benefited from a media landscape dominated by progovernment outlets supported through state-linked advertising. Even before any outright abolition of elections, democratic competition had been structurally tilted. The problem was not the absence of voting but the degradation of the conditions under which voting could discipline power. (Freedom House)

What these cases show is that elections are vulnerable to capture by a narrative of exclusive representation. The elected winner claims, "I am democracy because I won." But democratic legitimacy does not arise from victory alone. It also arises from the willingness of the winner to preserve the loser's status as a full political equal. Where that willingness disappears, elections become instruments of legitimation for domination rather than safeguards against it.

Delegative Democracy and the Weakening of Horizontal Accountability

If illiberal democracy describes one danger, delegative democracy describes another: the concentration of power in a leader who treats electoral victory as a personal mandate above institutions. O'Donnell's 1994 essay remains strikingly contemporary. Delegative democracies hold elections and may even display lively public support, but once elected, presidents or prime ministers claim broad discretion to govern unencumbered by legislatures, courts, auditors, or federal subunits. Institutions meant to check the executive are dismissed as relics, adversaries, or impediments to national renewal. Politics is personalized, and institutions are valued only when they ratify executive preference. (Journal of Democracy)

This matters because democracy is not only about choosing rulers; it is about preventing any ruler from governing without review. Philippe Schmitter's work on accountability and Powell's work on responsiveness both underscore that democratic quality depends on a chain of answerability: citizens choose representatives, representatives form governments, governments make policy, and institutions allow citizens to judge, challenge, and sanction those choices. At each link, distortion is possible. Information can be manipulated, representatives can defect from promises, executives can bypass lawmaking, and corruption can break the connection between public preference and public action. Elections matter within that chain, but they do not exhaust it. (Journal of Democracy)

The condition of the rule of law is therefore decisive. The World Justice Project reported in 2025 that 68 percent of countries declined in rule-of-law performance that year, with major erosion in judicial independence, legislative checks, open government, and fundamental rights. Judicial limits on government power declined in 61 percent of countries, and freedoms central to civic space—opinion and expression, assembly and association, civic participation—fell across most of the world. These are not peripheral indicators. They are the operational means through which democracy persists between elections. When they erode, executives acquire the ability to turn temporary victory into semi-permanent advantage. (World Justice Project)

The phrase "the people have spoken" obscures this danger because it collapses an ongoing constitutional order into a single event. Yet democratic government is not a moment; it is a pattern of restrained and revisable authority. A parliament that investigates the executive, a court that enforces due process, an auditor that exposes misuse of funds, a civil service that refuses unlawful instructions, and a free press that uncovers deception are not antidemocratic obstacles to popular will. They are part of the machinery that keeps electoral authorization from curdling into elected impunity.

To insist on this point is not to deny the frustrations institutions can create. Courts may be slow, legislatures obstructive, and bureaucracies self-protective. But democratic politics is supposed to be hard. Friction is often the price of preventing the winner from becoming sovereign in the Schmittian sense. A polity that seeks to remove all friction in the name of decisive leadership may gain speed, but it does so by reducing democracy to acclamation. It retains the spectacle of popular endorsement while sacrificing the substance of controlled government.

Equality, Money, and the Social Foundations of Citizenship

Elections are also not enough because the formal equality of the vote can coexist with severe inequality in political voice. Rueschemeyer's contribution to the "quality of democracy" debate is blunt: democracy requires robust political equality, yet social, economic,

and cultural inequalities constantly undermine it. A citizen's ballot may count as one on paper while their practical influence over public debate, organization, access, and policymaking differs radically from that of wealthier or better-connected actors. Where money buys communication, lobbying, litigation, and agenda-setting power, elections alone cannot guarantee equal citizenship. (Journal of Democracy)

This is not an argument for some impossible condition of perfect social equality before democracy can exist. It is a claim about thresholds. At some point, inequality ceases to be a background fact and becomes a constitutional fact. When wealth systematically determines who can run viable campaigns, who owns or influences media, who sustains advocacy networks, and who can survive the costs of political participation, the electoral arena stops being level enough to perform its democratic function. Citizens may still vote, but the menu from which they choose has already been shaped by unequal power long before election day.

Corruption intensifies the distortion. Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index reports that corruption remains a serious threat in every region and explicitly links reform failure to the rollback of democratic checks and balances and attacks on independent civil society. Corruption is not merely a moral stain on democracy; it is a structural breach in the chain of representation. It means decisions are increasingly responsive to private exchange rather than public reason. A system in which voters can choose among parties yet public contracts, regulations, prosecutions, or appointments are routinely bent by hidden influence may be electorally competitive and still democratically thin. (Transparency.org)

Powell's account of democratic responsiveness clarifies why. Responsiveness depends on a sequence of linkages between citizen preference, electoral choice, representative selection, and policymaking. That chain can be subverted by bad information, incoherent party platforms, unrepresentative outcomes, party-switching, executive decrees, campaign deception, and corruption in policymaking. Put differently, the right to vote does not guarantee the right to matter. A democracy becomes more than electoral when the institutional system makes it plausible that citizens' preferences can actually shape governing outcomes rather than merely confer symbolic legitimacy on prestructured choices. (Journal of Democracy)

Here, too, the temptation of minimalism is misleading. One might say that as long as elections are free, concerns about money, lobbying, oligarchic influence, or unequal participation belong to social policy, not democratic theory. But that separation is false. Democracy is not merely the absence of dictatorship. It is a regime of political equality. If some groups routinely command agenda-setting power while others are periodically mobilized only as voting blocs, then democracy has become formally inclusive yet substantively stratified.

This is one reason why the social state matters democratically. Citizens who lack education, security, time, organization, or freedom from economic desperation are less able to use their formal rights effectively. Sen's broader view of democracy as public reasoning points in the same direction: rights are more than paper guarantees; they are capabilities to act, speak, associate, and contest. Elections are meaningful only when citizens possess the practical resources needed to use them as instruments of self-government rather than rituals of consent. (Journal of Democracy)

Information, Civil Society, and the Conditions of Choice

A further reason elections are not enough is that choosing requires an environment in which alternatives can be known, debated, and defended. The secret ballot protects the act of voting, but it cannot by itself protect the public sphere in which choices are formed. If the press is captured, civil society harassed, academia intimidated, platforms flooded with coordinated deception, or opposition voices priced out of visibility, then the election may register preferences that were themselves manufactured under conditions of asymmetrical power.

That is why V-Dem's framework is so helpful. It treats democracy as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing not only electoral competition but also liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian principles, broken down into indicators such as media freedom, civil liberties, executive constraints, judicial independence, gender equality, and civil society. This approach does not deny the centrality of elections; it clarifies the ecosystem on which elections depend. A voter is not simply an isolated chooser. A voter is a citizen embedded in communicative institutions. Damage those institutions, and the formal act of voting remains while its democratic meaning diminishes. (V-Dem)

Current evidence suggests this ecosystem is deteriorating. V-Dem identifies freedom of expression as the most hard-hit democratic component in 2025, declining in 44 countries. Freedom House's 2025 report likewise notes that democratically elected leaders are advancing their goals by overriding institutional checks, while electoral periods in many countries were marred by violence, intimidation, and authoritarian restrictions on voters' choices. The cumulative effect is to turn democratic contest into something closer to a managed spectacle: the campaign exists, but the public sphere is increasingly warped in favor of those already in office. (V-Dem)

Civil society is indispensable in this context because it provides spaces of association not controlled by the state or the market. Associations, unions, advocacy groups, faith organizations, local movements, and professional bodies help citizens interpret their interests, coordinate demands, and defend one another against retaliation. They also generate the pluralism without which elections become binary plebiscites on leadership rather than structured contests among programs and interests. Where civil society is free, citizens can remain politically active between elections; where it is suppressed, politics is reduced to occasional, top-down mobilization.

The weakening of civic space therefore injures democracy twice. First, it deprives citizens of countervailing power. Second, it narrows the range of voices that can appear legitimate in public life. Once that happens, elections tend to reproduce the imbalance rather than correct it. The democratic ideal is not that citizens make choices in an informational vacuum and then disappear from politics until the next cycle. It is that citizens continuously participate in a public world dense with argument, organization, and scrutiny. Election day should crown that process, not substitute for it.

Losing, Legitimacy, and Democratic Time

Perhaps the clearest proof that elections are not enough is that democracy depends not only on how votes are cast but on how results are absorbed. International IDEA's 2024 report found that between 2020 and 2024, losing candidates or parties rejected the outcome in almost 20 percent of elections. It also notes a global turnout decline over the past fifteen years and a rising frequency of elections being decided through court challenges. These are not merely

technical concerns. They reveal stress in a norm without which democratic competition cannot survive: loser consent. (International IDEA)

Loser consent does not mean losers must believe every election was perfect. It means they accept that defeat under legitimate rules does not expel them from the political community. They remain entitled to organize, criticize, and try again. Democracy requires this ethic because elections are periodic, not final. Every electoral outcome is provisional. Today's minority may be tomorrow's majority. If political actors no longer believe that future contestation remains possible, they will treat every election as an existential battle that must be won at all costs.

This is why democratic time matters. Elections structure political time into repeated opportunities for revision. But that structure works only if the losers can survive politically between rounds. If the winner uses the interim to criminalize opponents, capture referees, monopolize information, or redefine citizenship against enemies, then the temporality of democracy breaks down. Formally, another election will come. Substantively, the contest has already been rigged by the governing interval.

The same point applies to winners. A democratic victor must govern with one eye on the next contest and with full awareness that the opposition has a legitimate future. This restraint is not simple generosity. It is fidelity to democracy's core principle of organized uncertainty. The ruler governs now without claiming to govern forever. A leader who treats victory as a permanent moral ratification misunderstands democracy even if they won cleanly.

Hence elections alone cannot secure democracy because the democratic meaning of elections depends on norms and institutions that span time: fair administration, independent adjudication, rights protection, media pluralism, and the expectation of repeated contest under stable rules. Without those conditions, the ballot ceases to mark a chapter in an ongoing constitutional story and becomes instead a singular struggle for unreviewable power.

What Makes Democracy More Than Electoral

If elections are not enough, what else is required? The answer is not a mystical democratic essence. It is a cluster of identifiable institutional and social conditions.

First, democracy requires civil liberties that secure public contestation: freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, religion, and academic inquiry. These rights are not ornaments. They are the channels through which citizens form judgments, criticize power, and build alternatives. Without them, elections become acts of selection without meaningful deliberation. O'Donnell's insistence that high-quality democracy requires rights-protecting rule of law is decisive here. So, too, is V-Dem's decision to treat liberal and deliberative components as integral to democracy's measurement rather than optional supplements. (Journal of Democracy)

Second, democracy requires horizontal accountability: institutions capable of checking, investigating, and where necessary blocking executive abuse. Courts, legislatures, auditors, electoral commissions, and professional civil services do not oppose democracy; they prevent the elected from confusing temporary office with unlimited authority. The WJP's recent documentation of declining judicial independence, legislative checks, and open government should be read as a democratic alarm, not merely a legal one. A government unchecked between elections is not more democratic because it is less constrained; it is less democratic because citizens have fewer reliable means of controlling power after the vote. (World Justice Project)

Third, democracy requires political equality beyond the formal ballot. Rueschemeyer is right that severe social and economic inequality complicates political equality. Democracies therefore need institutions that reduce the translation of private wealth into public dominance: campaign transparency, anti-corruption enforcement, inclusive party systems, universal education, labor protections, and fair access to media and organization. These are often dismissed as distributive or regulatory questions, but they are constitutive of democratic fairness because they shape who can participate effectively and whose voice counts. (Journal of Democracy)

Fourth, democracy requires a credible opposition. This sounds obvious, but it means more than allowing rival parties to exist on paper. The opposition must have realistic access to media, organization, funding under fair rules, judicial recourse, and the protection to campaign without intimidation. A system in which the opposition can lose but cannot realistically win is not a functioning democracy. Freedom House's evidence of election-related violence, exclusion, and manipulation demonstrates how easily this condition can be eroded without abolishing elections themselves. (Freedom House)

Fifth, democracy requires responsiveness. Powell's "chain of responsiveness" is a useful guide because it reminds us that citizens do not merely choose rulers; they expect policies to be linked, however imperfectly, to public preferences. Elections are one mechanism in that chain, but so are parties, legislatures, oversight institutions, access to information, and administrative integrity. A government that wins elections while routinely governing by decree, bait-and-switch tactics, or corrupt exchange weakens democracy even if it remains electorally popular. Responsiveness is not identical to plebiscitary responsiveness to a leader's base. It is system-wide answerability to the citizenry. (Journal of Democracy)

Sixth, democracy requires a civic culture of mutual restraint and legitimate opposition. No institutional design can fully substitute for this norm. Citizens and elites alike must distinguish rivals from enemies and electoral defeat from civic exclusion. This is one reason democratic erosion often proceeds legally. Institutions may still exist, but actors reinterpret them in bad faith, stretching every advantage until the constitutional spirit collapses. The decline of freedom and rise of outcome rejection documented by Freedom House and IDEA suggest that this cultural dimension is now under severe pressure globally. (Freedom House)

Finally, democracy requires state capacity. This point is often neglected because capacity is sometimes associated with technocracy rather than popular rule. But without capable administration, rights cannot be enforced, corruption cannot be contained, elections cannot be administered fairly, and policies approved through democratic processes cannot be implemented predictably. Weak states do not necessarily produce more democratic politics; often they produce informal oligarchies, local bossism, or criminalized governance under an electoral shell. Democracy depends not on a small state as such, but on a lawful, accountable, and effective one.

Put together, these conditions suggest a simple formula: elections make governments selectable, but constitutionalism, rights, equality, and accountability make governments controllable. Democracy needs both. A regime becomes democratically robust when citizens can not only choose rulers, but also criticize them, constrain them, replace them, and live as equals under laws that bind the governors no less than the governed.

Objections and Replies

A common objection is that this argument sets the bar too high. If democracy requires not only elections but also rights, equality, responsiveness, accountability, and civic norms, does the concept become so expansive that almost no real regime qualifies? The objection has force. There is always a risk of transforming democracy into an all-purpose moral ideal and then condemning every imperfect case as undemocratic. Przeworski's distinction between minimalist and maximalist conceptions reminds us that democracy cannot do everything and should not be defined so broadly that it becomes analytically useless. (Journal of Democracy)

Yet the answer is not to collapse democracy back into elections alone. The better response is to distinguish between necessary thresholds and aspirational qualities. A regime can be democratic in a basic sense if it holds genuinely competitive elections under broad suffrage and protects the minimum liberties needed for opposition and uncertainty. But once those liberties, checks, and conditions are badly damaged, it becomes misleading to say that democracy remains intact merely because citizens still vote. The concept should neither be so thick that ordinary democracies fail it automatically nor so thin that elected autocrats pass easily. The challenge is to preserve analytical realism without surrendering normative clarity.

Another objection comes from defenders of efficiency. Liberal constraints, judicial review, bicameralism, bureaucracy, and rights protections, they argue, often make governments less responsive to immediate majority demands. If democracy means rule by the people, why should unelected institutions be allowed to frustrate elected leaders? Berman's answer is persuasive: liberalism without democracy can indeed become oligarchic or technocratic, but democracy without liberalism can become oppressive majoritarianism. The solution is not to abolish constraints but to ensure that constraints themselves remain publicly justified, limited, and embedded in a democratic order. Institutions should not replace the people. They should protect the conditions under which the people can continue ruling themselves over time. (Journal of Democracy)

A third objection holds that citizens care less about institutional niceties than about outcomes. If an elected government delivers growth, safety, and welfare, why should procedural shortcomings matter so much? Here contemporary scholarship is useful. Maya Tudor's 2025 synthesis of comparative research argues that democracies, on balance, generally produce longer lives, more education, greater peace, and sustained growth, even if they do so unevenly and imperfectly. More important for the present essay, she stresses that democracy is not just elections but a broader set of rights and institutional checks between elections. In other words, the performance case for democracy is not a case for elections alone. It is a case for the wider democratic package. Strip away rights, scrutiny, and institutional restraint, and even short-term efficiency can become unstable, opaque, and distortion-prone. (Journal of Democracy)

The deepest objection, however, is emotional rather than conceptual: many citizens experience nonelectoral constraints as elite contempt for popular choice. That sentiment should not be waved away. Democracies that become too insulated from ordinary citizens can fuel the very backlash they fear. But this only reinforces the essay's central claim. Elections are not enough because democracy also requires institutions that make governments genuinely responsive to broad publics rather than narrow elites. The cure for antidemocratic populism is not less democracy disguised as guardianship. It

is more inclusive, rights-protecting, accountable democracy.

Conclusion

When elections are treated as the whole of democracy, two errors follow. The first is complacency: if voting still happens, we reassure ourselves that democracy survives even while rights, opposition, and institutional restraints are being dismantled. The second is cynicism: when elections fail to produce justice, accountability, or equality on their own, citizens conclude that democracy itself is a sham. Both errors stem from the same mistake—expecting elections alone to do work they were never meant to do.

Elections are indispensable because they authorize, rotate, and discipline power. But they do not, by themselves, secure freedom of criticism, legal equality, clean government, institutional accountability, or fair representation. They can coexist with domination when the public sphere is manipulated, the opposition harassed, the law politicized, and the executive unconstrained. They can also coexist with oligarchy when formal voting masks profound inequalities of voice and influence. Democracy therefore begins with elections but does not end there.

A more adequate democratic ideal is both more demanding and more defensible. It asks whether citizens can choose rulers, yes, but also whether they can challenge them, organize against them, live as equals under impartial law, and try again after defeat. It asks whether public disagreement remains protected, whether institutions preserve uncertainty, and whether government stays answerable between elections rather than only on them. On this view, elections are not enough because democracy is not merely a mechanism for producing winners. It is a constitutional form of common life in which no victory cancels the equal freedom of those who lost. In that sense, the health of democracy is measured not only by the honesty of the count, but by the breadth of the rights, restraints, and solidarities that make counting worth anything at all. (V-Dem)

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From Coal and Steel to Citizens: The EU's Democratic Story

By Luca Bianchi

The European Union is often described in one of two misleading ways: either as a heroic triumph of post-war idealism or as an over-engineered technocratic machine that never solved its problem of democratic legitimacy. Both accounts contain some truth, but neither is adequate as history. The EU did not begin as a democratic polity in the full parliamentary sense, and its founders did not pretend otherwise. The first European communities were designed above all to lock former rivals into rules, institutions, and shared material interests after the catastrophe of war. Yet the democratic question was present from the start, because the project aimed to secure peace among democratic states and to place cross-border power under law rather than force. The democratic story of the EU is therefore not the story of a ready-made democracy expanding in size; it is the story of a political order slowly learning how to justify authority beyond the nation-state. It is a history of partial democratization: of institutions becoming more representative, of lawmaking becoming more accountable, of citizens acquiring rights and voice, and of democracy itself becoming a condition of membership. This history matters because the EU's legitimacy has never rested on a single election, constitution, or people. It has had to be built in layers. (European Union)

That layered character is the key to understanding the Union. Unlike a nation-state, the EU was not born from a single revolutionary moment or a founding people claiming sovereignty in one voice. It emerged from treaties among states whose governments were already democratic but whose cooperation created new centers of power above the national level. This meant that the earliest legitimacy of European integration was indirect. National governments negotiated treaties; national parliaments ratified them; national electorates could, in principle, turn those governments out of office. For a time, that indirect legitimacy seemed enough. But as integration deepened—from coal and steel, to a common market, to monetary union, citizenship, external borders, and large-scale crisis management—the old arrangement no longer sufficed. A project once justified mainly by peace and prosperity had to confront a sharper question: who authorizes decisions made in Europe, who contests them, and who can reverse them? The democratic story of the EU is thus neither a simple ascent nor a settled failure. It is a moving argument between two logics: insulation and participation, efficiency and contestation, state equality and citizen equality. The history of the Union can be read as a sequence of attempts to reconcile those logics without collapsing into either a centralized superstate or a mere diplomatic club. (European Parliament)

From Peace Settlement to Indirect Legitimacy

The origins of European integration lie in the wreckage of the Second World War. Robert Schuman's declaration of 9 May 1950 proposed pooling French and West German coal and steel production in a common framework open to other European countries. The resulting European Coal and Steel Community brought together six founding states—France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg—and became the first of the supranational institutions that later developed into today's EU. Its political genius was modesty. Rather than trying to create a European state in one leap, it began with sectors essential to war-making and reconstruction. This was not merely economic administration. It was constitutional statecraft by other means: the attempt to make old rivalries materially and institutionally irrational. In that sense, the first

democratic achievement of integration was not an elected chamber but a peace settlement among democracies that bound public power to law, procedure, and mutual oversight. Scholars such as Desmond Dinan and Luuk van Middelaar are right to emphasize that integration was from the beginning both practical and political: a means of governing interdependence in a continent where national sovereignty had become too dangerous to remain absolute. (European Union)

Still, the early communities were not democratic in the way citizens now expect modern government to be. The Common Assembly created under the ECSC had no legislative powers, and its members were appointed by national parliaments rather than directly elected. As the European Economic Community and Euratom were created by the Treaties of Rome in 1957, the assembly became common to the three communities and later took the name "European Parliament," but its actual powers remained weak. For the first decades of integration, the central actors were the Council—where national ministers represented governments—and the Commission, whose supranational mission was to advance the common interest. This structure reflected an incremental method: limited transfers of power to institutions insulated enough to act beyond short-term national politics. The arrangement was not undemocratic in the authoritarian sense; it rested on the authority of democratic member states. Yet it plainly left a gap between the growth of supranational authority and the direct participation of citizens. The EU's democratic story therefore begins not with full representation but with a constitutional compromise: indirect legitimacy in exchange for peace, rebuilding, and problem-solving. (European Parliament)

That compromise held for quite some time because the early European Communities operated in an era of what later scholars would call permissive consensus. Integration remained relatively low on the agenda of ordinary electoral politics. Many of its most important achievements—lowering trade barriers, establishing common rules, stabilizing relations among states—were diffuse in their benefits and technical in their form. As a result, the absence of a strong parliamentary center at European level did not immediately provoke a full legitimacy crisis. But history did not stand still. As common policies expanded and the economic reach of the Community widened, so did the need for public scrutiny, political debate, and institutional balance. Even before direct elections, the Parliament pushed to increase its role and to separate the question of democratic representation from the question of institutional power. That political struggle matters. The Parliament was not simply granted democracy from above; it actively fought to be recognized as the representative pole of the European system. The democratic story of the EU is therefore also a story of institutional self-assertion: of an initially marginal assembly pressing its claim to become a parliament in more than name. (European Parliament)

The Parliamentary Turn

The breakthrough came in the 1970s. A Paris summit in December 1974 determined that direct elections to the European Parliament should take place in or after 1978, and after further negotiation the 1976 Electoral Act paved the way for the first direct elections, held from 7 to 10 June 1979. This moment deserves to be treated as one of the decisive democratic milestones in European history after 1945. For the first time, citizens across the European Economic Community voted directly for representatives at supranational level. The significance of this was not only institutional but symbolic. Direct elections made it impossible to regard the Parliament merely as an appendage of

national politics. They created a public space, however imperfect, in which European issues could be debated and in which political groups could begin to organize across national boundaries. Simone Veil's election as Parliament's president after the 1979 vote reinforced the moment's moral and political charge: the memory of Europe's darkest century was being linked to a new experiment in transnational representation. (European Parliament)

Yet 1979 did not solve the democratic problem; it changed its terms. The new Parliament still lacked the full powers of a legislature in a parliamentary democracy. It could not form a government, and European elections did not produce a clear governing majority that citizens could reward or dismiss in the way they could in national politics. As Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix later argued, this mattered because democracy requires not only representation but meaningful contestation over policy alternatives and executive leadership. Still, the importance of the first elections should not be understated. They turned the EU from an indirectly legitimated system into one with a directly elected institutional core. They helped generate transnational party families, more visible political conflict, and growing expectations that supranational authority should answer to supranational voters. Democratic development in the EU has often worked this way: institutions acquire a little representation first, then citizens use that foothold to demand greater power, clarity, and accountability. (European Parliament)

The next major advance came through treaty reform in the 1980s. The Single European Act, signed in 1986 and entering into force in 1987, was designed to speed decision-making and complete the single market, but it also increased the Parliament's influence through the cooperation and assent procedures. That was not a side issue. Once the Community committed itself to removing barriers within a vast internal market, it became harder to defend a system in which major regulatory decisions were made with limited parliamentary involvement. The Parliament's activism in these years, including Altiero Spinelli's 1984 draft treaty on European Union, helped frame the question more sharply: Europe could not remain permanently suspended between technocratic management and democratic ambition. The Single European Act did not create parliamentary government, but it acknowledged that integration required stronger representative legitimation. Economic integration and democratization were no longer separate tracks. They had become intertwined. (European Union)

Maastricht and the Democratic Deficit

This intertwining became unavoidable with the Maastricht Treaty. Signed in 1992 and entering into force in 1993, Maastricht established the European Union, prepared the path to monetary union, introduced EU citizenship, and created the co-decision procedure, giving the Parliament more say in decision-making. It was a constitutional watershed because it transformed the Community from a primarily economic arrangement into a more openly political union. Citizens were no longer just market participants or nationals of member states; they were citizens of the Union, endowed with certain rights and recognized as subjects of a broader political order. Maastricht thus pushed democratization forward. But it also triggered the language of the "democratic deficit" with new urgency. Why? Because the treaty expanded the scope and visibility of European governance faster than it created mechanisms of public control. The Union was moving into areas—currency, citizenship, justice and home affairs, foreign policy—where questions of identity, accountability, and consent were unavoidable.

Ratification difficulties in several member states showed that permissive consensus had ended. Europe had entered the age of politicization. (European Union)

The democratic deficit debate of the 1990s was not a sign of failure alone. It was also evidence that the EU had become important enough to be contested like a real polity. Karlheinz Neunreither identified a central problem early on: as decision-making shifted upward, traditional channels of parliamentary control no longer worked smoothly, and cooperation between the European Parliament and national parliaments became increasingly important. Maastricht's co-decision procedure tried to address that shift by placing the Parliament more firmly within lawmaking. Later treaty changes—especially Amsterdam in 1999 and Nice in 2003—extended or refined these arrangements and prepared the Union institutionally for enlargement. Amsterdam increased the use of what became the ordinary legislative procedure and sought more transparent decision-making. Nice focused more narrowly on institutional reform for a larger Union. Step by step, the Parliament's role grew from consultation toward something closer to co-legislation. But the democratic narrative remained mixed. Reform was real, yet it often appeared reactive, piecemeal, and too technical to inspire broad public ownership. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

That mixed picture produced one of the most important intellectual debates in EU studies. Andrew Moravcsik argued that concerns about the EU's democratic deficit were overstated: the Union, he maintained, was constrained by checks and balances, narrow mandates, fiscal limits, and the continuing centrality of democratically elected national governments. By comparison with other advanced democracies, he suggested, the EU was more legitimate than critics admitted. Follesdal and Hix responded that this defense missed the heart of the matter. The problem was not simply whether the EU had safeguards, but whether citizens could use elections to shape policy direction and hold decision-makers to account. This dispute remains fundamental because it highlights the dual nature of the EU's democratic story. On one side stands the claim that the Union is a limited, constitutionalized system whose legitimacy derives from multiple veto points and member-state democracy. On the other stands the claim that such indirect legitimacy becomes insufficient once supranational decisions have major distributive and ideological consequences. Historically, both sides capture something real. The EU has indeed become far more democratic than its critics sometimes admit, but it has never fully converted authority into popular choice in the way a classic parliamentary state does. (Princeton University)

Maastricht also mattered in a subtler democratic sense through the invention of EU citizenship. Official summaries of the treaty stress that European citizenship gave every national of an EU country rights to travel and live freely across the Union and to vote and stand as a candidate in local and European elections in the member state where they reside. Later Commission explanations of EU citizenship similarly frame it as a bundle of rights against discrimination by nationality and in favor of free movement, residence, and political participation. This did not create a European people in the thick cultural sense, and citizenship remained complementary to national citizenship rather than a replacement for it. But historically it changed the vocabulary of integration. The individual was no longer present only as worker, consumer, or beneficiary of market freedoms. The citizen became a bearer of rights within the Union's legal and political order. That shift helps explain why debates over democracy intensified after Maastricht: once the

EU began speaking the language of citizenship, it invited citizens to ask for something more than efficient regulation. It invited them to ask for voice, rights, accountability, and belonging. (EUR-Lex)

Enlargement, Rights, and Lisbon

The 1990s and 2000s also transformed the meaning of democracy in the EU through enlargement. The Copenhagen criteria, set in 1993, made democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for minorities central conditions for accession. This was a crucial shift. The Union was no longer only trying to democratize itself internally; it was also becoming a democratic gatekeeper externally. For post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, accession to the EU became a framework for institutional reform, constitutional restructuring, and democratic consolidation. The 2004 enlargement, followed by further accessions in 2007 and 2013, represented one of the greatest achievements of liberal constitutional order in modern Europe. Democratic transformation in the candidate countries was not caused by the EU alone, but the EU supplied incentives, benchmarks, and a powerful horizon of belonging. In this sense, the Union's democratic story extends beyond its institutions. It includes the use of membership, law, and conditionality to stabilize democratic norms across the continent. (European Commission)

At the same time, enlargement intensified internal questions about democratic cohesion. A union of 6 could function with a degree of elite brokerage that a union of 25 or 27 could not. Greater diversity of history, language, political economy, and party systems made the construction of a shared political space more difficult. This was one reason the early 2000s witnessed a more ambitious constitutional effort. The Charter of Fundamental Rights, solemnly proclaimed in 2000, began to articulate the Union as a community of rights as well as markets. The Constitutional Treaty signed in 2004 sought to simplify and clarify the EU's legal order, but its rejection in French and Dutch referendums in 2005 demonstrated a hard democratic truth: integration could not move forward on elite confidence alone. The lesson of that failure was not that Europe had become undemocratic by holding referendums; rather, it was that legitimacy in a more political union could no longer be presumed. Citizens had to be persuaded, not bypassed. (European Parliament)

The Lisbon Treaty, signed in 2007 and entering into force in 2009, was the most consequential answer to that problem. Officially, its purpose was to make the EU more democratic, more efficient, and better able to act. It strengthened the European Parliament, expanded the ordinary legislative procedure, increased the role of national parliaments, clarified competences, provided for a citizens' initiative, and gave the Charter of Fundamental Rights legal value equal to the treaties. It also gave the Parliament a key role in the selection of the Commission President. Lisbon is therefore best understood as the most ambitious democratizing treaty in the Union's history. It did not create a federal parliamentary regime, but it decisively narrowed the gap between the EU's growing authority and the institutions through which citizens and legislatures could supervise that authority. When people say the EU is run by unelected bureaucrats, they often speak as if Lisbon never happened. Historically, that is inaccurate. The post-Lisbon Union is far more parliamentary, rights-based, and participatory than the Community of the 1960s or even the Union of the early 1990s. (European Union)

The ordinary legislative procedure illustrates this transformation clearly. Today, the Parliament and the Council jointly negotiate and adopt most EU laws on an equal footing, making

them co-legislators across the vast majority of policy areas. This is not a cosmetic adjustment. It means that directly elected representatives now help shape the mainstream of European legislation rather than merely comment on it. Lisbon also reinforced participatory democracy by entrenching the European Citizens' Initiative. Under Article 11 TEU and the relevant implementing rules, citizens can invite the Commission to propose legislation if they gather sufficient support across member states. The ECI does not amount to direct lawmaking, and its practical impact has often been limited, but symbolically and constitutionally it matters. It recognizes that democracy in the EU cannot rest only on periodic elections; it must also include channels for agenda-setting, consultation, and transnational mobilization from below. In historical perspective, this is striking: a polity that began with an appointed assembly and elite bargains now includes both representative and participatory mechanisms operating across borders. (Consilium)

Crisis, Contestation, and Backsliding

But the democratic story did not end with Lisbon, because the Union soon entered an age of permanent crisis. The eurozone crisis, beginning in 2009–10, reopened old questions in a harsher form. As member states and EU institutions scrambled to stabilize the single currency, power shifted toward executives, central bankers, summit diplomacy, and ad hoc arrangements such as the European Stability Mechanism. Vivien Schmidt and Sergio Fabbrini, among others, have shown how this period exposed deep problems of democratic legitimacy. Decisions with enormous social consequences were often negotiated under emergency conditions and presented to national parliaments as unavoidable. The European Parliament, despite its strengthened formal role, could not fully control the architecture of crisis governance. Here the old tension between efficiency and accountability returned with force. In emergencies, the EU could act, but often in ways that seemed to confirm the image of a remote, elite-driven system. Historically, the euro crisis did not erase earlier democratization. It showed instead that multilevel democracy remains fragile when executive necessity overtakes normal legislative politics. (Economy and Finance)

The migration crisis and Brexit added further complications. Brexit was especially important because it demonstrated that EU membership rests on ongoing democratic consent and can be reversed through national political choice. Whatever one thinks of the wisdom of withdrawal, the 2016 British referendum marked a constitutional fact of the first order: integration is not destiny. A union that presents itself as democratic must accept the possibility of exit, dissent, and repudiation. At the same time, Brexit revealed a paradox of EU democracy. Many of the benefits and constraints of integration are collective and long-term, while democratic mandates are often national and immediate. The result is a structural tension between shared governance and territorial politics. The answer cannot simply be "more Europe" or "more nation-state." The historical challenge has been to design institutions through which both citizens and states remain authors of common rules. That challenge, not a lack of idealism, explains why EU democracy has advanced unevenly. (European Union)

To understand the EU's democratic architecture after Lisbon and after the crises, it is helpful to return to the treaties' own language. Article 10 TEU states that the Union is founded on representative democracy and that citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament. Yet the same institutional order also rests on the representation of member states through the European Council and Council. In other words, the EU is not built on

one principle of representation but on two. This is often described as dual legitimacy: citizens and states, Parliament and Council, party competition and diplomatic bargaining. Historically, that duality is not an accidental defect. It is the core design of European integration. The Union's democratic story has therefore never been the linear replacement of state representation by popular sovereignty at a higher level. It has been the attempt to combine them. That combination explains both the EU's resilience and its frustrations. It prevents simple domination by large states or majoritarian coalitions, but it also makes accountability more diffuse and political responsibility harder to assign. (EUR-Lex)

This is why the EU should not be judged only by asking whether it resembles a normal nation-state democracy. It is better understood as an experiment in compound or multilevel democracy. National elections remain indispensable because national governments shape European decisions in the Council and European Council. European elections matter because the Parliament co-legislates, approves the Commission as a college, and increasingly structures the Union's political debate. National parliaments matter because Lisbon strengthened their role and because EU legitimacy would be thinner without domestic scrutiny of European policy. The democratic story of the EU is therefore plural rather than singular. Its challenge is not simply to elect more people; it is to connect these multiple representative channels in ways citizens can actually see and use. Where that connection has improved, the Union has become more legitimate. Where it remains obscure, criticism flourishes. Historical progress in the EU has often been real but cognitively invisible to the public. That invisibility is itself a democratic problem. (European Parliament)

The question of values has become even more central in recent years. Article 2 TEU declares that the Union is founded on respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights. Yet democratic backsliding inside some member states has forced the EU to confront an awkward truth: a union of democracies can contain governments that undermine democratic norms once inside. This is the theme of R. Daniel Kelemen's influential argument about Europe's "other democratic deficit." The problem is no longer only that the EU may be insufficiently democratic at supranational level; it is also that the Union can be too weak, too partisan, or too procedurally constrained when member governments erode judicial independence, media pluralism, or constitutional checks. Article 7 TEU provides a mechanism for responding to serious breaches of EU values, but its sanctions stage requires unanimity among the other member states, making it politically difficult to use. The rule-of-law conditionality regulation that entered into force in 2021 is an attempt to strengthen the Union's hand by linking EU budget protection to respect for the rule of law. (EUR-Lex)

This development is historically significant because it completes, in a way, the shift begun with the Copenhagen criteria. The EU is no longer just a space in which democratic states cooperate; it is also a polity that claims the authority to defend democracy within itself. That authority is controversial, and it raises legitimate concerns about politicization, uneven enforcement, and institutional overreach. Yet the alternative is worse. A Union that treats democracy as a condition for entry but not as a standard for continued membership would undermine its own constitutional identity. Here the democratic story of the EU becomes self-reflexive: Europe must now democratize its democracy-protection mechanisms, ensuring that safeguards against backsliding are effective, legally bounded, and publicly justified. The future of EU legitimacy may depend less on

inventing entirely new institutions than on proving that existing commitments to democracy and the rule of law are credible in practice. (European Commission)

Recent efforts at participatory renewal reflect that same search for credibility. The Conference on the Future of Europe, which concluded in 2022 with 49 proposals and 326 measures, was presented as an unprecedented democratic exercise in which citizens could deliberate on the Union's future. One may reasonably debate how transformative the process was, but it is historically revealing that the EU now responds to legitimacy pressures not only with treaty engineering but with organized citizen deliberation. That marks a real shift from the elite bargains of the 1950s. Likewise, the 2024 European Parliament elections, with turnout again around 51%, suggested that the sharp decline of previous decades has at least stabilized. Stable turnout does not prove democratic health, but it does indicate that European elections have become a more normal feature of political life than they once were. The EU still struggles to generate a single European public sphere, yet citizens increasingly understand that what happens in Strasbourg and Brussels affects questions—climate, borders, digital markets, fiscal choices, agricultural standards, war and peace—that are no longer marginal to daily politics. (European Commission)

One reason the Parliament's growth has mattered so much is that it has slowly changed the character of European elections themselves. For many years, these elections were treated as "second-order" contests dominated by domestic concerns, lower turnout, and weaker media attention than national parliamentary races. There is truth in that diagnosis, but history also shows change. Since 1979, every direct election has reinforced the idea that there is a European level of representation that citizens can use. The 2019 elections saw a marked rise in turnout, and preliminary figures in 2024 again suggested participation of around 51%, similar to 2019. In the 2024 cycle, European political parties once more put forward lead candidates for Commission President, and the outcome of the elections was understood as relevant to the choice of the Commission's leadership. The EU still lacks the clean government-opposition logic of a classical parliamentary system, but European elections can no longer be dismissed as merely decorative. They shape coalitions in the Parliament, influence agenda-setting, and increasingly structure the public language through which citizens debate the Union's direction. (European Parliament)

The Lisbon reforms also matter because they recognized that democratic legitimacy in the EU cannot flow through one chamber alone. National parliaments were given more responsibility in determining the course of European policy, and the treaty strengthened their role in monitoring subsidiarity—the principle that decisions should be taken as closely as possible to citizens. This is easy to overlook, but it is historically important. The EU's democratic development has not consisted simply in shifting authority upward to Strasbourg and Brussels. It has also involved designing ways for domestic legislatures to scrutinize European proposals before they become law. Interparliamentary cooperation, subsidiarity checks, and dialogue between national and European representatives all reflect a larger constitutional lesson: in a union of states and citizens, legitimacy has to be braided across levels. Critics sometimes read this as evidence of confusion. It can also be read as a democratic safeguard, ensuring that integration advances through multiple representative channels rather than bypassing domestic democracy altogether. (European Parliament)

There is also a cultural dimension to the democratic story that institutional histories sometimes underplay. Democracy is not only a set of procedures; it is a habit of treating disagreement as legitimate and reversible. On this measure, the EU has evolved considerably. The early communities sought to depoliticize Europe's most dangerous conflicts by shifting them into rules and expert management. The later Union, by contrast, has been forced to accept a more openly political existence. Citizens argue over austerity, migration, enlargement, climate law, agricultural standards, sanctions, and defense cooperation in explicitly European terms. This politicization is often described as a threat to the European project, but historically it may be one of its achievements. A polity that cannot sustain disagreement is not democratic; it is merely administrative. The challenge for the EU has been to convert politicization into accountable choice rather than leaving it to be harvested only by anti-system actors. The rise of Euroscepticism is therefore not simply a pathology imposed from outside. It is also evidence that European integration has become important enough to be fought over in earnest. (Economy and Finance)

For that reason, the future of EU democracy is likely to depend less on inventing a dramatic constitutional "finality" than on improving the intelligibility of existing structures. Citizens do not need the Union to mimic every feature of a nation-state. They do need to know who decides, who can block, who can amend, and who can be blamed or rewarded. Historically, the EU has moved in that direction, especially since Maastricht and Lisbon, but not always clearly enough. The Parliament's rise, the extension of co-legislation, the formal role of national parliaments, the Charter, the citizens' initiative, rule-of-law mechanisms, and deliberative exercises such as the Conference on the Future of Europe all point to the same long-term trend: the steady, if uneven, replacement of silent consent by articulated democratic authorization. That trend should not be romanticized, but it should be recognized. The Union's democratic story is persuasive precisely because it is unfinished. It remains a history of institutions under pressure to become answerable to the people they govern. (European Commission)

Conclusion

What, then, is the historical verdict? The democratic story of the European Union is real, but it is not a fairy tale. The EU began as an elite-directed peace project with thin direct representation. Over time it acquired a directly elected Parliament, expanded parliamentary powers through successive treaties, created EU citizenship, incorporated fundamental rights into primary law, developed participatory instruments, made democracy a condition of accession, and began—however awkwardly—to defend rule-of-law standards within the Union. No honest historical overview can deny that trajectory. To compare the ECSC's appointed assembly with today's Parliament as co-legislator and conclude that "nothing changed" would be absurd. Equally, no serious history can pretend that the problem of democratic legitimacy has been settled. Crisis governance, executive dominance, weak transnational party competition, limited public understanding of responsibility, and the persistence of national frames continue to constrain the Union's democratic quality. (European Parliament)

The deepest lesson is that European democracy has developed not by replacing the nation-state but by reworking democracy under conditions of interdependence. The Union remains neither a state nor a mere international organization. Its legitimacy depends on an unstable but productive synthesis: direct citizen representation, state representation, judicial constraint, rights protection, national

parliamentary control, and increasingly, participatory channels that cross borders. This makes the EU frustratingly complex, but complexity is not the same as illegitimacy. Much of modern government is complex. The real historical question is whether complexity is domesticated by contestation, accountability, and rights. The democratic story of the EU shows partial success on all three fronts, though never enough to end the argument. In that sense, the Union's history is best understood as an unfinished constitutional experiment: the attempt to make shared power among democracies itself democratic. Whether that experiment deepens or unravels will depend not on a final treaty or slogan, but on whether Europeans can continue to connect common rule with common choice. (EUR-Lex)

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Hungary After Orbán: Democratic Renewal In A Captured State (Case Study)

By Dana Koptleuova

Hungary's April 2026 election ended Viktor Orbán's 16-year rule and handed Péter Magyar's Tisza party a constitutional majority in parliament. The result is historically important, but the election itself does not amount to democratic restoration. Hungary after Orbán is best understood as a case of post-competitive-authoritarian transition inside the European Union: the governing coalition has been displaced, yet many of the legal, administrative, economic, media, and cultural instruments of partisan domination remain embedded in the state. The key question is therefore not whether Hungary has entered a post-Orbán moment, but whether that moment can be converted into a durable post-Orbán order.

This case study argues that Hungary's prospects will depend on five linked tasks. First, the new government must restore constitutional checks without reproducing the majoritarian habits of the system it seeks to undo. Second, it must attack state capture through procurement reform, prosecutorial accountability, and transparent depoliticization of public administration. Third, it must rebuild a plural public sphere by reforming state media, advertising allocation, access-to-information practices, and protections for journalists, universities, and civil society. Fourth, it must stabilize the economy while unwinding politically distorted forms of intervention that became central under Orbán. Fifth, it must use European Union leverage intelligently: not as a substitute for domestic politics, but as an external anchor for reform, credibility, and fiscal recovery.

The most plausible near-term outcome is neither immediate liberal normalization nor authoritarian restoration. It is a contested transition marked by sharp institutional resistance, severe time pressure around frozen EU funds, and intense political conflict over how far a democratic repair agenda can go. Hungary's future will turn on whether the new government can combine speed with legality, purge capture without turning anti-corruption into victor's justice, and broaden democratic legitimacy beyond the anti-Orbán coalition that brought it to power.

Table 1. Core Post-Orbán Transition Tasks

Domain	Inherited Problem	Immediate Priority
Constitution	Entrenched emergency powers, politicized appointments, weak checks	Restore judicial and oversight autonomy through transparent legal revision
Corruption	Rare high-level accountability, procurement opacity, patronage	Secure investigative independence and procurement transparency
Media & Civic Space	State-media bias, regulator weakness, pressure on journalists and NGOs	Depoliticize public media and regularize access to information
Economy	Stagnation, inflation,	Stabilize policy while prioritizing

	regulatory distortion, tight fiscal room	visible service delivery
EU Re-Anchoring	Frozen funds, compressed deadlines, credibility deficit	Meet rule-of-law milestones without reverting to illiberal speed

1. Introduction: Why Hungary Matters After Orbán

Hungary has long occupied a special place in the study of democratic backsliding. Orbán's governments transformed an EU member state from a flawed but competitive democracy into what a broad scholarly and monitoring consensus described as a hybrid, autocratizing, or illiberal regime. Freedom House currently scores Hungary at 65/100 and classifies it as "Partly Free"; on its Nations in Transit measure, Hungary is listed as a "Transitional or Hybrid Regime" with a score of 43/100 (Freedom House 2026). The V-Dem project has treated Hungary as a paradigmatic case of autocratization, while scholars such as András Bozóki, Dániel Hegedűs, R. Daniel Kelemen, and Kim Lane Scheppele have used Hungary to illustrate how formal legality can be used to hollow out constitutional democracy from within (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018; Kelemen 2017; Scheppele 2022; V-Dem Institute 2025).

That is precisely why Orbán's electoral defeat in April 2026 matters beyond Hungary. Reuters, AP, and other major outlets reported that Péter Magyar's Tisza party defeated Fidesz after a record-turnout election and emerged with a two-thirds parliamentary majority, ending Orbán's 16 years in office (Reuters 2026a; AP 2026). Yet Hungary matters after Orbán for a second reason as well: it tests whether a heavily captured state can be democratized through electoral turnover alone. If the answer is yes, Hungary becomes the strongest recent European example of democratic recovery from entrenched illiberal rule. If the answer is no, it will show that electoral defeat of an autocrat does not automatically dismantle authoritarian infrastructures once they have been embedded in law, markets, and institutions.

This case study therefore treats Hungary after Orbán as a transition problem rather than a simple alternation in government. The challenge is not only to defeat Fidesz electorally, but to govern after Fidesz constitutionally, administratively, economically, and socially.

Method And Case Framing

This study uses a qualitative case-study approach focused on regime transition, state capture, and democratic repair. It combines three kinds of material: contemporary reporting on the 2026 election and the first days of the transition; official and quasi-official monitoring data on the rule of law, corruption, media freedom, and macroeconomic conditions; and academic literature on competitive authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, and illiberal constitutionalism. The purpose is not to predict Hungary's future with certainty. It is to identify the principal mechanisms that will shape the first phase of post-Orbán politics.

A "case study" is especially appropriate here because Hungary is not just one country among many. It is a crucial deviant and leading case. Within the EU, it became the clearest example of how democratic erosion can proceed through legal continuity, electoral competition, and selective coercion rather than through abrupt authoritarian rupture. Precisely because the Hungarian case was so important for theories of backsliding, it is also important for theories of recovery. The most useful question is therefore: which features of the Orbán system are easiest to reverse by election, and which are hardest to

reverse because they were sedimented in institutions, assets, and norms?

One answer is already visible. Electoral turnover can remove an incumbent government quickly, but it cannot automatically depoliticize the courts, reconstruct media markets, revise the ownership of quasi-public foundations, or restore habits of institutional self-restraint. The post-Orbán transition is thus best seen as a second-order democratization effort that takes place after democratic decay, not after an outright dictatorship. That distinction matters because the repertoire of reform must be constitutional and administrative rather than revolutionary.

The Social Geography Of Post-Orbán Hungary

Another reason to resist triumphalism is that Fidesz was defeated, but it was not socially annihilated. AP reported that Orbán still emphasized Fidesz's large vote total after his loss and signaled his intention, at least initially, to remain active in rebuilding the party (AP 2026). That matters because a captured state can only be democratized durably if democratic reform is not experienced by millions of citizens as collective dispossession.

Orbán's dominance was always geographically and socially uneven. Budapest and large cities contained more organized opposition, while rural and semi-rural areas were more dependent on local patronage networks, public-employment structures, and pro-government media. Even where direct coercion was absent, the structure of dependence mattered. Scheppele's analysis of the Orbán system stressed the interaction between formal electoral rules and broader asymmetries in resources and messaging (Scheppele 2022). The same asymmetries do not disappear on the morning after the election. They simply become available to different political strategies.

This is why post-Orbán leadership has to separate three categories that were often blurred under the old regime: regime architects, regime clients, and regime voters. The first group can legitimately be investigated for abuse of office or illicit enrichment. The second requires a differentiated policy response because many actors will have mixed motives, combining opportunism, self-preservation, and administrative conformity. The third must be reintegrated into democratic competition. A transition strategy that collapses all three groups into one enemy category would make democratic consolidation harder, not easier.

The importance of local government should be underlined here. Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi show how opposition actors under competitive authoritarianism can use local institutions and transnational ties to create room for manoeuvre (Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2024). In Hungary, opposition-run municipalities were among the few places where non-Fidesz governance could remain visible during the Orbán years. After Orbán, local government can again serve as a stabilizing channel for democratic reconstruction, particularly in service delivery and participatory legitimacy. If the new central government monopolizes reform from Budapest without empowering local institutions, it risks recreating the centralization it condemns.

Constitutional Repair In Practice

What would careful constitutional repair look like in practice? First, the government should identify which Orbán-era arrangements are substantively incompatible with democratic competition and which are merely politically objectionable. Not every policy disagreement warrants constitutional reversal. The priority should be structures that distort competition itself: court packing, partisan appointment mechanisms, emergency-governance powers, information restrictions, and rules that lock in asymmetrical control over autonomous institutions.

Second, reform should be sequenced around institutional confidence. The new government's

greatest constitutional asset is its claim to legitimacy after a landmark election. Its greatest constitutional risk is that in trying to repair a damaged order it may appear to instrumentalize legality. That is why independent review matters. Venice Commission consultation, open parliamentary hearings, published legal justifications, and clear implementation calendars are not bureaucratic niceties; they are tools for distinguishing democratic correction from partisan replacement.

Third, there must be a visible revaluation of ordinary law. Orbánism normalized governing at the constitutional edge. The Commission's repeated concerns over emergency powers, legal uncertainty, and reduced public consultation show how far this pattern travelled under Fidesz (European Commission 2025a). Post-Orbán democracy should therefore elevate ordinary legislation, transparent rulemaking, and administrative regularity. A captured constitutional order is not repaired only by changing the constitution; it is repaired by reducing the incentives to constitutionalize everyday politics.

The Anti-Corruption Dilemma: Justice Versus Stability

Anti-corruption politics will be central, but also dangerous. The public expectation of accountability is high. Reuters and other reports after the election highlighted Magyar's anti-corruption promises and the possibility of new investigations, institutional reform, and a break with Orbán-era business favoritism (Reuters 2026a; Reuters 2026c; Reuters 2026d). Yet anti-corruption drives in polarized environments can easily slide into selective justice, endless spectacle, or administrative paralysis.

Hungary therefore needs what might be called restrained aggressiveness. It should move rapidly on document preservation, procurement audits, beneficial-ownership transparency, and conflict-of-interest reviews, because delay allows evidence and assets to dissipate. At the same time, prosecutions must not become the sole public face of the new order. Stable transitions require both backward-looking accountability and forward-looking capability.

This is where European anchoring can help. Anti-corruption reform tied to objective standards on procurement, auditing, judicial review, and public-data publication is easier to defend than case-by-case moral rhetoric alone. The Commission's recovery plan framework already ties financial disbursement to reforms in competition, procurement, judicial independence, and anti-corruption (European Commission 2025c). Used well, that framework can depersonalize reform. Used badly, it can become a technocratic shield that distances anti-corruption from public debate. The government must avoid both extremes.

Media Reform After Informational Autocracy

Media reform poses a similar dilemma. There is no democratic future for Hungary without a more plural information environment. But direct political intervention in media personnel or editorial lines would hand Fidesz an immediate narrative of censorship by the new ruling party. The proper democratic response is institutional, economic, and procedural.

Institutionally, the composition and appointment rules of the media regulator should be revised so that no single parliamentary majority can dominate it. Economically, the allocation of state advertising must be subjected to transparent criteria and external review. Procedurally, journalists' access to public events, data, and officials must be regularized through rights rather than discretionary favors. The Commission's 2025 findings show why all three are necessary: the problem in Hungary was not just biased broadcasting but an ecosystem in which regulatory dependence, opaque advertising, and selective access together produced durable asymmetry (European Commission 2025a).

Public broadcasting deserves special mention. Reuters reported strong pressure from journalists within the state-news apparatus for renewed editorial autonomy immediately after the election (Reuters 2026e). That is an opening, but also a warning. If reform is handled as a purge, professional confidence may collapse further. The new government should instead create a firewall model: independent boards, fixed terms, transparent editorial standards, whistleblower protections, and external audits of fairness. Public media should cease to be a weapon precisely by becoming harder for any government to control.

Economic Governance And Democratic Legitimacy

The post-Orbán government's economic challenge is not only technical. It is political in the most basic sense: whether democratic governance can again be associated with competence. Orbán's long tenure benefited from the claim that whatever his constitutional sins, he could protect ordinary Hungarians from instability better than a fragmented opposition. By 2026, that claim had weakened. But it has not disappeared from the political memory of his electorate.

That makes delivery central. The Commission's forecast and the IMF's assessment point to an economy that is fragile but governable, provided policy credibility improves and distortions are reduced over time (European Commission 2025b; IMF 2025). The most important democratic-economic strategy is therefore not maximal ideological change, but visible improvement in state performance. Waiting times in hospitals, punctuality of trains, school maintenance, administrative responsiveness, and predictable regulation all carry democratic weight. They demonstrate that the state belongs to citizens rather than to a ruling network.

A transition government should also avoid the symbolic trap of appearing to govern primarily for markets, Brussels, or Budapest liberals. Orbán's system was sustained by a politics of uneven inclusion. Post-Orbán democracy should answer that not by reproducing targeted patronage, but by visibly universalizing state capacity. Reliable services are not politically neutral. They are among the strongest tools for rebuilding confidence in democracy where clientelism has flourished.

European Leverage, Deadlines, And The Problem Of Speed

The August 2026 deadline around key RRF milestones creates a distinctively European transition problem. The Commission's country page makes clear that all milestones and targets must be completed by August 2026, while Reuters reported that billions remain contingent on swift reform (European Commission 2025c; Reuters 2026b). This compresses time in a way that can distort democratic decision-making. Speed is necessary, but speed can also produce errors, weak consultation, and easy legal challenge.

For that reason, the new government should distinguish between emergency sequencing and emergency governing. Sequencing means front-loading the most externally binding reforms, especially where there is already a clear compliance roadmap. Emergency governing means reproducing Orbán-style shortcuts. The former may be necessary; the latter would be disastrous. The government must communicate this distinction constantly, both to domestic audiences and to Brussels. If European actors reward mere legislative velocity without regard to constitutional quality, they risk incentivizing the wrong lesson from Hungary's past.

The EU's own role should therefore be self-conscious. Kelemen's argument that the Union has struggled to confront national authoritarianism remains relevant, but the post-Orbán moment also shows the opposite risk: democratic recovery may be pressed into a timetable set by funding instruments rather than

democratic deliberation (Kelemen 2017). The wisest EU stance is firm conditionality paired with procedural patience on genuinely complex reforms. Brussels should insist on standards, not on mimicry of Orbánist speed.

Lessons Beyond Hungary

Hungary after Orbán also matters because it illuminates a broader comparative problem: how democracies recover after long periods of legalistic capture. In many backsliding regimes, the decisive question is no longer whether the opposition can win an election. It is whether, after winning, it can govern without either capitulating to old structures or becoming trapped in a cycle of constitutional retaliation.

The Hungarian case suggests five broader lessons. First, elections can break illiberal dominance even when rules are skewed, but usually only when economic underperformance, social exhaustion, and elite defection coincide. Second, international anchoring helps, but cannot do the domestic work of building legitimacy. Third, captured institutions are easier to delegitimize than to reconstruct. Fourth, anti-corruption politics is necessary but insufficient for democratic consolidation. Fifth, the most durable marker of democratic recovery is not rhetorical moderation but restored uncertainty: a system in which no governing party can again presume that the state belongs to it.

For scholars of democratization, Hungary is thus becoming a second critical case. During the Orbán years, it was evidence that democratic erosion can proceed gradually within a union of democracies. In the years after Orbán, it may become evidence either that such erosion is reversible through disciplined constitutional politics or that reversal is much harder once capture becomes deeply socialized. Both findings would travel well beyond Hungary itself.

2. The Orbán System: From Electoral Victory To State Capture

The Orbán era cannot be reduced to a nationalist political style or to unusually strong executive leadership. It was a regime-building project. Scheppele argued that Orbán's governing advantage rested not merely on campaign skill but on "the rules of the game" that Fidesz rewrote after 2010, including the constitution, electoral law, district boundaries, and the broader institutional setting of competition (Scheppele 2022). Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała similarly describe Hungary as a case of "illiberal constitutionalism," in which formal constitutional tools were used to capture courts and weaken liberal restraints while preserving a façade of legality (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała 2019). Bozóki and Hegedűs characterized the system as an "externally constrained hybrid regime," meaning that EU membership limited the regime's options without preventing the emergence of one-sided and unfair political competition (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018).

Three features of Orbánism are especially important for a post-Orbán case study.

First, institutional asymmetry became the regime's operating principle. Orbán's governments did not abolish elections, courts, media law, universities, or civil associations. Instead, they restructured them so that competition remained formally legal but materially tilted. The European Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report on Hungary found continued concerns over judicial independence, limited progress on high-level corruption, persistent threats to media pluralism, selective restrictions on access to information, extensive use of emergency powers, and a deteriorating civic environment (European Commission 2025a). This matters because post-Orbán governments inherit institutions whose dysfunction is often subtle and rule-bound rather than openly coercive.

Second, state capture extended beyond formal state offices into the economy and knowledge sector. Transparency International reported that Hungary scored 40/100 in the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index, the lowest in the EU alongside Bulgaria on one regional comparison, while its country page records Hungary at 40/100 and rank 84 of 182 countries (Transparency International 2026a; Transparency International 2026b). The Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report likewise stated that convictions in high-level corruption cases remained rare and that shortcomings persisted in party-finance transparency and public procurement (European Commission 2025a). In higher education and research, Orbán-era restructuring shifted control of universities and public assets toward politically aligned foundations and networks, reinforcing what one recent study terms a "deep state" logic in Hungarian academia (Majtényi and Major 2025).

Third, Orbán built an "informational autocracy." V-Dem's 2025 Democracy Report singled out Hungary as an example of a media system that had become highly centralized and politically controlled during autocratization (V-Dem Institute 2025). The European Commission found in 2025 that there had been no progress in strengthening the functional independence of the media regulator or in ensuring fair distribution of state advertising, while journalists continued to face serious challenges and selective denials of access (European Commission 2025a). RSF's country profile on Hungary similarly states that Orbán built "a true media empire" subject to his party's orders (Reporters Without Borders 2025). A democratic transition that leaves this information order largely intact will struggle to reproduce itself electorally.

3. Why Orbán Lost

Orbán did not lose because the authoritarian architecture disappeared. He lost because a previously resilient regime ran into cumulative political, economic, and social limits. Contemporary analyses by Reuters, AP, and the Journal of Democracy point to three immediate causes: declining public services and living standards, corruption fatigue, and elite defection in the form of Péter Magyar's insurgency (Reuters 2026a; AP 2026; Laczó 2026; Ésik 2026).

The economic context mattered. The IMF's 2025 Article IV consultation described Hungary as being at a "challenging juncture," with stagnant output over the previous three years, inflation above target, elevated public debt, and a policy mix distorted by price caps, windfall taxes, and other regulatory interventions (IMF 2025). The European Commission's autumn 2025 forecast projected GDP growth of only 0.4% in 2025, inflation of 4.5%, and a general government deficit of 4.6% of GDP, with deficits remaining high in 2026 and 2027 (European Commission 2025b). In short, the regime's promise of stability and national competence lost credibility.

Political exhaustion mattered too. Ferenc Laczó argues that Orbán's hegemony began to crumble not only because of opposition pressure, but because the regime increasingly failed at the "core tasks of governing" while everyday deterioration became visible (Laczó 2026). Reuters and AP likewise reported that inflation, corruption, healthcare, and public services were decisive voter concerns in the 2026 campaign (Reuters 2026a; AP 2026). Orbán's international alliances and ideological prestige could not offset domestic underperformance.

Finally, elite defection changed the opposition's strategic position. Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi's work on competitive authoritarianism in Hungary and Turkey is useful here: opposition success in such systems often requires strategies that break isolation and

widen room for manoeuvre (Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2024). Magyar's break with Fidesz mattered because he could translate liberal-democratic complaints into a national language legible to Orbán's own electorate. Laczó makes a similar point, arguing that anti-illiberal mobilization became more effective once a defector could delegitimize the regime from inside its own symbolic universe (Laczó 2026). This does not mean the old regime vanished. It means its coalition fractured enough for an electoral opening.

4. The Transition Problem: Government Change Is Not Regime Change

A central analytical mistake would be to read the April 2026 election as a clean regime reset. In practice, post-Orbán Hungary begins under conditions of institutional lag. The outgoing majority may have lost the cabinet and parliament, but many Orbán-era appointees, legal rules, asset transfers, and patronage channels remain.

The first constraint is constitutional entrenchment. Orbán used supermajoritarian lawmaking to relocate partisan preferences into cardinal laws, constitutional provisions, and long-term appointments. Even where a new parliamentary supermajority exists, the transition still raises a normative problem: how can a democratic government dismantle illiberal entrenchment without itself normalizing constitutional hardball? This is especially acute in contexts where the prior regime weaponized legality. A post-Orbán government must show that democratic restoration differs from mirror-image domination, even when both rely on formal majorities.

The second constraint is personnel entrenchment. Reuters reported after the election that Magyar's reform program would face resistance from Orbán loyalists embedded in key institutions and that he had already clashed with holdovers in the presidency and state media (Reuters 2026b; Reuters 2026c). The issue is not only overt obstruction. It is also passive resistance: delays, procedural veto points, selective leaks, sabotage within administrative agencies, and strategic litigation.

The third constraint is temporal. Reuters reported that roughly EUR 17 billion in EU funds remained frozen and that around EUR 10 billion in recovery funding was tied to rapid compliance with rule-of-law conditions, with a crucial deadline approaching in late August 2026 (Reuters 2026b). The Commission's Hungary recovery-plan page states that all milestones and targets under the national plan must be completed by August 2026 and that Hungary's plan totals EUR 10.43 billion, including EUR 6.512 billion in grants and EUR 3.918 billion in loans (European Commission 2025c). That creates a difficult sequencing problem: reforms need political deliberation and legal care, but delay carries heavy fiscal costs.

The fourth constraint is sociological. Orbánism was not only a legal order; it was a coalition linking parts of the bureaucracy, state-dependent business, public-media ecosystems, rural political machines, cultural institutions, and segments of the electorate that came to see Fidesz as the normal custodian of the nation. A transition that treats the entire Fidesz electorate as politically illegitimate will fail. Democratic repair requires disentangling regime structures from social constituencies.

5. Task One: Restore Constitutional Democracy Without Reproducing Illiberalism

The first task after Orbán is constitutional. Yet constitutional repair must not be confused with constitutional revenge. The challenge is to restore restraint, not simply to shift who benefits from the absence of restraint.

At minimum, constitutional repair requires rebalancing the judiciary, protecting the autonomy of oversight bodies, reducing

emergency governance, and reviewing cardinal laws or appointments that were designed less to serve public purposes than to lock in partisan advantage. The European Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report found that while some judicial reforms since 2023 had enhanced the National Judicial Council's powers, problems remained: consultation requirements were bypassed, undue pressure on some judges continued, and perceived judicial independence remained low, at 37% among the general public and 38% among companies in 2025 (European Commission 2025a). The report also found that the government continued to rely heavily on emergency powers, undermining legal certainty (European Commission 2025a). These findings identify the minimum agenda for any democratic reset.

But constitutional repair also has to be normatively disciplined. A new government with a two-thirds majority may be tempted to use the same constitutional machinery that Orbán used, only in the opposite direction. There are moments when this may be unavoidable: some appointments or legal structures cannot be neutralized without forceful legislative action. Yet the regime change becomes self-defeating if every controversial problem is solved through improvisational constitutional amendment. The more the new order relies on emergency-style constitutional politics, the easier it becomes for Fidesz to narrate democratic repair as partisan purge.

A better standard is dual legitimacy: reforms should be legally valid and publicly justifiable in liberal-democratic terms. That implies transparent procedures, reasoned explanations, consultation with domestic and international expert bodies, and whenever possible, sunset clauses or depoliticized replacement mechanisms. A democracy that has emerged from captured legality must be visibly more lawful than the system it replaces.

6. Task Two: Dismantle State Capture Through Anti-Corruption And Administrative Reform

Hungary after Orbán will succeed or fail on whether it can reduce state capture to manageable proportions. Corruption here is not a side issue. It is one of the regime's core governing technologies.

The Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report was blunt: there was "no progress" in establishing a robust track record of investigations, prosecutions, and final judgments in high-level corruption cases, while concerns persisted over political influence, clientelism, favouritism, and nepotism (European Commission 2025a). Transparency International's 2025 CPI data reinforce that picture, with Hungary at 40/100 and among the EU's worst performers (Transparency International 2026a; Transparency International 2026b). Reuters, after the election, noted market hopes that improved rule-of-law standards and a break with crony capitalism could unlock funds and restore confidence (Reuters 2026d).

Three principles should guide post-Orbán anti-corruption reform.

The first is institutional independence. New bodies are less important than credible investigative autonomy. Anti-corruption agencies that remain politically dependent merely rebrand selective prosecution. If Hungary is to generate trust at home and in Brussels, investigations into procurement, public foundations, asset transfers, and conflicts of interest must be rules-based and reviewable. Political allies of the new government must be as prosecutable as former Fidesz clients.

The second is administrative transparency. Hungary needs clearer procurement rules, fuller beneficial-ownership visibility, stricter party-finance rules, and stronger public-data access. The Commission noted continued shortcomings in party and campaign-finance transparency and unresolved opportunities to

circumvent spending limits via third parties (European Commission 2025a). That means clean politics cannot be secured only through criminal law; it also requires redesigning the incentive structure of public procurement, party funding, and public information.

The third is political sequencing. Anti-corruption is politically indispensable in the short run, but if it dominates the government's entire agenda it can become performative and polarizing. A democratic transition cannot be sustained only by retrospective justice. It must also deliver prospective competence. The electorate that voted against Orbán because hospitals, schools, railways, and prices mattered will not remain mobilized indefinitely by tribunal-style politics alone.

7. Task Three: Rebuild Media Pluralism, Academic Freedom, And Civic Space

No democratic transition can consolidate without a plural public sphere. In Hungary, this may be the hardest area of all because media capture under Orbán was cumulative, economic, and infrastructural rather than merely censorial.

The European Commission found in 2025 that there had been no progress in strengthening the independence of the media regulator, that no measures had been adopted to guarantee fair and transparent allocation of state advertising, and that pressure on journalists had increased (European Commission 2025a). RSF's Hungary profile says Orbán built a party-subordinated media empire, while V-Dem describes Hungary as an example of "informational autocracy" (Reporters Without Borders 2025; V-Dem Institute 2025). Reuters reported after the election that journalists inside Hungary's state news structures were already calling for editorial independence and that the prime minister-elect planned a major media overhaul (Reuters 2026e).

The policy implications are clear. A post-Orbán government should begin with governance rules rather than content interventions. The priority is not to make public media pro-government in a new direction, but to make it genuinely public. That means depoliticized appointments, transparent editorial charters, statutory independence, and external oversight compatible with European standards. State advertising must be allocated according to transparent and reviewable criteria instead of political loyalty. Freedom-of-information procedures need strengthening because media pluralism depends not only on ownership diversity but on the ability of journalists to obtain public data.

Academic freedom and civil society require similar treatment. Freedom House notes that Orbán-era governments adopted laws and practices that constrained NGOs, journalists, universities, and groups critical of Fidesz (Freedom House 2026). Majtényi and Major argue that the erosion of academic freedom in Hungary has been linked to patronage, cronyism, and ideological intervention in universities and research (Majtényi and Major 2025). Reversing this does not simply mean restoring pre-2010 arrangements. It means constructing defensible guarantees for university autonomy, foundation governance, research funding, and civic association that are harder for future governments to capture.

A central lesson from the Orbán years is that public-sphere repair is not cosmetic. If state media, universities, and NGOs remain vulnerable to partisan capture, any future democratic government will govern under permanent conditions of asymmetrical legitimacy.

8. Task Four: Stabilize The Economy While Exiting Political Distortion

Hungary's democratic transition cannot be separated from macroeconomic and

developmental constraints. Orbán lost in part because the regime's economic model stopped delivering broad credibility, but the incoming government inherits the consequences of that model.

The IMF concluded in 2025 that Hungary's output had stagnated for three years, inflation remained above the central bank's target, public debt was elevated, and policy distortions such as price caps, margin caps, windfall taxes, and subsidized lending added uncertainty (IMF 2025). The European Commission's forecast projected modest growth and persistently elevated deficits, with inflation remaining above comfortable levels and public debt edging upward (European Commission 2025b). This is not a crisis of immediate collapse, but it is a poor environment for democratic honeymoon politics.

The incoming government therefore faces a classic post-populist dilemma. It was elected partly on promises to improve living standards and public services, yet fiscal and institutional room for manoeuvre is narrow. Immediate austerity could discredit democratic change. Unrestrained spending could undermine market confidence and deepen the very vulnerabilities that Orbán left behind.

The right strategy is selective normalization. The government should unwind distortionary interventions gradually, protect vulnerable households from transition shocks, and prioritize investments that visibly improve state capacity: healthcare delivery, transport reliability, school quality, local administration, and digital public services. One reason Orbán remained resilient for so long was that he combined institutional capture with selectively distributive politics. A democratic successor must show that non-clientelist governance can also deliver.

EU funding is crucial here. Reuters reported that Brussels sees quick reform as the path to unfreezing about EUR 17 billion in withheld money, and markets responded positively to the election because investors anticipated better EU relations and stronger rule-of-law compliance (Reuters 2026b; Reuters 2026d). The Commission's RRF materials make clear that the Hungarian plan was already designed around reforms in rule of law, judicial independence, energy, education, and public finances (European Commission 2025c). In practice, then, economic stabilization and democratic repair are not separate agendas. They are institutionally linked.

9. Task Five: Re-anchor Hungary In Europe Without Outsourcing Reform To Brussels

Hungary's transition after Orbán is unusual because it is taking place inside a democratic union with fiscal, legal, and political leverage. Bozóki and Hegedűs were right to stress that Hungary's hybrid regime was "externally constrained": EU membership limited full authoritarian closure while simultaneously providing resources the regime could exploit (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018). After Orbán, the EU remains both an opportunity and a danger.

The opportunity is obvious. EU conditionality has become materially relevant. Kelemen argued years ago that the EU's real democratic deficit was not too much supranational power, but its limited ability to confront national authoritarianism inside the Union (Kelemen 2017). Since then, conditionality over funds and sustained rule-of-law monitoring have become central parts of the Union's response. In 2026, those tools may help a reforming Hungarian government lock in improvements faster than domestic politics alone would permit.

The danger is over-reliance. Domestic democratic legitimacy cannot be outsourced to Brussels. Reforms that are defended only as the price of obtaining funds will remain vulnerable to nationalist backlash and future reversal. Orbánism thrived partly by converting EU

criticism into a politics of external victimhood. A post-Orbán government must instead frame European re-anchoring as national reconstruction: judicial independence, media pluralism, and corruption control are not things Hungary does for Brussels, but things Hungary does for itself.

Foreign policy will matter symbolically too. Reuters and AP both reported that Magyar campaigned on restoring ties with the EU and NATO and on moving Hungary away from Orbán's isolationist and Russia-friendly posture (Reuters 2026a; AP 2026). A more cooperative European line could quickly improve Hungary's diplomatic standing. But foreign-policy normalization will not by itself guarantee domestic consolidation. The lesson of the Orbán era is that EU membership is compatible with serious democratic erosion. Europe can anchor reform; it cannot substitute for it.

10. Scenarios For Hungary After Orbán

Three broad scenarios are plausible over the next three to five years.

Scenario one is democratic consolidation through disciplined reform. In this path, the new government uses its parliamentary majority to restore judicial and media safeguards, improve procurement and anti-corruption enforcement, unlock EU funds, and deliver visible governance improvements without excessive constitutional hardball. Fidesz remains a large opposition party, but loses its privileged institutional ecosystem. This is the best-case outcome, and it is possible, but only if the government resists both complacency and vengeance.

Scenario two is unstable coexistence. Here, the government secures some rule-of-law concessions and some funds, but entrenched networks in the state, economy, and media remain powerful. Reform becomes partial, conflictual, and uneven. Hungary moves away from Orbánism but not fully beyond it. Elections become more competitive, yet institutions remain brittle and politics intensely polarized. This is arguably the most likely medium-term outcome.

Scenario three is failed transition and illiberal return. In this path, reform overreaches or underdelivers. Economic pain rises, anti-corruption efforts appear selective, constitutional battles erode legitimacy, and Fidesz reconstructs itself as the victim of a partisan purge. If the new government disappoints quickly enough, Orbánism—or an Orbánist successor—could return in a more explicitly revanchist form. AP has already reported deep soul-searching within Fidesz after the defeat, but also Orbán's intention, at least initially, to remain politically active within the party (AP 2026). Defeat does not necessarily mean disappearance.

11. Conclusion

Hungary after Orbán is not a tabula rasa. It is a democracy trying to emerge from a system that used democratic forms to weaken democratic substance. That makes the Hungarian case unusually important for contemporary comparative politics. It shows that democratic backsliding in an EU member state can be electorally reversed. But it also shows that the defeat of an illiberal incumbent is only the beginning of transition.

The core lesson of this case study is that democratic renewal in a captured state requires more than winning office. It requires restoring restraint, dismantling patronage, rebuilding pluralism, stabilizing public expectations, and re-grounding European integration in domestic legitimacy. Hungary's new rulers will need speed because the fiscal and geopolitical window is narrow. They will need patience because institutional repair takes time. Above all, they will need self-restraint, because the deepest test of post-Orbán democracy will be

whether it can govern differently from the regime it replaces.

If Hungary succeeds, it will offer the most important recent example in Europe of how a hybridized system can be brought back toward constitutional democracy without rupture. If it fails, the case will become a warning of equal significance: once state capture becomes systemic, elections alone may be insufficient to end it.

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Dry Laws, Hard Lines: Russia and the Politics of Prohibition

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This essay argues that prohibition in Russia is best understood not as a single moral doctrine but as a selective political technology. Across the late imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods, Russian rulers have used prohibitory policy to do several kinds of work at once: to discipline labor, manage public disorder, display state capacity, shape moral authority, and define the boundaries of full citizenship. The essay compares two trajectories. In alcohol policy, especially after the early 2000s, Russia moved from dramatic emergency-style bans toward a more technocratic regime of pricing, tracking, availability controls, and market management that produced measurable health gains. In drug policy, by contrast, the state hardened prohibition into a security-centered and civilizational project, rejecting harm reduction and substitution therapy while empowering punitive institutions. The contrast shows that Russia does not simply prohibit intoxicants; it selectively regulates, medicalizes, and criminalizes them according to the political uses prohibition can serve.

In Russia, prohibition has almost never been just a matter of banning intoxicants. It has been a way of organizing power. From the late imperial vodka monopoly to the Soviet anti-alcohol drives, and from post-Soviet narcotics laws to contemporary campaigns against "drug propaganda," prohibition has repeatedly served as a political technology for disciplining labor, displaying state capacity, defining moral order, and marking the boundaries of legitimate citizenship. The recurring Russian story is not simply that the state tries to suppress vice and fails. It is that prohibition becomes most attractive to rulers when it can do several kinds of work at once: raise or reallocate revenue, identify internal enemies, dramatize national emergency, and place coercive institutions at the center of social policy.

This history matters because Russia offers not one prohibition story but several, and they do not all lead to the same conclusion. The imperial "dry law" of 1914 revealed the contradiction between moral reform and a state fiscally dependent on vodka. The Soviet period showed that official sobriety campaigns could produce genuine public-health gains while also generating black markets, resentment, and administrative overreach. The post-2000 alcohol regime demonstrated that regulation grounded in prices, tracking systems, and availability controls could reduce mortality on a large scale. Yet in narcotics policy, the Russian state moved in the opposite direction: away from harm reduction and toward punitive absolutism, moral panic, and geopolitical defiance. Alcohol policy became more evidence-based; drug policy became more ideological.

That divergence is the core argument of this essay. Russia's politics of prohibition are best understood not as a stable moral doctrine but as a selective and adaptive method of rule. The state criminalizes or tolerates intoxication according to the political uses to which prohibition can be put. Where regulation can be folded into administrative modernization and population health, as in alcohol policy after the early 2000s, Russian governments have been capable of learning. Where a substance can be tied to internal disorder, foreign influence, and civilizational threat, as in narcotics policy, prohibition becomes harder, more theatrical, and less responsive to evidence. In that sense, modern Russia does not merely prohibit substances. It sorts populations, privileges some forms of dependence over others, and turns public health into a test of obedience.

An Empire Built on Vodka and Anxiety

The Russian prohibition tradition cannot be understood without starting from the paradox

that structured late imperial alcohol politics: the state was both the chief seller of vodka and one of the loudest official voices warning against drink. As Patricia Herlihy's classic study of late imperial Russia shows, vodka was not simply a commodity; it was deeply woven into the empire's political economy, social rituals, and administrative logic (Herlihy 2001). State authorities depended on alcohol revenues while doctors, clergy, military officers, and reformers increasingly described drunkenness as a national problem. Alcohol was blamed for absenteeism, domestic violence, criminality, illness, and military weakness. In other words, the state profited from a practice that many elites increasingly regarded as a threat to modernization itself.

This contradiction mattered because it shaped the language through which prohibition entered Russian politics. Temperance in imperial Russia was not only a moral movement; it was also a critique of autocracy's revenue model. Herlihy notes that private temperance societies often took aim at the state liquor monopoly and, by implication, at the regime that sustained it (Herlihy 2001). To attack mass drunkenness was therefore to raise an uncomfortable question: could an empire that funded itself through vodka ever sincerely reform the drinking culture it had helped normalize? The "alcohol question" thus became a wider question about what the state was for. Was it a guardian of public welfare, or an extractor of revenue that moralized after the fact?

The emergency ban of 1914, imposed at the outbreak of the First World War, exposed the depth of that contradiction. According to Herlihy, Russia was the first country to adopt national prohibition, and the wartime ban was interpreted by contemporaries as a dramatic act of national self-discipline (Herlihy 2001). Yet the move was neither purely altruistic nor ideologically coherent. It answered several political needs at once: improving military discipline, stabilizing mobilization, raising industrial productivity, and presenting the monarchy as morally serious at a moment of existential danger. It was a sovereign gesture in the literal sense: a declaration that national emergency justified exceptional control over ordinary social practice.

But if the imperial ban revealed the state's capacity for sweeping action, it also revealed prohibition's fragility when it is not backed by durable institutional and economic realignment. Research on the 1914 vodka prohibition emphasizes the scale of the unintended consequences: the loss of a crucial revenue stream, the persistence of demand, and the expansion of illicit production, especially samogon, or moonshine (Herlihy 2001; Nemtsov 2011; see also Paoli 2002 on black-market adaptation in the post-Soviet period). The deeper lesson was that prohibition could reorder the moral language of the state more quickly than it could reorder the material conditions of consumption. The ban did not abolish the social life of alcohol; it drove part of it underground while burdening the state with new enforcement problems.

This was not a uniquely Russian outcome. But in Russia the stakes were unusually high because alcohol occupied such an important place in both state finance and social reproduction. The imperial experience established a pattern that would recur throughout the twentieth century: prohibition appeared most appealing to rulers in periods of war, crisis, or systemic transition, precisely because it promised a shortcut to order. Yet each time, the state encountered the same dilemma. If prohibition was too weak, it looked performative; if it was too strong, it threatened revenue, legitimacy, and governability. Russian rulers never fully escaped that trap. They learned instead to alternate between moral condemnation and pragmatic retreat.

Soviet Sobriety and the Cycles of Command

The Soviet state inherited not only the imperial ban but also the wider political grammar that made alcohol a problem of labor, discipline, and social engineering. Early Bolshevik hostility to drink fit comfortably with revolutionary ambitions to create a more rational, productive, and morally renewed society. Sobriety could be cast as a socialist virtue, while drunkenness could be framed as a residue of backwardness and exploitation. Yet, as Alexandr Nemtsov's long view of Russian alcohol history makes clear, Soviet policy oscillated sharply between aspiration and accommodation (Nemtsov 2011). The state denounced alcohol even as it repeatedly returned to it as a source of revenue and a mechanism of everyday social management.

That oscillation is crucial. It shows that Soviet prohibitionism was never simply ideological. It was instrumental. Periods of stricter control tended to coincide with efforts to intensify labor discipline or remold public behavior; periods of relaxation reflected the reality that the state also needed money, social quiescence, and administratively manageable forms of consumption. Stalinist industrialization, for instance, did not eliminate drink from Soviet life. It reincorporated alcohol into a planned system in which the state could both moralize and profit. The result was a characteristic Soviet duality: official rhetoric celebrated sobriety, while practical governance tolerated and organized significant levels of alcohol consumption.

The most important Soviet experiment in prohibition politics came under Mikhail Gorbachev. Beginning in 1985, the anti-alcohol campaign restricted sales, raised prices, cut production, reduced retail hours, punished violations, and promoted substitute activities. In policy terms it was one of the most ambitious alcohol-control efforts in modern history. For decades, it was remembered in much of popular discourse as a joke, an irritation, or a contributor to black-market expansion. Yet the empirical literature has substantially revised that view. Bhattacharya, Gathmann, and Miller show that the campaign was associated with a dramatic fall in mortality: roughly 400,000 fewer deaths per year during the campaign, or around 1.6 million fewer deaths over four years, with especially large effects on alcohol-related causes of death (Bhattacharya, Gathmann and Miller 2013).

That finding matters for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that coercive anti-alcohol policy can work, at least in the short run, when it sharply reduces availability and changes the effective price of drinking. The Russian case is therefore not evidence that all prohibition is futile. Second, however, Bhattacharya and colleagues also show that the end of the campaign was associated with a major rebound in mortality during the 1990s, suggesting that the benefits of coercive suppression were politically and institutionally brittle (Bhattacharya, Gathmann and Miller 2013). The campaign achieved real health gains, but those gains depended on an intrusive administrative offensive that proved hard to sustain amid fiscal stress, popular resentment, and systemic collapse.

The Gorbachev episode is sometimes treated either as proof that public health must override liberty or, conversely, as proof that moralizing bans inevitably backfire. Both conclusions are too simple. What the campaign actually reveals is the conditional nature of prohibition's success. Russian governments could indeed reduce harmful drinking quickly, but only by assuming a level of enforcement and paternal authority that imposed political costs elsewhere. The campaign was unpopular not merely because people wanted to drink. It was unpopular because it made visible the Soviet state's aspiration to regulate intimate life by command. It intruded into weddings, funerals, local trade,

and everyday exchange. Even when the health results were positive, the politics were corrosive.

This tension helps explain why the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years were so consequential for later policy. The anti-alcohol campaign demonstrated two propositions that subsequent Russian elites did not forget. One was encouraging: the state could save lives through alcohol control. The other was cautionary: blanket, moralizing prohibition could delegitimize rule if it appeared arbitrary, hypocritical, or disconnected from lived reality. Post-Soviet alcohol policy would therefore move, gradually and unevenly, away from grand prohibitory theater and toward more technical forms of regulation. Drug policy, by contrast, would move toward an even harsher version of ideological command.

From Blanket Prohibition to Managed Restriction

If the imperial and Soviet periods made alcohol into a recurring object of moral emergency, the post-2000 period turned it into a field of administrative reform. This shift is one of the most important developments in the modern politics of prohibition in Russia, because it shows that the state was capable of learning from earlier failures without abandoning prohibitionist instincts altogether. The new model did not rely on a single dramatic "dry law." Instead, it combined excise taxes, minimum pricing, marketing restrictions, sales-hour limits, tighter licensing, and the digital monitoring of production and distribution. In effect, Russia moved from prohibition as exceptional command to prohibition as layered regulation.

The results were substantial. A 2019 WHO report on the Russian Federation concluded that total per capita alcohol consumption had fallen by 43 percent between 2003 and 2016, with declines in both recorded and unrecorded alcohol use (WHO Regional Office for Europe 2019). The same report linked these changes to a marked decline in all-cause mortality and a historic rise in life expectancy by 2018. The measures singled out by WHO are revealing: higher excise taxes, minimum unit pricing for vodka and later other beverages, a real-time tracking system for the alcohol market, a night ban on off-premises retail sales, and stricter rules on public-space drinking and marketing (WHO Regional Office for Europe 2019). None of these policies amounted to total prohibition. All of them were restrictive. The Russian state, in other words, discovered that it could achieve many of prohibition's goals more effectively through calibrated market governance than through outright bans.

Academic work broadly supports that interpretation. Neufeld and colleagues argue that Russia's 2010-2020 national concept on alcohol abuse achieved significant progress, with alcohol increasingly framed as a population-level health risk rather than as a purely moral failing (Neufeld et al. 2020). In the same vein, comparative work on former Soviet states identifies Russia as one of the clearest cases in which stronger alcohol control policies were followed by visible declines in consumption and harm (Neufeld et al. 2021). More recent research by Vadim Radaev and co-authors suggests that the downward trend continued into the 2010s and 2020, with younger cohorts showing especially strong movement toward abstinence or lower-volume drinking (Radaev, Roshchina and Salnikova 2020; Radaev and Roshchina 2025). This is a major social fact. It means that Russia's relationship to alcohol has not been frozen in the stereotype of timeless vodka fatalism. Policy, generational change, and altered social norms have mattered.

Yet this relative success should not be romanticized, because it also reveals the selective logic of Russian prohibition. Alcohol policy became more effective when it became less absolute. But even then, restrictive measures

could produce displacement effects when legal access narrowed too sharply or became too expensive for poorer consumers. Work by Neufeld and Rehm on unrecorded and surrogate alcohol in Russia shows how loopholes, denatured products, and cheap substitutes undermined the public-health goals of regulation when enforcement was inconsistent or incentives were misaligned (Neufeld and Rehm 2018). Alexander Skorobogatov's analysis of regional sales-hour restrictions goes further, arguing that tighter restrictions on legal sales could increase alcohol-poisoning mortality by pushing some consumers toward more toxic surrogates (Skorobogatov 2021). The implication is sobering: even a comparatively successful prohibitionist regime can generate lethal side effects when it fails to account for informal markets.

The Irkutsk methanol poisoning of 2016 dramatized this problem with horrifying clarity. More than seventy people died after consuming surrogate alcohol sold as a bath product, and the case exposed the porous boundary between formal regulation and informal substitution in the Russian alcohol market (Neufeld and Rehm 2018). It would be easy to read Irkutsk simply as a failure of regulation. It was also, however, a failure produced by selective regulation: legal alcohol had become more tightly controlled, but a surrounding economy of quasi-alcoholic products, tolerated loopholes, and desperate consumers remained. In that sense, Irkutsk was not outside the politics of prohibition. It was one of its by-products.

This distinction is important because it separates two very different meanings of "prohibition" in the Russian case. The first is a health-oriented restriction regime that reduces harm when it combines price measures, tracking, availability controls, and administrative capacity. The second is a moralizing or poorly targeted restriction regime that treats illicit substitution as a secondary issue and thereby reproduces the conditions for poisoning, black markets, and corruption. Post-2000 alcohol policy contains both tendencies. On balance, the evidence suggests that Russia's alcohol controls saved many lives. But the effectiveness of those controls depended on precisely the pragmatism that Russian drug policy rejects.

Drugs, Security, and the Making of the Internal Enemy

The politics of narcotics in post-Soviet Russia developed under very different conditions. After 1991, the collapse of borders, the expansion of trafficking routes from Afghanistan, and the rapid spread of injectable heroin transformed the country's drug landscape. Letizia Paoli's pioneering work on post-Soviet Russia described a booming illegal drug market in which heroin, previously marginal in the Soviet context, became widely available across Russian cities (Paoli 2002). This was not only a policing problem. It was also a public-health catastrophe in the making, because widespread injection use accelerated HIV transmission and placed enormous pressure on treatment systems that were ill equipped for opioid dependence (Lunze et al. 2016; Hellman 2022).

At this point, Russia could in principle have followed a path closer to its later alcohol policy: stricter regulation where appropriate, but with treatment, substitution therapy, and harm reduction at the center. Instead, it took the opposite route. The post-Soviet drug regime was built around criminal law, abstinence-based narcology, police targets, and an increasingly securitized political discourse. Methadone and buprenorphine remained banned for the treatment of opioid dependence, despite broad international support for opioid agonist therapy. Harm reduction organizations faced suspicion and periodic repression. Courts were empowered to mandate addiction treatment, but the treatment system itself remained heavily punitive and weakly aligned with evidence-based practice (Lunze et al. 2016; Hellman 2022).

The ideological structure of this regime has been mapped clearly by My Lilja's analysis of State Duma debates between 2014 and 2018. Lilja finds a strong cross-party consensus that framed drugs not as a complex social and medical issue but as a top-priority national threat requiring a "war on drugs" approach (Lilja 2021). In those debates, drugs were linked to youth corruption, foreign influence, social degeneration, and criminal danger. The parliamentary field did not produce serious policy pluralism. It produced a ritual reaffirmation of hardness. Consensus itself became political theater: a way of proving seriousness by refusing ambiguity.

Once this discourse is taken seriously, Russia's drug policy starts to look less like a failed health system and more like a successful symbolic order. The ban on substitution therapy is a striking example. Human Rights Watch criticized the policy years ago as arbitrary and unreasonable in light of the available evidence on treatment effectiveness (Human Rights Watch 2007). The European Court of Human Rights, in Abdyusheva and Others v. Russia, nonetheless declined in 2019 to find that Russia had breached the Convention by refusing replacement therapy, thereby illustrating the broad margin of deference states still possess in this area (Abdyusheva and Others v. Russia 2019). Russian officials and diplomatic representatives have continued to defend the ban, including in 2025, by invoking domestic law and a "harm prevention" approach that treats opioid substitution not as treatment but as the replacement of one narcotic with another (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation in Vienna 2025).

This is not a minor policy disagreement. It is the hinge on which the whole Russian narcotics regime turns. By rejecting substitution therapy, the state rejects the proposition that dependence should be managed pragmatically where cure is not immediately possible. It insists instead on a moralized abstinence model in which treatment must visibly separate the patient from the prohibited substance. That insistence has obvious symbolic value. It preserves the clarity of prohibition. It prevents the medical system from blurring the boundary between legal and illegal intoxication. And it allows the state to present itself as uncompromising, even when the epidemiological results are poor.

The consequences have been severe. Lunze and colleagues argued in the BMJ that mandatory addiction treatment for people who use drugs conflicts with human rights norms and is not supported by global evidence; in the Russian case they also pointed to the scale of opioid use, injection-driven HIV transmission, and the lack of effective prevention and treatment tools for people who inject drugs (Lunze et al. 2016). Hellman's 2022 overview of Russian drug control likewise emphasizes the punitive trajectory of the system and notes estimates that more than one quarter of the imprisoned population has been punished for drug-related crimes (Hellman 2022). These are not incidental side effects. They are signs of a prohibition regime that produces governable deviance: arrests, registrations, compulsory interventions, and repeat contact with coercive institutions.

The penal incentives embedded in the system reinforce that logic. Alex Knorre's study of heroin seizure weights found statistically significant discontinuities near legal threshold amounts, suggesting that police manipulations of seized quantities are the most plausible explanation (Knorre 2020). Put bluntly, the institutional design of drug prohibition creates opportunities for law enforcement to manufacture seriousness. Thresholds, quotas, and performance metrics make drug policy an attractive terrain for bureaucratic production. Alcohol regulation, by contrast, has increasingly emphasized market tracking and mortality

reduction. Drug prohibition emphasizes case creation.

This asymmetry reveals the central point: Russia's narcotics policy is not simply "stricter" than its alcohol policy. It is differently rationalized. Alcohol is regulated as a dangerous but enduring social reality; drugs are governed as an existential contaminant that validates exceptional force. The difference is not pharmacological. It is political.

Prohibition as Sovereignty

Why has the Russian state remained so resistant to harm reduction and substitution-based treatment in drug policy while becoming more pragmatic in alcohol policy? Part of the answer lies in institutional inheritance, especially the influence of Soviet and post-Soviet narcology. But the deeper answer is geopolitical and ideological. Drug prohibition in contemporary Russia functions as an assertion of sovereignty: over medicine, over morality, and over the meaning of social protection.

Official language makes this visible. When the Kremlin announced the State Antidrug Policy Strategy until 2030 in November 2020, it described the policy as aimed at protecting people's health while ensuring state and public security (Kremlin 2020). That pairing is revealing. Health is present, but security is coequal, and the state remains the principal subject of concern. That official framing also sits comfortably with the broader discourse identified by Lilja, in which drugs are tied to moral decay, youth corruption, and the fate of the nation rather than treated as a routine field of health administration (Lilja 2021). The underlying synthesis is clear: drugs are a medical problem only insofar as they are also a problem of order, sovereignty, and social cohesion.

This helps explain why Russian drug diplomacy has often sounded less like a technical argument about treatment outcomes than like a defense of civilizational independence. In international forums, Russian representatives have repeatedly insisted that their approach is rooted in prevention, abstinence, and legal order, while portraying alternative models as ideologically loaded or socially dangerous (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation in Vienna 2025). The refusal of methadone is thus not merely a refusal of one medication. It is a refusal of a whole political anthropology: the liberal-harm-reduction assumption that the state's task is to minimize damage even when abstinence cannot be guaranteed.

Seen from Moscow, harm reduction can be represented as a surrender of moral clarity, or worse, as an imported doctrine that weakens national discipline under the guise of compassion. That representation is politically useful because it turns an empirical disagreement into a question of loyalty. Once drug policy is linked to national security and moral sovereignty, evidence that substitution therapy reduces overdose, HIV transmission, and criminalization does not necessarily weaken the prohibitionist case. It may even strengthen it by appearing to confirm that global expertise is pressuring Russia to normalize the unacceptable.

There is also a domestic advantage to this posture. Prohibition framed as sovereignty allows the state to identify liberal reformers, health-rights activists, and harm reduction NGOs with foreign influence. Hellman notes that the war in Ukraine further aggravated an already hostile environment for civil society actors working on drug policy and HIV prevention (Hellman 2022). In such a context, policy becomes a loyalty test. The question ceases to be whether a given intervention saves lives; it becomes whether the intervention belongs to "us" or to "them."

The externalization of prohibition is especially stark in territories under Russian control beyond internationally recognized

Russian borders. Bromberg and colleagues noted in 2022 that the Russian Federation bans methadone and prioritizes its discontinuation in occupied Ukrainian territories (Bromberg et al. 2022). Here prohibition is quite literally exported. The policy does not merely regulate Russian citizens; it becomes part of a wider project of territorial and normative domination. To eliminate substitution therapy in occupied space is to declare that Russian sovereignty includes the right to redefine legitimate medicine itself.

This is why drug prohibition in Russia cannot be reduced to conservatism or bureaucratic inertia. It is a live part of regime ideology. It aligns with a broader state tendency to collapse public health into questions of security, traditional values, and foreign subversion. And because it serves those functions, failure on health terms does not necessarily discredit it. A prohibition regime can remain politically "successful" even while epidemiologically destructive, so long as it keeps producing the images and hierarchies the state wants: dangerous users, protective authorities, corrupting outsiders, and disciplined youth.

Why Prohibition Endures

At this point, a broader pattern becomes visible. Prohibition persists in Russia not because rulers are incapable of learning, but because the state learns selectively. It adapts where adaptation reinforces administrative capacity and legitimacy; it hardens where hardness reinforces ideological control. This is why alcohol and drugs have diverged. The alcohol field offered the state a chance to modernize governance, cut mortality, and display competence through regulation. The drug field offered something else: a way to institutionalize emergency, keep coercive agencies central, and define moral belonging through punishment.

Several forces sustain this arrangement. One is bureaucratic interest. Drug prohibition feeds police work, court work, prison populations, registrations, anti-drug commissions, and endless prevention campaigns. It rewards institutions for visible activity rather than measurable health improvement. Knorre's work on threshold manipulation illustrates one micro-level mechanism by which such a system reproduces itself (Knorre 2020). Once success is counted in cases, seizures, and punitive visibility, the system develops an internal logic largely independent of social outcomes.

A second force is moral hierarchy. Russian prohibition is profoundly selective in what it treats as thinkable. Alcohol, despite its catastrophic historical harms, remains governable because it is culturally embedded and economically regulatable. Illegal drugs are rendered radically other: foreign, contaminating, criminal, anti-family, anti-youth. The distinction is convenient because it allows the state to present itself as realistic in one domain and uncompromising in another. The realism of alcohol regulation makes the absolutism of drug policy appear principled rather than arbitrary.

A third force is the politics of citizenship. Prohibition in Russia has repeatedly drawn lines between full and diminished social membership. The drinker may be reformed, taxed, monitored, or nudged. The drug user is more likely to be registered, coerced, imprisoned, or spoken for. This difference is not absolute, but it is structurally important. It creates a gradation of deservingness. Some risky citizens remain within the paternal ambit of the state; others are pushed toward a zone of suspicion in which rights are thinner and expertise speaks over rather than with them.

A fourth force is memory. The Russian state remembers the Gorbachev anti-alcohol campaign as both effective and politically costly. That memory discourages broad, dramatic bans in fields where a large share of the population

might feel directly targeted. It does not discourage harshness against stigmatized minorities. On the contrary, it channels prohibitionist energy toward populations with less political protection. Drug users are ideal targets in this respect: visible enough to symbolize disorder, marginal enough to punish with limited electoral cost, and already entangled with police institutions.

This helps explain a final paradox. Contemporary Russia is often described as conservative, security-oriented, or neo-imperial, and all of those labels capture something real. But they are still too blunt to explain the politics of prohibition. Russia does not simply repress because it is authoritarian. It represses differently depending on whether a form of regulation can be converted into state capacity, fiscal control, symbolic sovereignty, or all three. Prohibition survives because it is useful, but its uses vary. In alcohol policy, usefulness has increasingly meant mortality reduction through controlled markets. In drug policy, usefulness means the reproduction of a moral-security state.

The Social Geography of Prohibition

Prohibition in Russia is also unevenly distributed across class, region, and social respectability. One reason national debates about vice often become moralistic is that the most visible harms of prohibition are concentrated among groups with less political voice. This is especially true in the alcohol field. Middle-class urban consumers can often adapt to higher prices and shorter sales hours by shifting brands, reducing frequency, or purchasing in advance. Poorer and more precarious consumers are more exposed to the economics of substitution: they are more likely to turn toward samogon, medicinal tinctures, counterfeit spirits, or other surrogate products when legal alcohol becomes too expensive or inconvenient. The politics of "sobriety" therefore looks different depending on where one stands in the social hierarchy.

Research on unrecorded alcohol makes this point clearly. Neufeld and Rehm argue that Russia's success in reducing alcohol harm depended not just on formal restrictions but on closing loopholes in the market for illegal and surrogate alcohols (Neufeld and Rehm 2018). Where loopholes remained, restrictive policy could deepen stratification rather than simply reduce risk. The same measure that nudged one population toward lower consumption could push another toward more dangerous substitutes. Skorobogatov's finding that tougher sales-hour restrictions were associated with higher alcohol-poisoning mortality is especially important here, because it suggests that formal restriction can interact with poverty, rurality, and informal supply in lethal ways (Skorobogatov 2021). Prohibition is therefore not experienced as a uniform national policy. It is lived through local infrastructures of access, scarcity, and desperation.

Drug policy displays an even sharper social geography. Formal rhetoric presents the "drug threat" as universal and national, especially in relation to youth. But the actual burdens of enforcement are highly concentrated. They fall on street-level users, people in poorer neighborhoods, people already visible to police, and people with limited access to legal protection or medical care. Hellman's discussion of the Russian drug regime emphasizes the cumulative effect of punitive restrictions, human-rights indifference, and the weakening of harm reduction civil society (Hellman 2022). In such a system, the social location of the user matters profoundly. Affluent consumers may remain comparatively invisible; precarious users become the face of the problem.

This asymmetry helps explain why prohibition can endure even when it fails on its own stated terms. A policy that produces black markets, repeat arrests, overdose risk, HIV transmission, or surrogate consumption does not necessarily generate a broad political

constituency for reform if the costs are borne mainly by stigmatized populations. The very groups most harmed by punitive policy are often the least capable of shaping public discourse. Meanwhile, the state can continue to speak in the language of national protection, childhood innocence, and moral hygiene. In this sense, prohibition in Russia works politically because it redistributes visibility. It hides structural failure behind selected images of deviance.

The emphasis on youth is central to that process. Both alcohol and drug policy are routinely justified in the name of protecting children and adolescents, but the two substances are framed differently. Alcohol is represented as an old social evil that must be managed to protect families and labor productivity. Drugs are represented as an invasive corrupting force directed at the next generation, often with undertones of foreign manipulation. Lilja's analysis of parliamentary debate shows how frequently drugs are connected to youth salvation, social decay, and national future (Lilja 2021). This is more than rhetoric. It is a way of making punitive policy appear caring. Once prohibition is coded as protection of children, arguments for decriminalization, harm reduction, or substitution therapy become easier to depict as moral betrayal.

There is also a temporal geography at work. Russian prohibition is often justified by references to emergency and decline: war, demographic crisis, public disorder, moral degeneration, foreign subversion. The effect is to keep policy in a permanent present tense of danger. Alcohol policy after 2003 was able, to an extent, to move beyond that emergency mode and settle into regulatory routines. Drug policy did not. It remained tethered to a language of crisis. That matters because crisis authorizes asymmetry. It licenses selective coercion, compresses debate, and reduces the political space in which harmed populations can appear as citizens rather than as threats.

Seen this way, the politics of prohibition are inseparable from the politics of whose suffering counts. Russian policy has often been effective at naming collective dangers while remaining selective about individual losses. The workers poisoned by surrogate alcohol, the opioid-dependent patients denied substitution therapy, the people imprisoned on manipulated drug thresholds, and the communities exposed to HIV through the absence of evidence-based prevention are all casualties of that selectivity. They are not outside the prohibition system. They are among the people whose disposability makes the system durable.

Conclusion

Russia's long encounter with prohibition shows that the real subject is not intoxication alone but the state's changing relationship to society. Late imperial rulers tried to square moral reform with dependence on vodka revenue and discovered that emergency bans could not dissolve the social embeddedness of drink. Soviet governments repeatedly oscillated between sobriety campaigns and accommodation, learning that command could save lives but also generate resentment and illegality. The post-2000 Russian state eventually developed a more effective alcohol policy by abandoning the fantasy of total suppression and embracing a dense regime of taxes, minimum prices, market tracking, and availability restrictions. In that domain, prohibition became less theatrical and more technocratic.

Drug policy moved in the opposite direction. Faced with a genuine opioid and HIV crisis after 1991, Russia hardened prohibition into a doctrine of moral security. It rejected substitution therapy, marginalized harm reduction, empowered coercive treatment, and built a parliamentary and bureaucratic consensus around the image of drugs as an existential threat. The result has been a regime in which

prohibition serves less to improve health than to organize fear, reward punitive institutions, and dramatize sovereignty. Here the state does not govern dependence pragmatically; it governs it symbolically and coercively.

The contrast yields a broader lesson. Prohibition in Russia is not a single philosophy. It is a repertoire. Sometimes it is fiscal, sometimes disciplinary, sometimes technocratic, sometimes openly civilizational. Its practical effects depend on which version prevails. Where policy is allowed to become evidence-based and adaptive, as in much of recent alcohol control, Russian governance has shown an unexpected capacity for effectiveness. Where policy becomes a stage for moral absolutism and anti-Western sovereignty, as in narcotics control, prohibition turns destructive while remaining politically resilient.

For that reason, the most revealing question is not whether Russia is "for" or "against" prohibition. The country's history shows that it is always both. What matters is who gets prohibited, who gets regulated, who gets medicalized, and who gets punished. In that selective distribution lies the real politics of prohibition: the politics of deciding which dependencies the state can live with, which it can profit from, and which it must turn into enemies.

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Beyond 1991: Why Post-Soviet States Struggle to Democratize

By Sofia Petrovà

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created fifteen independent states at once, but it did not create fifteen equally viable democracies. More than three decades later, the former Soviet space is defined less by convergence than by divergence. On V-Dem's 2025 regime map, Estonia and Latvia are classified as liberal democracies and Lithuania sits just below them, while Armenia and Moldova are electoral democracies; much of the rest of the region is categorized as electoral autocracy or closed autocracy, including Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and the Central Asian dictatorships. That distribution matters because it shows that the post-Soviet problem is not a simple story of failed transition. It is a story of sharply different political trajectories that emerged from a common imperial collapse. (v-dem.net)

That variation is the starting point for any serious explanation. If all post-Soviet states had authoritarian outcomes, one might plausibly blame "Soviet political culture" in the abstract. But the Baltic republics disprove that easy answer. They were Soviet republics too, yet they democratized, joined the EU and NATO in 2004, and today remain embedded in Western institutions. The real puzzle, then, is not why post-Soviet states failed to democratize across the board, but why most of them struggled while a few consolidated democracy and a handful managed only partial, reversible progress. (cosmos.sns.it)

This essay argues that most post-Soviet states have struggled to democratize because sovereignty arrived faster than the institutional, social, and geopolitical foundations needed to sustain impersonal rule. Four forces mattered most. First, the region inherited highly uneven levels of state capacity; where administrative institutions were weak, democracy rarely moved beyond elections. Second, politics in much of the former USSR became organized through personalistic patronage networks rather than autonomous parties, courts, or parliaments. Third, nation-building often unfolded alongside disputed borders, separatism, and Russian intervention, which empowered executives and securitized politics. Fourth, democratization was strongest where external anchoring to the EU and NATO was credible and weakest where rulers had resource rents or Russian support to finance authoritarian resilience. The result was not one post-Soviet model, but three broad regime paths: Baltic consolidation, unstable pluralism, and entrenched authoritarianism. (Sage Journals)

A comparative approach makes the pattern clearer. The Baltics succeeded not because they were somehow culturally immune to Soviet legacies, but because they restored pre-Soviet statehood, possessed relatively stronger bureaucratic traditions, and received a credible Western membership horizon. By contrast, countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, and at times Georgia and Armenia developed real political competition but often without strong rule-of-law institutions; they became pluralist before they became programmatic. Meanwhile, Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan built durable authoritarian systems through some combination of coercive capacity, patronal politics, hydrocarbon rents, and geopolitical shielding. The comparative lesson is that democratization in the former USSR was possible, but only under conditions that were absent in most of the region. (cosmos.sns.it)

The Comparative Puzzle

The present-day regime map of the former Soviet space is strikingly polarized.

V-Dem's 2025 classifications place Estonia and Latvia in the liberal-democracy category and Lithuania in the liberal-democratic gray zone; Armenia is coded as an electoral democracy and Moldova as an electoral democracy close to the autocracy threshold. Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Ukraine are all coded as electoral autocracies, while Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are classified as closed autocracies. These categories are not the whole story, but they are useful because they reveal how little the post-1991 region resembles a shared "transition" zone today. (v-dem.net)

Those outcomes are best understood as clustering into three families. The first is Baltic consolidation: states that rapidly tied independence to state restoration, legal continuity, and Euro-Atlantic integration. The second is unstable pluralism: states where rulers were too weak to monopolize power but oppositions were too fragmented to institutionalize democracy deeply. The third is entrenched authoritarianism: states where presidents, ruling clans, or dominant security apparatuses built durable pyramids of power. Levitsky and Way's work on post-Soviet competitive authoritarianism showed early on that, by the late 2000s, most such regimes had failed to democratize, with Ukraine as the major exception at the time. Later developments in Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova showed that openings remained possible, but also how reversible they were. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

That is why teleological transition language is misleading. It assumes that all post-communist states were moving along the same track, just at different speeds. Yet the former Soviet Union produced countries as different as Estonia and Turkmenistan, Moldova and Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan. As Vladimir Gel'man argued, post-Soviet political development frequently departed from classic "transitions to democracy" theory because contestation often emerged through intra-elite conflict rather than negotiated democratic pacts, and because the rule of law remained weak even where elections were competitive. The right question is therefore not why the region "stalled" on a single road to democracy, but why different roads emerged at all. (EUSP)

State Capacity Before Democracy

A first answer lies in state capacity. Jessica Fortin's work on post-communist states is crucial here. In her cross-national analysis, she finds that post-communist countries began independence with sharply different levels of infrastructural state capacity, that those initial differences remained relatively stable over time, and that effective state capacity appears to be a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for democracy. That finding matters because it shifts the debate away from slogans about "civil society" or "democratic culture" and toward a harder institutional reality: states must be able to enforce rules, protect rights, and administer territory before democratic institutions can function reliably. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

The Baltic states entered independence with unusually favorable institutional conditions for the region. Their democratic transitions were tied to the restoration of pre-Soviet statehood rather than the invention of entirely new states. Rossi's study of Baltic democratization emphasizes that, after independence, pre-Soviet democratic institutions were quickly restored because elites and much of the population shared the goal of returning to the institutional setting of the independent interwar republics. That consensus reduced the ambiguity surrounding the founding moment. In the Baltics, democracy did not have to be sold as a foreign import or improvised under conditions of near-state collapse; it was presented as the legitimate

restoration of interrupted sovereignty. (cosmos.sns.it)

Elsewhere, new sovereignty was layered onto Soviet republican administrations that had rarely functioned as autonomous national states. In much of the former USSR, legislatures, courts, parties, and bureaucracies were weakly institutionalized or subordinate to executive networks. Gel'man noted early that in post-Soviet societies civil society often existed only to the extent permitted by dominant elites, while political conflict tended to be mediated by those elites rather than constrained by neutral rules. Under such conditions, elections could occur without producing durable accountability, and constitutions could exist without creating constitutionalism. Democracy requires a state that is both effective and limited; many post-Soviet states lacked one or both elements. (EUSP)

This point also explains why state capacity alone cannot be treated as inherently democratic. Russia under Putin improved many administrative functions relative to the 1990s, yet that did not produce liberalization. Research on Putin's Russia argues that the regime's resilience rests less on fully modern state strength than on a combination of rent distribution, welfare provision, repression, co-optation of civil society, and nationalist mobilization. In other words, the same state-building process that could, in principle, support democracy can also be used to centralize coercion and close the political arena. That is why Fortin's claim is so important: capacity is necessary, not sufficient. Weak states rarely democratize well, but stronger states can harden into autocracy unless power is institutionally constrained. (Sage Journals)

Patronal Politics and the Problem of Impersonal Rule

A second explanation concerns how power was organized after 1991. Henry Hale's theory of patronal politics argues that much of post-Soviet political struggle has been waged through extended personalistic networks and that presidential institutions, together with leadership popularity, encourage those networks to align into single pyramids of power. That formulation captures a central problem across the former USSR: formal democratic institutions existed on paper, but the real currency of politics often remained personal loyalty, selective access to resources, and informal brokerage. In such systems, elections decide which network dominates the state, not whether the state is governed impersonally. (ResearchGate)

Once politics is organized this way, democratic breakdown becomes easier to understand. Courts are pressured because they threaten elite bargains. Parliaments become arenas of patronage rather than policy. Parties remain vehicles for leaders rather than programmatic organizations. Anti-corruption drives become factional weapons. Constitutions are rewritten less to settle principles than to redistribute leverage among networks. Gel'man's broader critique of transition theory parallels this insight: in much of the post-Soviet world, the decisive line was not democracy versus dictatorship in the abstract, but formal rules versus arbitrary rule. Where patronal networks overwhelmed formal institutions, democracy remained thin even when competition persisted. (EUSP)

Russia is the clearest case of a patronal pyramid hardening into authoritarianism. The 1990s left Russia with fragmented elites, oligarchic capitalism, and a weak center. Putin's system solved that instability not by institutionalizing liberal democracy but by subordinating rival power centers to the presidency and selectively redistributing rents. Later analyses of Russian authoritarian resilience

emphasize exactly this combination: elite management, economic benefits, coercion, and patriotic legitimation. The regime became more governable, but also less pluralist. In that sense, Russian authoritarianism was not a rejection of post-Soviet politics; it was one possible consolidation of them. (Sage Journals)

Belarus followed a different route to a similar destination. It lacked the oil wealth of Russia or Azerbaijan, yet Lukashenka built an unusually durable authoritarian system by preserving state control over key sectors and exploiting Russian energy arrangements. Scholarship on Belarusian authoritarian resilience argues that energy policy and the redistribution of energy-related revenues were central to maintaining elite loyalty and political support. Belarus thus demonstrates that rentier authoritarianism in the post-Soviet space did not always require domestic hydrocarbon abundance; subsidized external rents could play a similar role when combined with patronage and repression. (Taylor & Francis Online)

Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan illustrate the more classic rent-backed version of this pattern. Franke, Gawrich, and Alakbarov describe both as post-Soviet rentier states characterized by enormous oil and gas resources, low diversification, and strong autocratic presidentialism with neopatrimonial structures. They argue that resource revenues and autocratic institutions reinforce one another in a "double curse": rents stabilize personal rule, while personalized rule increases the likelihood that rents will be used to entrench incumbent elites rather than build accountable institutions. The result is not simply corruption, but a political economy in which access to wealth depends on proximity to the ruling pyramid. (el2019.kimep.kz)

The flipside of patronal politics is that competition sometimes survives not because institutions are strong, but because rulers are weak. Lucan Way's famous concept of "pluralism by default" captures this dynamic. In Ukraine and Moldova, he argued, incumbents often failed to monopolize coercion, elections, media, or elite unity, and therefore could not consolidate full authoritarian control. That kind of competition can be real and politically meaningful. It can produce alternation in power, protest mobilization, and moments of democratic opening. But it is also fragile, because it rests on elite fragmentation and weak state control rather than on deeply institutionalized checks and balances. (eurozine.com)

Kyrgyzstan fits this logic especially well. The introduction to *Kyrgyzstan Beyond "Democracy Island" and "Failing State"* argues that the country has long displayed unusually high levels of political pluralism and civic activism for Central Asia, but that parties often remained façade structures and powerful, divided elites continued to dominate political life even after the 2010 constitutional shift toward parliamentarism. Kyrgyzstan therefore shows both the promise and the limitation of pluralism by default. Weak incumbents can leave space for contestation, but unless parties, courts, and public administration become more autonomous, competition can remain clientelistic and unstable. (centralasiaprogram.org)

Nation-Building, Identity, and the Security Trap

A third reason democratization struggled is that post-Soviet state-building was inseparable from nation-building. At independence, many expected the two to reinforce each other: national self-determination would supposedly empower civic citizenship, delegitimize empire, and open the door to accountable government. Peter Rutland's survey of thirty years of post-Soviet nation-building shows that this expectation was only partly realized. The synergy between nationalism and democratization worked relatively well in the Baltic states, but elsewhere authoritarian leaders

often appropriated nationalism, while the more democratic states found themselves destabilized by separatist conflicts and Russian pressure. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

That pattern mattered because nearly all new post-Soviet states had to define who belonged to the nation, which language the state would privilege, and which history would ground legitimacy. Rutland notes that every post-Soviet state except Belarus promoted a national language and a new historical narrative, yet most remained multiethnic and multilingual. Those choices were therefore politically consequential and often divisive. In some cases they helped consolidate sovereignty; in others they created openings for populists, ethnic entrepreneurs, or outside powers claiming to defend minorities or compatriots. Nation-building was unavoidable, but it was not politically neutral. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

The democratic costs were highest where statehood itself remained contested. Rutland stresses that democracies such as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine lost control of parts of their territory to secessionist movements backed by Russia. These conflicts did more than violate borders. They securitized politics, strengthened executive power, distorted media environments, and gave domestic elites powerful incentives to postpone or instrumentalize reform. A state fighting to hold territory together does not operate under normal democratic conditions, especially when the neighboring great power has both the means and the motive to keep the conflict unresolved. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

Moldova is an especially revealing example because it combines partial democratic success with enduring geopolitical vulnerability. The EU's 2024 Moldova report states that the country has continued to progress toward accession, that its presidential election and constitutional referendum on EU accession were mostly satisfactory, and that it has shown resilience while facing Russia's war against Ukraine and intensified hybrid actions from Russia and its proxies seeking to destabilize the country. Yet the same report also identifies continuing administrative weaknesses, gaps in oversight, and the unresolved issue of Transnistria. Moldova demonstrates that even where democratic direction is positive, security fragility and state weakness continue to slow consolidation. (European External Action Service)

Ukraine reveals the same tension in more dramatic form. Since 1991, Ukraine has repeatedly shown mass democratic mobilization, most notably in 2004 and 2013–14, and its civic identity has deepened markedly in response to Russian aggression. Rutland explicitly argues that the success of Ukrainian nation-building and the aspiration to join the European community helped drive Putin's decision to invade. Yet wartime politics inevitably compress liberties, centralize decision-making, and strain institutional balances. V-Dem's 2025 coding of Ukraine as an electoral autocracy should therefore be read not as proof that Ukrainian society abandoned democracy, but as evidence of how war can degrade democratic practice even when the underlying political nation remains strongly pro-sovereignty and pro-European. The European Parliament's 2026 draft report on Ukraine similarly notes both the resilience of civil society and continuing concerns about transparency and balance of power. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

Armenia offers a different but related lesson. The 2018 Velvet Revolution, as Lanskoy and Suthers describe it, removed a kleptocratic ruling elite through mass protest and opened a genuine opportunity for democratic reform. Yet even Armenia's more successful opening has

unfolded under severe external constraints, above all the long Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the broader security dependence that has historically tied Yerevan to Moscow. Armenia's current classification as an electoral democracy is therefore significant precisely because it shows that democratic advance is still possible in the former USSR, but also that such advance remains difficult to consolidate when existential security questions dominate the state. (Journal of Democracy)

External Anchors: Why the Baltics Succeeded

A fourth explanation concerns external anchoring. The Baltic states democratized not only because of domestic advantages, but because they had a credible route into institutions that demanded democratic standards. The Copenhagen European Council in 1993 explicitly stated that membership in the EU required stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities, alongside a functioning market economy and the capacity to assume the obligations of membership. This mattered because it changed domestic incentives. Reform was no longer just normatively desirable; it became the price of entry into a wealthy and secure political order. (European Parliament)

That external anchor was credible. The Baltic states were not simply "engaged" by Europe; they were ultimately admitted. Official EU records show that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined the EU on 1 May 2004 as part of the largest enlargement in the Union's history. NATO's official history similarly records that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became members of the Alliance on 29 March 2004. Together, those two accessions locked the Baltics into a rules-based legal and security environment that sharply reduced the space for post-Soviet-style authoritarian consolidation. By embedding themselves in institutions that could monitor, reward, and discipline domestic elites, the Baltics escaped the gray zone in which many other former Soviet republics remained trapped. (Consilium)

The contrast with the rest of the former USSR is stark. As Fabio Fossati argues, EU anchoring was strongest where enlargement was credible and far weaker for neighbors such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia when they were not treated as realistic candidates. Diplomatic pressure and democracy assistance could matter at the margins, but they could not substitute for the incentive structure created by a believable accession path. That helps explain why the Eastern European color revolutions, though politically dramatic, did not generate the same institutional lock-in as the Baltic transitions. Without a secure Western destination, democratic breakthroughs remained vulnerable to domestic reversal and external sabotage. (dispes.units.it)

The Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009, illustrates both the value and the limits of weaker anchoring. The European Commission describes it as a framework designed to strengthen and deepen political and economic relations between the EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. That is significant, and it has mattered in areas ranging from regulatory alignment to infrastructure and public administration. But partnership is not membership. The Eastern Partnership can encourage reform, but it does not impose the same hard conditionality or provide the same strategic assurance as accession. In geopolitically exposed states, that difference is decisive. (Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood)

Recent developments in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia confirm the point. The EU's enlargement portal records that Moldova and Ukraine both became candidate countries in 2022 and opened membership negotiations in

June 2024, while Georgia became a candidate country in December 2023. Those are meaningful changes: they increase the credibility of EU leverage over reform trajectories in parts of the former Soviet space. Yet they also show the gap between aspiration and consolidation. Moldova remains institutionally fragile, Ukraine is at war, and Georgia's current regime trajectory has moved in the opposite direction, with V-Dem classifying it as an electoral autocracy in 2025. External anchoring helps, but only where domestic coalitions can use it to overcome state capture rather than merely invoke it rhetorically. (European Union)

Political Economy and the Authoritarian Advantage

Political economy deepened these institutional and geopolitical patterns. In many post-Soviet cases, the shift from plan to market did not produce a broad class of rule-bound market actors with an interest in clean institutions. Instead, privatization and deregulation often occurred through informal bargains among elites, ministries, security services, and emerging oligarchs. Where state capacity was weak and property rights uncertain, economic liberalization empowered insiders rather than constraining them. Patronage, not competition, became the mechanism linking politics and wealth. Hale's emphasis on extended personal networks captures why this mattered: economic assets became tools in political pyramid-building, and political office became the route to private accumulation. (ResearchGate)

Resource rents made this problem even harder. Franke and her coauthors show that in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, resource wealth combined with autocratic presidentialism and neopatrimonial structures to create unusually stable authoritarian systems. Hydrocarbon income reduced reliance on broad taxation, lowered incentives for bargaining with society, and financed both selective co-optation and coercive state-building. In such settings, rulers could fund patronage without liberalizing and could survive crises that would have destroyed poorer clientelist regimes. Oil and gas did not mechanically cause authoritarianism, but they made accountable politics more expensive for incumbents and less necessary for regime survival. (el2019.kimep.kz)

Belarus again shows a variant of the same logic. Without major domestic hydrocarbon reserves, the regime nonetheless benefited for years from favorable energy arrangements with Russia and used that space to preserve a statist economy, avoid deep reform, and sustain a social contract based on stability and paternalism. Scholarship on Belarusian energy politics argues that Lukashenka used energy-related revenues and distributive mechanisms to secure the loyalty of key domestic constituencies. This helps explain why Belarus remained authoritarian even without the classic resource profile of Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan: what mattered was access to politically usable rents, not only the geological origin of those rents. (Taylor & Francis Online)

By contrast, the Baltic republics had fewer opportunities to finance personalistic rule and stronger incentives to build export-oriented, regulated market economies inside European institutions. EU integration rewarded administrative reform, legal approximation, competition policy, and bureaucratic discipline. Official EU material on the 2004 enlargement emphasizes that the new member states experienced significant economic growth and convergence after joining. Economic success alone does not guarantee democracy, but in the Baltic case it reinforced a political model already oriented toward rule-bound governance and Western markets, rather than toward rent distribution through a presidential court. (Consilium)

Three Post-Soviet Paths

Taken together, these factors produced three broad regime paths across the former USSR.

The first path was Baltic consolidation. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania benefited from a combination of restored pre-Soviet institutions, stronger administrative traditions, cohesive elite commitment to state restoration, and credible EU and NATO accession. Rossi's analysis shows that democratic institutions in the Baltics were restored quickly because elites and populations broadly agreed on the return to the pre-Soviet institutional setting. The Copenhagen criteria then translated that orientation into a concrete reform agenda, while accession in 2004 embedded the Baltics inside powerful external constraint structures. Their subsequent V-Dem classifications as liberal democracies are therefore not evidence that Soviet legacies "did not matter," but evidence that they were outweighed by unusually strong domestic and international counterweights. (cosmos.sns.it)

The second path was unstable pluralism. Ukraine, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, and, in different periods, Armenia and Georgia all exhibited forms of genuine political contestation. But that contestation often rested on divided elites, episodic protest coalitions, and weakly institutionalized parties rather than on consolidated liberal-democratic rules. Way's "pluralism by default" captures the logic for Ukraine and Moldova; the Kyrgyz literature describes a similarly plural but elite-dominated system; and Armenia's 2018 opening showed how civic mobilization can break oligarchic equilibrium without automatically resolving deeper state and security constraints. These states were not simply "semi-democracies"; they were regimes in which democratic openings repeatedly collided with weak institutions, oligarchic incentives, and geopolitical pressure. (eurozine.com)

Georgia's recent trajectory shows how reversible this path can be. For years Georgia was treated as one of the more reformist post-Soviet states outside the Baltics, yet V-Dem now classifies it as an electoral autocracy. That reversal underscores the essay's core point: partial democratization does not automatically cumulate into consolidation. Unless opposition competition becomes institutionalized, media pluralism protected, courts insulated, and the security question stabilized, democratic gains can be turned back by incumbents who learn how to govern through state capture rather than outright dictatorship. (v-dem.net)

The third path was entrenched authoritarianism. Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan differ in ideology, economic structure, and international positioning, but they share a basic political pattern: concentrated executive power supported by personalistic networks, security services, and rents of some kind. In Russia and Belarus, the key story is the use of state institutions and distributive resources to suppress uncertainty and neutralize challengers. In Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, hydrocarbon rents strongly reinforced presidential and clan-centered systems. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the authoritarian apparatus never meaningfully opened in the first place. Here democratization did not merely stall; it was preempted. (v-dem.net)

Why "Post-Soviet Culture" Is the Wrong Explanation

This comparative record makes cultural determinism unconvincing. A shared Soviet past did leave enduring legacies: bureaucratic habits, security-service power, weak rule of law, and suspicion of autonomous organization. But those legacies were mediated by different state traditions, elite choices, national projects, economic structures, and international environments. The Baltic states and Belarus both

emerged from the same empire; so did Estonia and Kazakhstan, Lithuania and Azerbaijan. Their outcomes are too different to be explained by one civilizational essence. What the region shares is not a fixed political destiny, but a common repertoire of problems whose resolution depended on variable domestic and external conditions. (cosmos.sns.it)

The same point applies to civil society. Strong civil society mattered in cases such as Armenia and Ukraine, but it was rarely enough on its own. Lanskoy and Suthers describe how Armenia's 2018 protests drew on earlier opposition and civic organizing, yet they also stress the enormous reform and security challenges that remained afterward. The European Parliament's 2026 draft report on Ukraine likewise highlights civil society resilience while still warning about pressures on activists and the need for transparency and balance of power. Mobilized citizens can open democratic windows, but they cannot by themselves replace state capacity, territorial security, or external anchoring. (Journal of Democracy)

Nor is the region's problem simply "too much presidentialism." Presidential systems certainly mattered, especially where they facilitated the fusion of formal office with patronal control. But constitutions alone did not determine outcomes. The decisive issue was whether executives were embedded in a political environment that rewarded restraint. In the Baltics, the drive toward EU and NATO membership, restored legal continuity, and relatively stronger institutions constrained leaders. In Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, executives operated in contexts where rents, coercion, or weak opposition made centralization advantageous and feasible. Institutions mattered, but their effects were filtered through power structures and geopolitical incentives. (ResearchGate)

Conclusion

Most post-Soviet states have struggled to democratize because the Soviet collapse created independent polities before it created the conditions for impersonal, rule-bound government. In much of the region, the state was too weak to guarantee law but strong enough to be captured. Elites competed through networks rather than institutions. Nation-building unfolded under the shadow of contested borders and Russian intervention. External incentives for reform were often vague, delayed, or non-credible. Where rulers could draw on oil, gas, security services, or subsidized rents, they converted uncertainty into durable authoritarian rule. Where they could not, competition often survived, but as fragile pluralism rather than consolidated liberal democracy. (Sage Journals)

The Baltic exception is therefore not an embarrassing anomaly to be explained away; it is the most important evidence in the argument. It shows that post-Soviet societies were not inherently incompatible with democracy. Under the right combination of state restoration, elite consensus, Western anchoring, and security protection, democratic consolidation was achievable. The tragedy of the wider former USSR is that most states lacked one or more of those supports, and many lacked all of them at once. That is why democratization in the region has been so uneven, so reversible, and so vulnerable to authoritarian adaptation. (cosmos.sns.it)

For comparative politics, the larger lesson is that democratization is not just a matter of holding elections after empire collapses. It depends on whether new states can build capacity without concentrating arbitrary power, create national solidarity without militarizing politics, and secure external guarantees strong enough to protect reform from predatory neighbors. In the post-Soviet space, those conditions were rare. Where they existed,

democracy survived. Where they did not, patronal politics, rent distribution, and geopolitical coercion usually won. (Sage Journals)

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Guardrails and Breakdown: Democracy in Ghana, Botswana, Mali, and Benin

By Carlos Mendoza

Why do some African democracies endure while others collapse? This comparative case study argues that the crucial difference is not culture, colonial legacy, or income alone, but whether political competition remains both genuinely open and institutionally bounded. I compare two enduring democracies, Ghana and Botswana, with two breakdown cases, Mali and Benin. Ghana and Botswana are imperfect democracies with serious weaknesses, including patronage politics, executive dominance, and declining trust in some institutions. Yet both have preserved a central democratic principle: incumbents can lose and opposition actors can realistically gain power through elections. Mali and Benin lost that principle in different ways. In Mali, weak and unresponsive institutions, deep insecurity, and a politicized military culminated in repeated coups and open military rule. In Benin, democratic decline was more gradual and legalistic: judicial pressure, restrictive electoral reforms, and opposition exclusion hollowed out competition from within. The argument advanced here is that democratic endurance in Africa rests on four mutually reinforcing guardrails: civilian control over coercive institutions, credible electoral administration, an opposition with a real path to office, and sufficient state responsiveness to preserve public faith in constitutional politics. Where those guardrails hold, democracy can survive even severe economic or political stress. Where they fail, democracy can be overthrown by soldiers or emptied out by elected incumbents. (Brookings)

Introduction

Africa's democratic record is best understood not as a single continental story of success or failure, but as a pattern of sharp divergence. In the same recent period, Botswana experienced its first peaceful transfer of power after nearly six decades of one-party dominance, and Ghana completed another alternation in office after an opposition victory conceded before the final declaration of results. At the same time, Mali's junta deepened military rule by dissolving political parties and extending its hold on power, while Benin's governing bloc consolidated political advantage through exclusionary electoral rules and an increasingly uncompetitive political field. Freedom House's most recent country profiles capture that divergence starkly: Ghana remains rated Free at 80/100, Botswana Free at 75/100, Benin Partly Free at 61/100, and Mali Not Free at 21/100. (Brookings)

This variation matters theoretically as well as empirically. Much of the older literature on African democratization asked why the continent struggled to sustain democracy after independence. The more urgent contemporary question is different: why, under similarly turbulent regional and global conditions, do some African democracies keep absorbing shocks while others break down? Brookings' recent synthesis on democratic resilience in Africa emphasizes that the continent is no longer marked by a single regime trajectory. Instead, countries have diverged into patterns of deepening, stagnation, autocratization, and breakdown. That insight shifts analysis away from broad civilizational explanations and toward the concrete institutions and incentives that shape elite behavior, opposition survival, and the role of coercive actors. (Brookings)

This essay advances a straightforward argument. African democracies endure when they preserve what may be called institutionalized uncertainty: elections are competitive enough that incumbents can lose, but rules and referees are credible enough that losers usually accept the outcome. That equilibrium depends on four

reinforcing guardrails. First, the armed forces must remain subordinate to civilian politics. Second, electoral institutions must be sufficiently transparent that defeat is visible and difficult to deny. Third, party competition must leave opposition actors with a plausible route to office rather than reducing them to symbolic participants. Fourth, the state must remain responsive enough that citizens and elites still see constitutional politics as preferable to extra-constitutional alternatives. When these guardrails weaken, democratic collapse can take at least two forms. One is abrupt coercive rupture, as in Mali. The other is slow legal-institutional hollowing, as in Benin. (Brookings)

The comparison of Ghana, Botswana, Mali, and Benin is therefore useful because it captures both democratic endurance and two distinct pathways of democratic failure. Ghana represents an electorally competitive democracy that remains resilient despite patronage and recent economic crisis. Botswana represents a democracy that long combined stability with one-party dominance, yet still proved capable of alternation when voter sentiment changed. Mali represents a democracy that appeared viable for years but was undermined by weak institutions, insecurity, and military intervention. Benin represents a once-admired democracy that has been hollowed out from within by executive legalism and elite collusion. Taken together, these cases show that democratic collapse in Africa cannot be reduced to coups alone, nor democratic endurance to simple regime longevity. (Brookings)

Comparative Framework and Case Selection

The case design is comparative rather than purely descriptive. Ghana and Botswana are treated here as enduring democracies because, despite imperfections, they continue to combine competitive elections, meaningful opposition, and accepted transfers of power. Mali and Benin are treated as collapse cases, though in different senses. Mali underwent visible democratic breakdown through repeated coups and current military rule. Benin did not collapse through tanks in the streets; instead, its competitive democracy has been progressively dismantled through courts, electoral-law changes, and narrowed political participation. Using both cases under the broader category of collapse is analytically useful because it distinguishes between democratic death by coercive seizure and democratic death by legal attrition. (Freedom House)

This distinction is increasingly important in comparative democratization research. Resnick and Signé note that democratic backsliding in Africa often occurs not only through old-style coups but also through "constitutional coups," manipulation of electoral rules, repression of opposition and media, and the weakening of checks and balances. Koter's analysis of Benin makes the same point from within a single case: democracy there deteriorated not because elections disappeared outright, but because competitiveness, opposition capacity, and civil liberties were steadily constricted. By contrast, Bleck and Soumano show that Mali's retrenchment followed a more dramatic trajectory in which weak institutions and insecurity opened the door to recurring military takeover. These differences matter because they suggest that democratic endurance requires protection both against soldiers and against elected incumbents who weaponize legality. (Brookings)

At a broader level, this framework also fits older comparative findings. Berg-Schlosser's classic cross-national work on democratic successes and failures in Africa argued that governance variables are decisive in explaining divergent political outcomes. That claim remains persuasive. The issue is not merely whether a constitution exists, or whether elections are held,

but whether institutions constrain power, structure conflict, and preserve accountability. In that sense, the present comparison treats democracy not as a checklist of formal procedures but as a lived political order in which actors expect that competition will continue tomorrow, even after they lose today. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

Ghana: Endurance Through Competitive but Bounded Contestation

Ghana's democratic resilience is rooted first in repeated, credible alternation. Brookings' recent country study describes Ghana's Fourth Republic as a system that has held nine general elections since 1992 and produced four peaceful transfers of power by 2025. Freedom House similarly emphasizes that Ghana has conducted competitive multiparty elections since 1992 and has repeatedly seen peaceful transfers between its two major parties, the National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic Party. The 2024 election reinforced that pattern: opposition leader John Mahama won the presidency, and Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia conceded defeat before the official declaration in order to defuse tension. That sequence matters because it signals that losing office remains politically survivable and institutionally intelligible. (Brookings)

Ghana's endurance does not rest on the absence of conflict. On the contrary, the system is intensely competitive, partisan, and often patronage-driven. Brookings argues that Ghana's strong democratic reputation partly reflects liberal institutions more than deeply internalized democratic norms. The same study warns that the major parties often behave more as patronage networks than as programmatic democratic organizations. That warning is important because it explains why Ghana should not be romanticized. Its durability is real, but it is not effortless or culturally automatic. Democratic stability in Ghana is produced by institutions that channel rivalry, not by the disappearance of rivalry. (Brookings)

A key element in that channeling process has been the relative credibility and transparency of electoral administration. Idowu and Mimiko's comparative study of Ghana and Nigeria argues that Ghana's election management system has been central to peaceful alternation because its transparency makes rejection of results difficult, especially for incumbents. They emphasize that where politicians and citizens perceive the process as credible, defeat becomes more acceptable and concession more likely. Their account fits Ghana's recent record: incumbents have repeatedly conceded because the process, while imperfect, produces observable and contestable results rather than opaque decrees. (politikon.iapss.org)

Even so, Ghana's resilience should not be confused with institutional perfection. Afrobarometer's recent Ghana findings reveal a more complicated democratic landscape. More than four-fifths of Ghanaians still endorse elections as the best way to choose leaders, and large majorities believe elections enable voters to remove underperforming governments. A solid majority also rated the 2020 election as generally free and fair, and most respondents reported little or no fear of political intimidation or violence during the campaign. Yet trust in the Electoral Commission fell to 33 percent, the lowest level recorded in more than two decades of Afrobarometer surveys. In other words, Ghana's democracy continues to function even as confidence in one of its central referees has weakened. (Afrobarometer)

This apparent contradiction is revealing. Ghana endures not because every institution is universally trusted, but because no major actor can easily replace constitutional politics with a more legitimate alternative. The opposition remains viable nationwide. Civil society and media are active enough to make overt

manipulation costly. Courts and electoral bodies, though disputed, remain meaningful arenas of contestation. Crucially, there is no credible military claim to guardianship over politics. Ghana's history certainly contains periods of military rule, but under the Fourth Republic the armed forces have not emerged as accepted arbiters of civilian failure. That absence matters enormously when compared with Mali. (Brookings)

Ghana also shows that economic crisis alone does not explain democratic collapse. The 2024 election took place after what Reuters described as the country's worst economic crisis in a generation, with high inflation, debt distress, and deep public dissatisfaction. Yet the crisis produced alternation, not authoritarian closure. Voters punished the incumbent party, the losing candidate conceded, and constitutional politics absorbed the shock. This suggests that poor performance endangers democracy only when citizens or elites no longer believe elections can produce correction. In Ghana they still do. That belief, more than consensus or prosperity, is the core of endurance. (Reuters)

Thus Ghana's democratic durability can be summarized in three linked propositions. First, two large parties are both strong enough to compete and constrained enough to lose. Second, electoral administration remains credible enough that defeat is legible. Third, public and elite expectations still favor constitutional turnover over extra-constitutional intervention. Ghana's democracy is therefore resilient not because it is fully consolidated in a liberal sense, but because political actors still expect the game to continue after each round. (Brookings)

Botswana: Stability Beyond Dominant-Party Rule

Botswana is frequently described as one of Africa's most stable democracies, and that description is broadly accurate, but incomplete. For decades the country combined regular multiparty elections with uninterrupted dominance by the Botswana Democratic Party. Freedom House notes that Botswana was dominated by a single party from independence until the 2024 election, and that many institutions have been closely tied to the presidency. Earlier scholarship made similar points. Sebudubudu and Osei-Hwedie warned of pitfalls in Botswana's parliamentary democracy, including the concentration of power in the presidency and the weakness of other accountability institutions. Botswana was therefore resilient, but not immune to democratic deficit. (Freedom House)

Yet Botswana's long period of dominance did not eliminate competition altogether. Poteete showed that the BDP's legislative supermajority persisted despite increasingly competitive elections, due to electoral-system effects, party fragmentation, and factional dynamics within the ruling party itself. Burchard likewise argued that Botswana's dominant-party system still generated meaningful competition, especially at the constituency level. These studies matter because they explain why Botswana was not simply an authoritarian regime in democratic clothing. Alternation was delayed, but uncertainty never disappeared entirely. Competition persisted beneath the surface long enough for turnover eventually to become possible. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

That possibility became reality in 2024. Freedom House records that the Botswana Democratic Party lost power for the first time since 1966, after the opposition Umbrella for Democratic Change won a majority in the National Assembly and its leader, Duma Boko, was elected president. Reuters and the Associated Press both emphasized the symbolic significance of that moment: the ruling party's

six-decade hold on power ended, and President Mokgweetsi Masisi conceded defeat before final results were fully confirmed. In democratic terms, this was a crucial stress test. A system that had long been criticized for dominant-party entrenchment nonetheless proved capable of peaceful alternation when electoral arithmetic turned. (Freedom House)

Botswana's social foundations for democracy remain strong, though not untroubled. Afrobarometer's 2025 dispatch found that 70 percent of Batswana still say democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. Overwhelming majorities reject dictatorship, military rule, and one-party rule. At the same time, 54 percent say they are dissatisfied with how democracy works, support for elections as the best means of choosing leaders has fallen to 65 percent from much higher levels in earlier years, and fewer than half of respondents express trust in the electoral commission. These data show a system under strain, but not one that has lost its normative core. Citizens are frustrated, yet they remain far more hostile to authoritarian substitutes than to democracy itself. (Afrobarometer)

Why, then, has Botswana endured? One answer is that the state has historically preserved legal continuity and civilian control, even while concentrating power at the top. Another is that opposition weakness, though long real, was never made permanent through the sort of exclusionary engineering seen in Benin. Botswana's rulers benefited from incumbency and electoral rules, but they did not close the arena so completely that defeat became impossible. That distinction is central. A democracy can survive prolonged dominance if the opposition retains a pathway to office and the incumbent accepts that pathway when the moment arrives. Botswana passed that test in 2024. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

Botswana also reveals that democratic endurance does not always coincide with democratic deepening. The same country that delivered a peaceful transfer still faces executive-heavy institutions, media constraints, and signs of civic dissatisfaction. Its endurance is therefore best described as resilient but incomplete. That nuance matters for the broader argument of this essay. Democracies do not endure only when they are ideal liberal democracies. They endure when institutions continue to make turnover thinkable, credible, and nonviolent. Botswana's democratic record is strong not because all of its deficits vanished, but because those deficits did not prevent alternation when voters demanded it. (Freedom House)

Mali: Democratic Breakdown and the Return of Military Guardianship

Mali is a reminder that elections alone do not secure democratic survival. For years it was cited as a promising example of post-1990 democratization in Africa, having held multiparty elections and experienced two executive alternations of power. But Brookings' 2025 study argues that this democratic record concealed deeper fragilities. Mali's institutions were weak and unresponsive, and citizens often relied on extra-institutional mechanisms to solve political and social problems. In that context, insecurity did not create democratic weakness from nothing; it triggered the collapse of an already brittle order. (Brookings)

That diagnosis is reinforced by Susanna Wing's earlier analysis of the 2012 crisis. Wing argued that corruption, resurgent violence in the north, and the growing illicit economy implicated state officials in the erosion of state legitimacy. The Malian state, she wrote, had lost touch with the people, and its military was divided. This formulation is vital because it shows why the 2012 coup was not simply an external shock. The democratic regime had failed to build responsive state structures or

reliable civilian control over coercion. Once the security crisis intensified, the military could present itself as the actor best able to act. (ETH Zurich Files)

Mali's subsequent trajectory confirms the depth of that failure. Freedom House reports that after the 2012 coup and renewed conflict, a 2020 military coup installed a junta-led transition, and a second coup in 2021 tightened the military's grip further. Elections planned for 2024 were postponed, and the junta remained firmly in control. More recently, Reuters reported that Mali's military rulers suspended political activity in May 2025, then formally dissolved all political parties later that month. Additional reporting from Reuters and AP showed the regime moving to grant junta leader Assimi Goïta another five years in power, with elections repeatedly pushed aside in the name of security and order. (Freedom House)

These developments demonstrate a central point in the comparative argument: where civilian institutions are weak and citizens no longer believe they can extract accountability through elections, the military can claim democratic legitimacy by denouncing civilian incompetence. Bleck and Soumano capture this dynamic precisely. Their explanation of Mali's breakdown rests on three steps: weak and unresponsive institutions, a pattern of extra-institutional problem-solving, and insecurity as the final trigger. In such settings, the military is not merely a usurper. It becomes, in the eyes of at least part of the public, a plausible substitute for failed constitutional politics. That is the opposite of what we observe in Ghana and Botswana. (Brookings)

Mali's present democratic condition reflects that reversal. Freedom House now rates the country Not Free with a score of 21/100. Its country narrative explicitly links the current crisis to the persistence of insecurity, the coups of 2020 and 2021, and the indefinite postponement of a return to full constitutional rule. Mali therefore stands as a case of full democratic breakdown rather than mere decline. Elections once structured politics; now coercive authority does. Parties once competed; now they have been dissolved. The regime no longer depends on institutionalized uncertainty but on the elimination of it. (Freedom House)

Importantly, Mali's collapse cannot be explained simply by poverty or conflict exposure. Many poor states remain electoral regimes, and not every insecure democracy collapses into repeated coups. The specific problem in Mali was that insecurity intersected with low responsiveness, corruption, weak decentralization, and an unconstrained military. Security threats became politically decisive because democratic institutions lacked the legitimacy and capacity to manage them. In that sense, Mali's failure was not just a security failure. It was a failure of democratic state-building. (ETH Zurich Files)

Benin: Legalistic Backsliding and the Collapse of Competition

Benin illustrates a different route to democratic failure. For much of the post–Cold War period it was regarded as one of Francophone Africa's strongest democratic stories. Freedom House still frames the country's recent decline against that earlier record, noting that Benin had been among the most stable democracies in Africa before President Patrice Talon began using the justice system against political opponents after 2016 and progressively consolidated power. Koter's recent article offers a sharper analytical interpretation: Benin entered democratic backsliding after 2016, and the weakness or passivity of political elites enabled the deterioration of competitiveness, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly. (Freedom House)

Benin therefore matters because it shows that democracy can collapse without a military takeover. Elections still occur, constitutions still exist, and incumbents still invoke legality. But the substance of democratic competition is drained away. Koter argues that better opposition cooperation in 2023 helped halt further backsliding, but did not reverse the broader decline. The regime did not need to abolish elections in order to dominate them; it instead altered the terms on which elections could be contested. (Sage Journals)

Freedom House's 2025 report gives concrete examples of how this occurred. It notes that the legislature approved electoral-law amendments in 2024 that raised the threshold needed for parties to gain representation in the National Assembly from 10 percent to 20 percent in each electoral district. It also raised the endorsement requirement for presidential candidates from 10 percent to 15 percent of legislators and mayors. Freedom House explicitly links Benin's score decline to these changes because they make it harder for new and opposition parties to compete. In effect, the rules of entry were rewritten in ways that narrowed contestation while preserving the appearance of constitutional procedure. (Freedom House)

The consequences were visible in 2026. Reuters reported that Benin's main opposition party, the Democrats, won 16.14 percent of the vote in the January parliamentary election but secured no seats because it failed to cross the new 20 percent threshold. The two pro-Talon parties therefore captured all 109 seats in the National Assembly. Reuters noted that critics viewed this outcome as a further reduction of institutional oversight over the executive. In April 2026, Talon's ally and finance minister Romuald Wadagni then won the presidency with more than 94 percent of the vote in a race where the main opposition had been unable to field a viable candidate under the endorsement rules. AP reported that the leading opposition figure had been excluded because he lacked the required parliamentary endorsements, which critics argued were designed precisely to block competition. (Reuters)

Benin's recent status captures this transformation. Freedom House rates it Partly Free at 61/100 in 2026, a modest statistical improvement over 2025 but still far below the democratic standing it enjoyed before Talon's tenure. That score alone does not tell the whole story. More revealing is the qualitative change in the nature of political contestation. When electoral laws, judicial instruments, and administrative hurdles systematically reduce the opposition's ability to compete, elections cease to function as mechanisms of uncertainty. The point is not merely that opposition parties lose. In healthy democracies, oppositions lose all the time. The problem is that in Benin they increasingly lose under rules designed to make victory nearly unattainable. (Freedom House)

Benin is thus best understood as a case of civilian democratic collapse through executive capture. Unlike Mali, the coercive center of the breakdown is not the army. Unlike Botswana, dominant incumbency did not remain compatible with a plausible path to alternation. Unlike Ghana, elite competition no longer reliably generates concession because the arena itself has been narrowed in advance. Benin demonstrates that African democracy can die by law as well as by coup. (Sage Journals)

Why Some Endure and Others Collapse

The four cases suggest that democratic endurance depends less on formal regime labels than on whether politics remains organized around institutionalized uncertainty. This section draws out the main contrasts.

1. Real Alternation Versus Managed Certainty

The most obvious difference is whether the opposition retains a realistic route to office. Ghana and Botswana do. Ghana's two-party system has repeatedly produced alternation, and the 2024 defeat of the incumbent party confirmed that citizens can remove governments electorally. Botswana went even further in 2024 by demonstrating that a party in power since independence could still lose and leave office peacefully. By contrast, Benin's recent electoral reforms and opposition exclusion converted elections into increasingly managed exercises. Mali no longer offers opposition competition at all under military rule. The core democratic divide is therefore not whether elections exist on paper, but whether they generate genuine uncertainty about who may govern next. (Reuters)

This contrast helps explain why democratic endurance can coexist with serious flaws. Botswana was long criticized for one-party dominance; Ghana for patronage and weak party institutionalization. Yet both systems still preserved the possibility of rotation. Benin did not. Once electoral rules are systematically rewritten to keep the opposition out, democracy loses its central disciplining mechanism. Once the military becomes the decisive political actor, as in Mali, electoral uncertainty disappears even more completely. Endurance, then, is not equivalent to liberal perfection. It is equivalent to preserving a competitive route to power. (Brookings)

2. Civilian Control of Coercion

The second guardrail is the subordination of the armed forces. Ghana and Botswana differ institutionally and socially, but both share the critical fact that their militaries are not accepted as arbiters of civilian failure. Elections remain the only legitimate mechanism for replacing rulers. In Mali, the exact opposite occurred. Weak responsiveness and insecurity made the military appear to many as a problem-solving alternative to discredited civilian politics. Once that threshold is crossed, democratic institutions become vulnerable not just to criticism but to displacement. Benin's erosion has so far been chiefly civilian, but even there recent reports of a failed coup attempt underscore how narrowing civilian legitimacy can create broader instability. (Brookings)

This is why security crises are dangerous but not sufficient explanations. Ghana faced a severe economic crisis in 2024 without a military intervention. Botswana faced rising public dissatisfaction and economic stress without praetorian politics. Mali's insecurity proved regime-breaking because the military was organized and politically emboldened, while civilian institutions were distrusted and ineffective. Civilian control is therefore not a technical detail of democratic design. It is the line between constitutional correction and coercive replacement. (Reuters)

3. The Quality of Referees

Democracies survive when institutions that regulate competition remain credible enough to make losing tolerable. Ghana's electoral institutions are not fully trusted, but they remain sufficiently transparent that incumbents have repeatedly conceded. Botswana's electoral framework, despite concerns and declining trust, retained enough integrity to permit the first alternation in the country's history. In Benin, however, legal reforms and state institutions increasingly served to reduce competition rather than referee it. In Mali, democratic referees became largely irrelevant once the military seized effective sovereignty. Referees matter not because they eliminate conflict, but because they keep conflict within constitutional bounds. (politikon.iapss.org)

This point also helps make sense of Afrobarometer's mixed findings. In Ghana and Botswana, trust is imperfect and in some

respects declining, yet broad support for democratic principles remains stronger than support for authoritarian substitutes. That reservoir of legitimacy keeps political actors inside the system. When trust and competitiveness decline together, as in Benin, the effect is far more corrosive. And when insecurity renders formal institutions irrelevant, as in Mali, they simply cease to organize political life. (Afrobarometer)

4. Responsiveness and the Preference for Constitutional Politics

Finally, democratic endurance requires at least minimal responsiveness. Citizens and elites do not need to be fully satisfied with democracy; Ghanaian and Batswana respondents plainly are not. But they must still believe that electoral politics can correct failure better than unconstitutional alternatives. In Ghana, economic crisis generated electoral punishment and turnover. In Botswana, dissatisfaction generated historic alternation. In Mali, the opposite occurred: public frustration with corrupt and ineffective governance fed the appeal of military intervention. In Benin, elite collusion and executive engineering progressively blocked the corrective mechanisms that elections are supposed to provide. When citizens cease to see elections as a route to accountability, democracy becomes brittle. (Reuters)

Counterarguments and Limitations

A first counterargument is that these cases are really about structural conditions such as colonial legacy, ethnic diversity, or resource wealth. Those factors matter, but they are insufficient. Ghana and Botswana are both former British colonies, but that commonality alone cannot explain their different party systems or why Botswana long remained dominant-party while Ghana developed repeated alternation. Nor can colonial legacy explain Benin's decline, given that the country was once seen as one of Francophone Africa's democratic successes. Resource wealth is similarly indeterminate: Botswana is mineral-rich and democratic, while Mali is resource-endowed yet unstable. Structure shapes the terrain, but institutions and elite choices determine how politics is played on it. (Cambridge University Press & Assessment)

A second counterargument is that performance, not institutions, is the true driver. There is certainly something to this view. Bad governance, corruption, and insecurity were central to Mali's collapse, and economic hardship was politically decisive in the Ghanaian and Botswanan elections of 2024. Yet performance alone cannot explain outcomes either. Ghana's severe crisis produced alternation rather than autocratization. Botswana's dissatisfaction produced turnover rather than a coup. Benin posted notable economic gains under Talon even as political competition narrowed sharply. Performance matters most through its effect on whether people still trust constitutional politics to produce correction. (ETH Zurich Files)

The study also has limits. It is a small-N comparison that privileges causal interpretation over measurement. Benin in particular sits between backsliding and full collapse, and democracy indices do not always move uniformly across time or across datasets. That ambiguity is not a weakness of the argument so much as a reminder that democratic death is often gradual. The central claim remains robust: whether decline is abrupt or incremental, democracies become vulnerable when competition stops being open, coercive actors gain autonomy, and constitutional politics no longer looks like the best route to accountability. (Freedom House)

Conclusion

Some African democracies endure because they preserve the integrity of competition. That is the central lesson of this comparison. Ghana and Botswana are not flawless democracies. Both show enduring weaknesses in party organization, executive power, representation, and public trust. But they still uphold the principle that office can be won and lost through elections. That principle makes political rivalry intense yet bounded, and it keeps constitutional politics more attractive than coercive shortcuts. (Brookings)

Mali and Benin reveal the two main ways that principle can be destroyed. In Mali, democracy collapsed when weak institutions and insecurity enabled the military to present itself as a legitimate substitute for civilian rule. In Benin, democracy was hollowed out when elected incumbents used legal and institutional tools to make opposition success increasingly unlikely. One case is dramatic and coercive; the other gradual and legalistic. But both end in the same place: elections cease to organize meaningful uncertainty about power. (Brookings)

The broader answer to the essay's question is therefore this: African democracies endure when they combine civilian control, credible referees, viable opposition, and enough state responsiveness to keep citizens invested in constitutional politics. They collapse when those guardrails fail and elites or soldiers can credibly claim that politics no longer needs to remain democratic in order to be effective. The lesson is not pessimistic. Ghana and Botswana show that democracy can survive patronage, dissatisfaction, and economic stress. But Mali and Benin show how quickly survival becomes collapse once the uncertainty at the heart of democracy is replaced by coercion or engineered certainty. (Brookings)

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