

## The Erosion of Democracy in Developing and Transition Countries

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### I Introduction

Political transformation as measured by the BTI 2018 has, on average, reached a new low around the globe. In more and more countries, rulers are strategically undermining control mechanisms in order to secure power and maintain patronage systems and opportunities for self-enrichment. At the same time, protests are growing against social inequality, mismanagement and corruption.

As normative transformation goals, democracy and the market economy have never been so contested – or so threatened by degradation from within. Clearly, if democratic systems do not offer a robust framework for ensuring rule of law and opportunities for political participation, and if market-based economies do not guarantee fair and reliable rules of competition and social inclusion, then not only will they lose their appeal, they will devolve into illiberal, patronage-driven structures. Against this background, populist and authoritarian criticisms of democratic processes, institutions and ultimately norms will gain credibility.

The following text starts out by introducing the most important investigative parameters used to assess the political status and quality of democracy in 129 developing and transformation countries (excluding Western nations that were already members of the OECD in 1989). On this basis, the erosion of democracy worldwide is analyzed and the question addressed in what sense this development represents a global “retreat of democracy.” The prevailing antidemocratic positions are then depicted and discussed. In conclusion, suggestions are made as to how the European Union, as one of the main democratic actors on the international stage, can counteract the erosion in the quality of democracy and promote a liberal order and democratization.

### II The Investigative Framework of the Bertelsmann Transformation Index

The origins of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index (BTI) are closely associated with the understanding that the processes of social change do not only move in one direction. Indeed, transformational processes towards democracy and a market economy can certainly regress or stagnate. After the euphoria that followed the end of the Cold War and the twofold transformation – political and economic – that unfolded in numerous countries in Eastern, East-Central and Southeast Europe, it did not take long to come to the sobering realization that the trend of liberalization was reversible.

The “end of history” that was predicted at the time had not yet arrived.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1990s, events such as the Russian constitutional crisis and the unsuccessful US Marine operation in Mogadishu, Somalia highlighted the complexity and reversibility of democratization processes and efforts to bring stability. It was during this period of rethinking the new world order that the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s founder Reinhard Mohn initiated the efforts to develop a Transformation Index.

The aim was to gain a more thorough understanding of the dynamics of transformation processes and to identify by means of international comparison successful cases of social transformation that could serve as examples of good practice and help devise recommendations for democratization and transformation management. As such, the BTI combines two outlooks. The first is a continued

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York 1992.

confidence in the universal applicability and superiority of the social models of a democracy based on the rule of law and a market economy flanked by sociopolitical safeguards. The second is a more sober and skeptical understanding of actual transformation processes that considers the complex interdependencies between democratization and economic liberalization – including the possibility of blockades and failure.

As a consequence of these origins, the BTI is a more diversified index than many comparable instruments, which enables it to evaluate and compare complex transformation trends in a detailed, differentiated way. There are a range of different requirements associated with successful political transformation and democratization. A comprehensive array of indicators should be used when examining these requirements. A similar principle applies to the erosion of the quality of democracy, which can also affect various domains within the political order. Numerous country reports and data analyses of the BTI show that political regression can happen for a range of reasons and can follow various paths. As such, it will be helpful here to first provide a brief outline of the investigative parameters used in the BTI.

The normative framework for political transformation on which the BTI assessments are based is that of a democracy based on the rule of law. The qualification “based on the rule of law” clarifies that this model requires more than just free and fair elections and additional political participation rights. Thus, the BTI adds a constitutional element to the influential Dahlian concept of polyarchy (rule of many) – a concept that primarily focuses on all citizens having the opportunity for political participation and on the free competition for political power, and therefore on the associated political freedoms (freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of the press, the right of association and the right to vote or to stand as a candidate).<sup>2</sup> In accordance with the narrower concept of polyarchy, 52 of the 58 countries that are classified as autocracies in the BTI 2018 are categorized as such because the freedom and fairness of elections no longer meets democratic standards. But in addition, the BTI also acknowledges that functional constitutional democracies must be embedded – there must be horizontal accountability and a separation of powers, and the democratically elected representatives must have effective power to govern. This concept of “embedded democracy” can be used to identify a range of limitations of existing democracies, which are categorized as “defective democracies” in the BTI.<sup>3</sup> Four types of defective democracies can be identified. As the following table “Types of Defective Democracies” illustrates, they are classified according to the most prevalent defect.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Dahl. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven and London 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Merkel. *Systemtransformation: Eine Einführung in die Theorie und Empirie der Transformationsforschung*. (System Transformation: An Introduction to the Theory and Empirical Studies of Transformation Research). 2nd rev. edition. Wiesbaden 2010, pp. 30–40.

<sup>4</sup> Aurel Croissant, and Peter Thiery. *Eroding Democracy, or the Intransigence of Defective Democracy? Analyzing Democratic Transformations*, in: *Transformation Index 2010: Political Management in International Comparison*. Gütersloh 2010, pp. 70–71.

## Types of Defective Democracies

Type	Characteristics
Exclusive Democracy	Exclusion from Elections or Participation Rights Violation of the Principle of Free and Fair Elections Obstruction of Free Preference Formation (Freedom of the Press)
Illiberal Democracy	Limitation of Rule of Law through Partial Suspension of Property/Civil Rights and other Individual Freedoms Interference in Judicial Independence
Delegative Democracy	Undermining of the Separation of Powers ("Checks and Balances")
Enclave Democracy	Existence of "Veto Powers" (Military, Major Landowners, etc.) Existence of Political Domains that are not Accessible by Democratically Elected Representatives

Source: Author's own diagram.

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This typology of democratic deficits should not be regarded as being static or exclusive. It is, however, useful for identifying the most prevalent systemic weaknesses. In practice, hybrid types are often found and defects can mutually reinforce each other. The concept is most useful for analyzing the interdependencies between the various defects and it may also help with identifying the creeping process of autocratization from within. For instance, before the AKP governments took office in Turkey, the veto held by the military council meant that the country's democracy could be described as an enclave democracy. After a successful democratization period, it then showed increasingly repressive tendencies – especially after the failed coup of 2016 – and became an illiberal democracy. Today, following a constitutional referendum and another election victory for Erdoğan in June 2018, it would not only be described as illiberal but also as delegative. Indeed, the combination of both defects means that the Turkish political system may have already crossed the threshold and become an autocracy.

In order to be able to present the quality of democracy in a comprehensive, differentiated way, the Transformation Index accordingly not only measures political participation rights (voting rights, freedom of expression, rights of association and assembly) and the effective power to govern but also assesses the rule of law (separation of powers, independence of the judiciary, prosecution of office abuse and protection of civil rights). Any erosion of the quality of democracy with respect to core democratic institutions can thus be identified and quantified with precision.

In recent years, the Arab Spring illustrated yet again that although these democratic institutions are indispensable, in and of themselves they are not sufficient to establish a sustainable democratic order. Two additional criteria must also be fulfilled. The first is stable stateness, which is supported by a functioning administration and a well-established state monopoly on the use of force. The second is the consolidation of democratic order by developing effective and accepted democratic institutions and by integrating a stable, balanced representation of social concerns into political decision-making processes. The first aspect is foundational to the process of political transformation. The second relates to the institutional and social consolidation of democracy.

On the subject of **stateness**, just one year after the Arab Spring had begun, the political scientist Eberhard Kienle warned that only Egypt and Tunisia would have sufficient state stability and identity to introduce the process of democratization with any prospect of success.<sup>5</sup> The first election in Libya following the fall of Gaddafi in July 2012, for example, was one of the freest and fairest votes held in the Arab world in the last 15 years. At the same time, however, the stateness was so fragile,

<sup>5</sup> Eberhard Kienle. Looking Ahead: Prospects for Democratization and Better Governance in the Arab World, in: Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.). The Arab Spring: One Year After. Gütersloh 2018, p. 85.

the administration and jurisdiction so underdeveloped and civil rights protection so inadequate that the BTI continued to classify Libya as an autocracy – even before destabilizing tribal and regional forces resulted in the country becoming a failed state. Events in Afghanistan and the Central African Republic have unfolded in a similar way in recent years.

The analysis of **democratic consolidation** addresses the opposite end of the spectrum of political development, examining political and social integration and the stability of democratic institutions.<sup>6</sup> Negative trends in these areas can be either a trigger for or a symptom of a more widespread erosion of the quality of democracy. For example, in some more developed democracies in Latin America and Southeast Europe (Brazil, Costa Rica, Romania, Slovenia), BTI scores for aspects such as the stability of the party system or the approval of democratic norms and procedures are decreasing, despite the relative stability of the democratic institutional structures.

According to the normative and conceptual framework of the BTI, a political system should be stable, participatory, constitutional, effective and representative. These premises form the basis of this indicator framework, which the BTI uses in its assessment of 129 developing and transition countries, see Figure “Political Transformation Indicators in the Bertelsmann Transformation Index.”

#### Political Transformation Indicators in the Bertelsmann Transformation Index

Target Level: Democracy Based by Rule of Law



Source: Author's own diagram.

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## III Analysis

### 1. Political Transformation Trends

By using the three-pronged approach of assessing state stability, investigating participation rights and rule of law, and analyzing democratic consolidation, the BTI is able to record three important phenomena that affect the level of political transformation and the quality of democracy all over the world. These phenomena are state failure, the weakening of institutions and consolidation setbacks.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Merkel. Systemtransformation: Eine Einführung in die Theorie und Empirie der Transformationsforschung. (System Transformation: An Introduction to the Theory and Empirical Studies of Transformation Research). 2nd rev. edition. Wiesbaden 2010, pp. 110–124.

**State failure** is not a major contributing factor to the current continuation of the negative political trend. Nevertheless, following the collapses in Libya and Syria, state order has now also fully disintegrated in South Sudan and Yemen. As a result, no central state powers are in a position to deal with the humanitarian catastrophes in these countries. This list of countries also includes the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia, all of which have been categorized as failed states by the BTI since the mid-2000s. Generally speaking, however, the total number of failed states has remained relatively constant at seven or eight. This is because former problematic cases such as Côte d'Ivoire have now stabilized. The number of fragile or very fragile states has also remained fairly similar, at between 10 and 13 states. As such, there are consistently around 20 states that have problematically low levels of stateness. Of course, it is alarming that around 15 percent of all countries assessed by the BTI have an insecure state monopoly on the use of force and a limited state administration. But again, this number is stable, it does not explain the negative political trend that has been continuing globally for many years.

The prevailing perception in Europe that there has been a significant increase in state fragility can instead be explained by the particularly intense awareness of the instability in the European neighborhood.<sup>7</sup> With the exception of Algeria, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates, in the last ten years there have been marginal to significant declines in stateness in every Arab state. Eastern European countries such as Ukraine and Moldova are also less stable. Furthermore, the interference of religious dogmas in the legal system and in political institutions has increased in just under half of all countries assessed by the BTI. This is the stateness indicator that has deteriorated the most by far. The increased role of religion in politics is by no means exclusive to Arab states or Muslim-majority societies. Nevertheless, there are clear regional hotspots. The list of 42 countries where religion currently has at least a perceptible level of political influence and where it is opposing pluralist, democratic legislation includes all of the Arab states in addition to countries that are primarily located in West Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia. This kind of development has the potential to bring destabilization where there are heightened identity conflicts, as shown to an alarming degree in recent years by terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in the Arab world and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

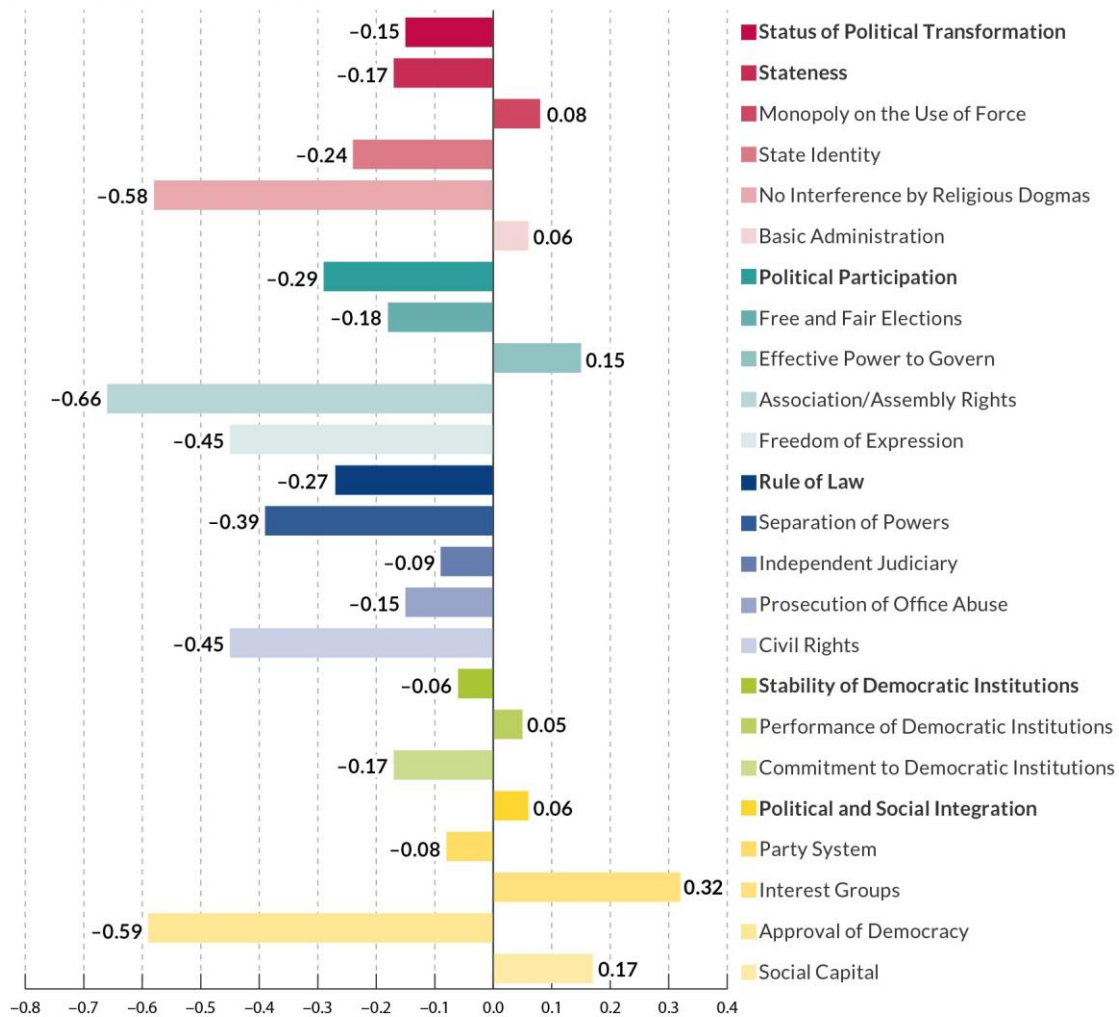
At first glance, no dramatic **consolidation setbacks** are discernible either. At a global level, the average scores for the "stability of democratic institutions" and "political and social integration" criteria have only changed slightly. As above, however, it is worth breaking down this highly aggregated data by region and subject matter. By doing so, a lack of trust in and commitment to established politics becomes evident. Meanwhile, values for civil society are tending to improve. These observations are significant for stability analyses and debates about populism. Although there has been low-level improvement to the performance of democratic institutions over the last twelve years, the level of commitment to them among political players has decreased. There have been positive trends concerning the self-organizing ability of civil society, levels of social trust, the ability of interest groups to mediate and their willingness to cooperate. At the same time, public approval of democratic norms and procedures has dropped dramatically. With a negative value of -0.59 points (on a scale of one to ten), it is the democracy indicator that has deteriorated the most since 2006 (after "association and assembly rights").

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<sup>7</sup> Sabine Donner. The Deepening Divide between Rulers and the Ruled, in: Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.), Transformation Index BTI 2018: Governance in International Comparison. Gütersloh 2018, pp. 34–35.



Changes in BTI Criteria and Indicator Scores, 2006–2018  
(for the 119 Countries Assessed by BTI since 2006)



Source: Author's own diagram.

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Consolidation setbacks primarily affect countries and regions where democratic institutions are already relatively well established. For example, the decline in the level of commitment to democratic institutions is particularly noticeable in East-Central and Southeast Europe, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Hungary (-3 in both) as well as in Macedonia, Poland and Slovakia (-2 in all three). From different qualitative levels, scores for the approval of democracy have fallen significantly in Latin American countries such as Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama and Peru (-2 in all four). Although the causes of this disenchantment with democracy vary from country to country, in nearly every region there are two main accusations being levelled at the established political elite. The first is that rather than serving the common good, they are corrupt, seeking primarily to secure their status. The second is that they are therefore uninterested in introducing effective measures for eliminating the prosperity gap between rich and poor (Latin America) or between the West and the East (East-Central and Southeast Europe). Although these two accusations are also part of a populist and therefore anti-elite, polarizing narrative, this does not change the fact that they are demonstrably justifiable – as exemplified in numerous countries in Latin America and East-Central and Southeast Europe. The political elites and administrations of many Latin American countries are riddled with corruption, as was made particularly clear by the Odebrecht scandal that recently permeated the whole region. Similar statements can also be made for Southeast Europe, particularly for Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, where there is a lack of effective prosecution of

office abuse and too few effective anti-corruption policies. Furthermore, by interregional comparison, Latin America still has one of the highest levels of social inequality and is second only to Southern Africa, where the gulf between rich and poor is even wider. Since the end of the commodity boom in Latin America, the prosperity gap has been widening again. In East-Central and Southeast Europe, the large majority of citizens has been burdened with the effects of three economic transformations (from planned economy to market economy, regarding the fulfilment of EU accession criteria and concerning the structural adjustments following the global financial crisis). They are still waiting for their share in the prosperity associated with becoming EU members or accession candidates.

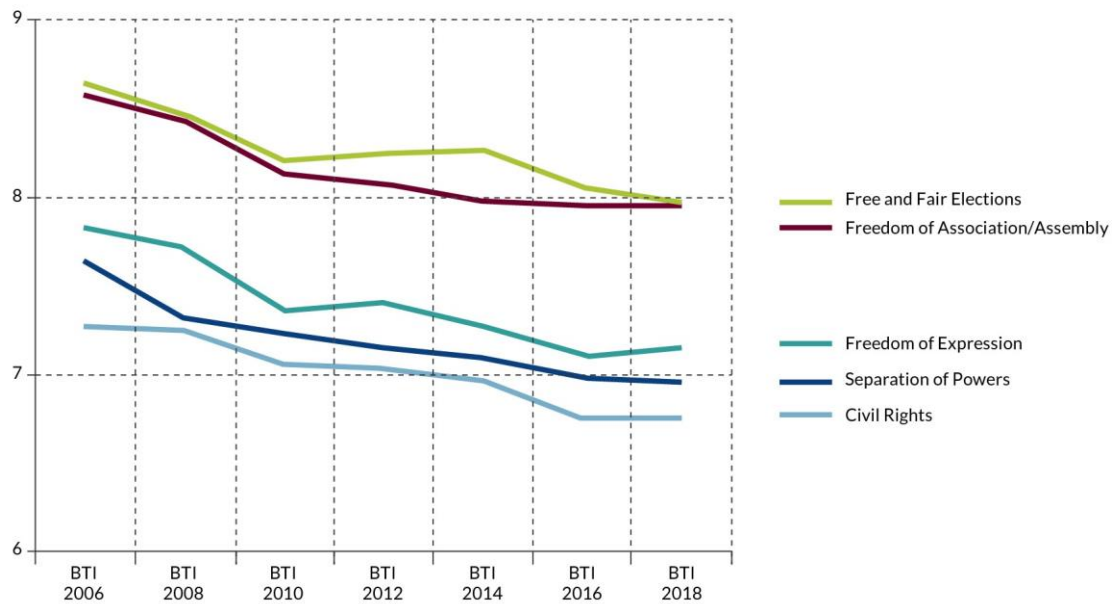
The global average scores show that regression in political transformation levels primarily stems from the **weakening of democratic institutions**. The true drivers of the negative political trend are the erosion of political participation rights and of the rule of law in democratic states, in combination with the regression of previously moderate autocracies into more severe, highly repressive dictatorships.<sup>8</sup> These developments make more of an impact on the global “retreat of democracy” than the system change from democracy to autocracy. The BTI 2018 records five regimes that have become autocratic – Bangladesh, Lebanon, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Uganda – compared to two fragile processes of democratization (in Burkina Faso and Sri Lanka). Although this means that autocracies have reached an all-time high in the current Transformation Index, both in terms of the actual number (58 autocracies) and the percentage they represent (45%), all of the new autocracies have been exhibiting a continuous downhill trend for some years now. Of these countries re-categorized as an autocracy, none has experienced an abrupt change to a dictatorship. Instead, all went through a longstanding, ongoing and intensifying erosion of democratic standards. The scale of this process of erosion is now so large, particularly in the areas of free, fair elections and the separation of powers, that these countries can no longer be classified as democracies.

The five new autocracies in the BTI 2018 have crossed a threshold. A range of defective democracies is also approaching this threshold, although with varying degrees of democratic quality. These states include Honduras, Hungary, Moldova, Niger, the Philippines and Turkey – and one might even add Poland. Furthermore, countries such as Macedonia, Mexico and South Africa have been reporting substantial losses in the quality of democracy for a long time. All cases considered, it becomes clear that defective democracies – with increasing limitations on the rule of law and opportunities for political participation – contribute significantly to the global negative trend in political transformation.

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Raymond Dresden, and Marc Morjé Howard. Authoritarian Backsliding and the Concentration of Political Power, in: *Democratization*. 2015, Vol. 23.7, pp. 1122–1143.

## Participation and Rule of Law in Democracies Continue to Decline



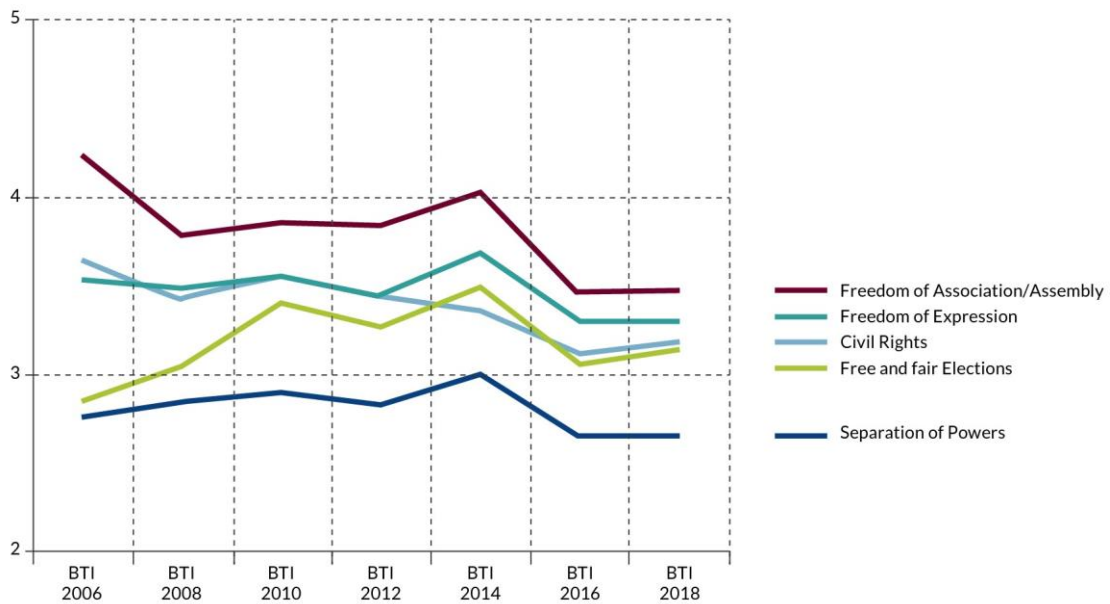
Source: Author's own diagram.

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In recent years, particularly in response to the Arab Spring and Euromaidan, regressive political transformation in the direction of autocracy has also contributed to the institutional loss of quality in democracies. More than two thirds of autocratic governments harshly suppress political opposition and place such severe limitations on remaining civil liberties that their political systems can now only be described as hard autocracies. Where there was a tendency some years ago to allow a certain level of dissent and pluralism – from allowing opposition parties to stand for election to tolerating selected opposition media and non-governmental organizations – numerous regimes are now once again using clearly repressive methods to inhibit open, societal discourse. The arbitrary detention of human rights activists and journalists has increased. There have also been more bans on demonstrations and more laws placing limitations on civil society organizations. This often takes place under the pretext of fighting terrorism or of preventing foreign interference in domestic matters. The main regional focuses are the Middle East and North Africa. Other important regions include Southeast Africa, where there is significant political regression and conflicts that are partly ethnically charged, and the hardened autocracies of Central Asia, which are often shaped by family dynasties.



Repression and Concentration of Power in Autocracies Continue to Increase



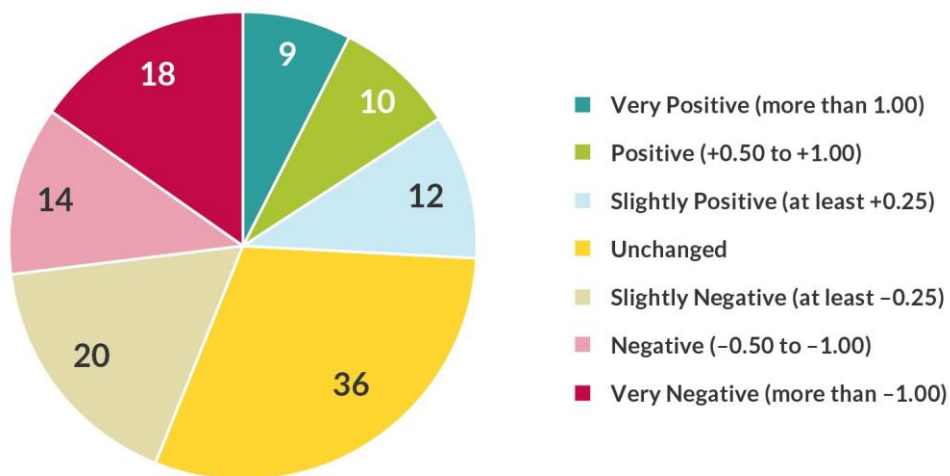
Source: Author's own diagram.

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In 44 percent of the 119 countries that have been continuously assessed since 2006, the overall democracy trend is distinctly negative, at more than a quarter of a point on the one-to-ten scale that depicts the status of political transformation. In 14 of these 52 countries, there is clear political regression (a negative value between 0.50 and 1.00) and in 18 of these countries, regression is massive (a negative value of one point or more). This means that in at least one fifth of all countries, the level of political transformation has declined to such an extent that it resulted in very grave democratic deficiencies or the introduction of an autocracy. Neither qualitatively nor quantitatively, there has been anything resembling an equally powerful positive trend towards democratization or liberalization.

BTI Democracy Trend, 2006–2018

(Number of Countries per Level of Change)



Source: Author's own diagram.

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The most serious developments are the impingements on electoral freedom, the erosion of the separation of powers and the increased limits being placed on opposition and civil society activities. Since 2006, no aspect of political transformation has seen as much regression as the area of

association and assembly rights. Also, freedom of expression and civil rights have been increasingly and significantly curtailed. This “shrinking space” is being supplemented by a “manipulated space,” which seeks to maintain sovereignty over public discourse in a controlled system by providing targeted support for organizations loyal to the government and by discrediting critics of the government as foreign agents.<sup>9</sup> The methods of interference, marginalization and isolation – for example, complicated registration systems, banning foreign support or placing legal restraints on civil society activities – are remarkably similar around the world. This suggests improved authoritarian policy learning and an international transfer regarding strategies of repression and manipulation.

A “retreat of democracy” can hardly be assessed by simply counting the number of democracies and autocracies over time. This approach would not show a rapid recent rise in authoritarian systems, nor would it fit with the historical trend analysis which reveals that only since the end of the Cold War and until now have the majority of states around the world been subject to democratic rule. Also, an increasing state fragility and the associated destabilization of democracy is not empirically detectable either. Rather, an important consideration here is the influence of religious dogmas on the legal system and on political institutions. This influence has risen rapidly and usually has an illiberal effect. This finding fits with the fact the BTI reveals a clearly perceptible global rise in conflict intensity in recent years. This rise is not due to an increase in open, military conflict but is instead linked to the increasing polarization of societies along ethnic, religious and social lines. This polarization, which the BTI also shows by depicting deconsolidation trends in democratic societies, is particularly detrimental to the commitment to democratic institutions and to the approval of democratic norms and procedures, especially in Latin America, East-Central and Southeast Europe and in many of the countries in Southern and Eastern Africa that are still ruled democratically. On the one hand, increasing polarization and growing skepticism towards democratic norms and procedures are the result of dissatisfaction with poorly functioning political institutions. On the other hand, these factors are catalysts that further accelerate the erosion of political participation rights and the rule of law in democracies, while also facilitating or even justifying the increased levels of repression in autocracies.

## 2. Antidemocratic Positions

Considering the increasing polarization of societies and the decrease in commitment to democratic norms and processes, there is, next to the institutional aspect, also a discursive dimension weighing into the “retreat of democracy.” The first thing to note here is that following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its model of state-socialist development (with a planned economy), there has been no attractive and comprehensive alternative ideological concept to democratic transformation (with a market economy). Even the successful and influential Chinese development model is still referred to by China’s state media as “enlightened Chinese democracy”.<sup>10</sup> In all but a few autocracies, the political ruling powers provide pro forma constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights and install what look like participative processes. Open repression is only the last resort for safeguarding power. Instead, elections are held from time to time. These elections are neither free nor fair but their credibility is verified by “international election observers” which are either founded by, financed by or allied with the state in question. Governments from Morocco to Russia have begun to either found their own civil society organizations or to invite existing NGOs to cooperate politically by joining umbrella organizations that provide them with huge levels of financial support. This makes

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Schwarz. Growing Numbers Living in Unfree Societies, in: Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.). Transformation Index BTI 2018: Governance in International Comparison. Gütersloh 2018, pp. 18–19.

<sup>10</sup> Xinhua. Commentary: Enlightened Chinese Democracy Puts the West in the Shade. October 17, 2017.

the organizations politically dependent on the government but also gives the impression that the government has the support of civil society. It is often the case in autocracies – and in defective democracies such as Hungary and Turkey – that media outlets are not simply closed down. Instead, they are bought out by companies that are close to the government and then brought into line politically.

Despite the lack of a convincing authoritarian alternative concept, the BTI data depicts a perceptible shift in the discourse towards a greater acceptance of positions that are illiberal and skeptical of democracy. For instance, in the wake of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, all over the world there was an increased willingness to subordinate individual rights if this was deemed necessary for collective security. This illiberal argument is also used by numerous dictators, especially in Arab states, in order to legitimize repression or call in support from external sources. Furthermore, leading emerging markets – whose self-confidence is growing due to the shifting balance of global economic power – are protesting against what they assert to be the patronizing or even interventionist attitude of democratic states and international organizations. For example, on the initiative of China, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization called for the “democratization of international relations” by strengthening the principle of national sovereignty and non-intervention. Another example is the way that, in reference to Western decadence, the Russian government insisted that greater consideration be given to the “traditional values” of national culture and religion, which should be differentiated from universal rights – a caveat that was successfully added at the 2012 Human Rights Council, for instance.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, antidemocratic positions are shown to be most effective when they focus on supposed or actual deficits in the functionality or performance of liberal democracies. In recent years, populist movements, parties and governments have levelled anti-elitist critique at the corrupt practices and the lack of equal opportunities associated with the democratic political establishment. At the same time, dictatorships in developing nations have pointed to their own economic and social successes and advocated strict state leadership as a foundation for overcoming poverty and inequality.

### **Populist Critique of Democracy**

All streams of **populism** are characterized by the demand for greater equality of opportunity and the mantra of “society before individuals.” Left-wing populist movements and parties are particularly common in Latin America. They form or formed the government in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela. In the name of the people, they condemn the high degree of social injustice, which they claim came about because the political and economic elites lacked commitment to reform and selfishly sought to secure their own status.<sup>12</sup> A right-wing populist “illiberal drift,” however, is widespread in East-Central and Southeast Europe. It is particularly well-represented by the governments of Macedonia, Poland and Hungary.<sup>13</sup> Decidedly anti-elitist characteristics are present here too and the homogenous will of the people is postulated. Reference is made to the systemically corrupt structure of the old, post-communist nomenklatura system that, it is claimed, is still in force – a system that has no regard for the interests of the man on the street

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander Cooley. Countering Democratic Norms, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 2015, Vol. 26.3, pp. 51–53.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Thiery. Growing Frustration, Lagging Response: Latin America and the Caribbean, in: Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.). *Transformation Index BTI 2018: Governance in International Comparison*. Gütersloh 2018, pp. 44–52.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Brusis. Illiberal Drift: East-Central and Southeast Europe in: Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.). *Transformation Index BTI 2018: Governance in International Comparison*. Gütersloh 2018, pp. 84–92.

and would betray national interests to Brussels, foreign companies or international trade organizations. While the impact of left-wing populism in Latin America tends to move in the direction of social inclusion, which can take on both authoritarian (Venezuela) and democratizing (Bolivia) features, European right-wing populists generally embody authoritarian, traditionalist and nationalist values, which tend to encourage the exclusion and discrimination of minorities.<sup>14</sup>

The reasons for the successful mobilization of support for populists differ from country to country. In Hungary, the success was directly related to the dissatisfaction at the incompetence and mismanagement of the previous government. In Turkey, it originally stemmed from the resistance shown to the hardened, Mafia-like informal power structures formed by an alliance of politicians, companies and the military. The success of populists in Venezuela was due to their protests against deeply unjust structures and mass poverty. Indeed, as the political theorist Benjamín Arditi has aptly noted, populism is a style of politics that is akin to an uninvited guest at a dinner party who is slightly drunk and talks frankly about uncomfortable truths.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, while populist leaders claim to advocate for the "common man", the way they mobilize support is strictly hierarchical. In the context of demonstrations, protest rallies and elections, a top-down approach is evident. The lack of a democratic internal structure within populist movements, the disregard for representative policy formation, the preference for direct, plebiscitarian decision-making – and the associated personality-based and anti-establishment concept of political leadership – do not in and of themselves provide sufficient grounds for categorizing populism as anti-democratic. To do so, there must also be a claim to represent the "true will of the people",<sup>16</sup> which in practice leads to a disregard for political opposition and the marginalization of minorities. By conceptualizing the population as homogenous, populism is necessarily anti-pluralist and, therefore, as emphasized by the political scientist Jan-Werner Müller, also anti-democratic. This is because in democracies, the will of the people is not discernable a priori, but is instead the product of pluralist decision-making processes.<sup>17</sup>

As numerous BTI country reports show, the anti-democratic, illiberal character of populists becomes evident when they gain political power. They see their electoral victory not only as a change of government but also as a regime change – a revolution at the ballot boxes. They therefore interpret their electoral mandate as an imperative mandate to thoroughly dismantle the political system that is supposedly still controlled by the old political elites. Although the individual steps taken may vary in sequence and intensity, there is a typical chronology in which populist, authoritarian governments dismantle democratic institutions. This chronology generally begins with the weakening of the supervisory bodies that were designed to hold the government accountable. As the populist executive in most cases has the backing of a clear parliamentary majority and is thus relatively unchecked by the legislative, the judiciary generally is the first target. Under Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian government provided the Polish PiS-led government with a blueprint of how to partially disempower the constitutional court, appoint judges who are loyal to the party, introduce an age limit for incumbent judges, and curtail judiciary independence. The second step is usually an attack on the freedom of the media. With the aim of dominating the discourse and minimizing criticism, restrictive media legislation is passed (Ecuador, Hungary, Poland), critical newspapers

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<sup>14</sup> Cas Mudde, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America, in: *Government and Opposition*, 2013, Vol. 48.2, pp. 147–174.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamín Arditi. *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation*. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2007, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth M. Roberts. Latin America's Populist Revival in: *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 2007, Vol. 27.1, pp. 3-15.

<sup>17</sup> Jan-Werner Müller. *Was ist Populismus? Ein Essay (What Is Populism? An Essay)*. Berlin 2016, pp. 19, 26.

are closed down or bought out by entrepreneurs close to the government (Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Turkey), social media channels and online platforms are subjected to cyberattacks or simply banned (Ecuador, Turkey), and critical journalists are threatened. Former European Commissioner for Justice Viviane Reding, who is now a member of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Board of Trustees, summarized the initial dynamics of populist regimes in a nutshell: "Any attack on the constitutional state always begins with an attack on the constitutional court." During an interview, she said that what came next were attacks on media outlets – first the public ones and then the private ones. "This is the Putin-Orbán-Kaczynski logic," she added.<sup>18</sup>

The third step consists of attempts to influence civil society by using massive threats (Philippines), limiting foreign support (Hungary, India) or by specifically promoting organizations that are close to the government. The fourth step is to manipulate the electoral system. A range of approaches are used strategically to secure the ruling party's electoral victory and significantly diminish the power of the opposition. These include re-drawing constituency boundaries, changing electoral laws regarding seat allocation or election funding, re-structuring the electoral authorities, weakening the opposition's capabilities by reducing media access, and passing anti-terrorism legislation. Finally, the fifth step is to try to prevent the prospective strengthening of the opposition by changing the constitution. Populist governments often attempt to enshrine the "will of the people" in the constitution. Examples include elevating specific political goals to the level of constitutional law (Hungary), removing term limits (numerous countries in Africa and Latin America) and making fundamental changes to the political system in order to disempower the "old" elites (Bolivia, Ecuador).

This strategy of concentrating and securing power is generally communicated openly and reasoned in normative terms. The argument used in Turkey and the Philippines, for example, is as follows: Repression is predominantly used against the "enemies of the people," so the domination of media outlets or the banning of demonstrations can be legitimized at a higher level – namely that of fulfilling the true wishes of the people. This logic states that it is the concentration of power, without separation of powers or control mechanisms, that enables the government to do its job (for example that of "draining the swamp") as freely and effectively as possible. After all, by this logic the reasons for securing power are not selfish; securing power is necessary for the fulfilment of the electoral mandate because the fight against the corruption and mismanagement of the old system is not yet over.

Nevertheless, beyond the populist rhetoric, observations and empirical evidence show that neither a higher concentration of power nor an anti-elite emphasis contributes to a more effective fight against corruption, for instance. The approach to government taken by Hungary's Prime Minister Orbán and Turkey's President Erdoğan is to fight a supposedly defensive war against the return of corrupt politicians or the power-hungry military, still influential and pulling strings behind the scenes. This approach promotes social polarization, which secures the rulers' power and brands all opponents and critics as potential enemies of the state. By weakening or abolishing all supervisory bodies, this approach also makes it harder to prosecute cases of office abuse and to achieve transparency and accountability. In both countries, it is evident that there is a planned development of business networks loyal to the government. These businesses are given preferential treatment during tendering processes and when economic policy decisions are made. This is another reason

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<sup>18</sup> Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zehntausende für freie Medien und gegen Regierung (Tens of Thousands for Free Media and against the Government), January 9, 2016. (<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/zehntausende-polen-demonstrieren-fuer-freie-medien-14005655.html>), retrieved on July 18, 2018.



why both countries are listed among the seven states that Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, which includes data from the BTI, has downgraded the most since 2012 (Transparency International 2018).

### **Authoritarian Critique of Democracy**

Crises relating to the legitimacy and performance of liberal democracies play into the hands of populists and autocrats all over the world. Even today, the discourse in Latin America still makes reference to the devastating social consequences of the "Washington Consensus" policy developed by the Western-dominated IMF and World Bank, which involved structural adjustment programs, austerity policies and cuts to social programs. The global economic crisis, which was caused by Western banks, is used as evidence for a lack of economic governance and is dubbed the "great Western financial collapse."<sup>19</sup> As a result of the Eurozone crisis, the EU's ongoing inability to make decisions on key social and economic policy issues, and the insecure membership prospects of numerous countries in Southeast Europe, the attraction of Brussels is diminishing and populist powers are forming governments – including in many longstanding EU member states such as Greece and Italy. The role of the USA as a leading example of democracy has diminished due to the populist and erratic governmental style of President Trump. The quality of democracy is also being eroded in many of the OECD countries. This is captured in detail by the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI). All of these difficulties and unresolved problems are construed as a sign of the decadence and exhaustion of "The West." They provide authoritarian rulers with an opportunity to present themselves as an alternative development model.

In this context, **authoritarianism** is being advocated as a successful route for economic development. China is now pointing more aggressively to the economic successes it has enjoyed in recent years, which are indeed impressive. They include consistently high levels of growth, technological advances and a significant and rapid increase in the level of socio-economic development which has lifted hundreds of millions of people from poverty. China argues that this success can be traced back to strict, authoritarian governance, which made it all possible through state-directed industrial policy, rural industrialization and liberalized foreign trade. It could well be argued that the Asian countries of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan pursued the very same kind of economically successful governmental steering before and also after their democratization. Nonetheless, authoritarianism is singled out and praised as an efficient, consistent alternative that facilitates reliable planning and is therefore more successful. Another point that often overlooked in this context is the fact that key aspects of China's economic success are particular to China. The country has a meritocratic promotion system and it combines economic and administrative decentralization with a system of political centralization that is functional and secures loyalty. These aspects have nothing to do with the authoritarian government as such, and they also cannot simply be replicated in other countries.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Chinese state media present the country's governmental system as an example for other developing countries to follow if they wish to combine economic progress with social cohesion. A commentary published by the state news agency Xinhua begins as follows: "[C]rises and chaos swamp Western liberal democracy." It adds that "[t]he Chinese system leads to social unity rather than the divisions which come as an unavoidable consequence

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<sup>19</sup> Viktor Orbán. Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp on July 26, 2014 at: Website of the Hungarian Government, (<http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>), retrieved on July 18, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Pranab Bardhan. China's Solitary Development Model in: Project Syndicate. December 5, 2017. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-model-xi-jinping-new-option-to-democracy-by-pranab-bardhan-2017-12>, retrieved on July 18, 2018.

of the adversarial nature of Western democracy today. Endless political backbiting, bickering and policy reversals, which make the hallmarks of liberal democracy, have retarded economic and social progress and ignored the interests of most citizens.”<sup>21</sup>

Malaysia offers another authoritarian model in Southeast Asia – although it may currently be undergoing democratization. Authoritarian development models as exemplified by China and Malaysia are also popular in Eastern and Southern Africa (South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia). They seem to show how long-term state planning and implementation can ease growing social tensions, even if this comes at the expense of political freedoms. In 2014, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was already making reference to there being “a race underway to find the method of community organisation, the state, which is most capable of making a nation and a community internationally competitive.” He then explicitly named the “stars of the international analysts today [like] Singapore, China, India, Russia and Turkey.” By making this positive reference, he was distancing himself from liberal democracy as the model for transformation. Instead, he proclaimed that Hungary was pursuing “an illiberal state, a non-liberal state” that does not specifically oppose the fundamental principles of liberalism, such as freedom, but “does not make this ideology the central element of state organisation, but instead includes a different, special, national approach.”<sup>22</sup>

This unsubstantiated reference to the supposed benefits of an autocratic, strictly governed development model can be countered with three fundamental observations.<sup>23</sup>

The first is that the list of successful modernizing dictatorships is short – and has become even shorter in recent years. Only four of the 26 countries listed in the BTI 2018 as the most developed market economies are autocracies: Malaysia, Qatar, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates. Gulf States such as Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman, however, were no longer included in this group of countries, due to insufficient diversification, sharp drops in economic performance or widespread mismanagement. This means that the list of showcase authoritarian economies is in fact rather short, even if consideration is given to the low and mid-level economies that are catching up (Rwanda and China respectively).

The second is that even the successful authoritarian modernizers experience periods of weaker growth and are confronted with limitations of their existing growth models, the functionality of which is their only source of legitimization. It is becoming more and more obvious in these cases that, ironically, the lack of transparency, accountability and participatory approaches is contributing to the lack of correction of undesirable developments. It is also negatively affecting the sustainability of the implementation and ongoing progress of development strategies. The main challenge facing many modernizing dictatorships is dealing with the consequences of clientelism. In Singapore, which remains one of the world’s front runners in the area of anti-corruption policy, observers comment that the dynastic ruling elite is consolidating around the Lee family and that more and more questions are being asked concerning the inefficiency of the state-owned Temasek Holdings business conglomerate. Meanwhile, Malaysia has been shaken by a high-level corruption scandal

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<sup>21</sup> Xinhua. Commentary: Enlightened Chinese Democracy Puts the West in the Shade. October 17, 2017. ([http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/17/c\\_136685546.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/17/c_136685546.htm)), retrieved on July 18, 2018.

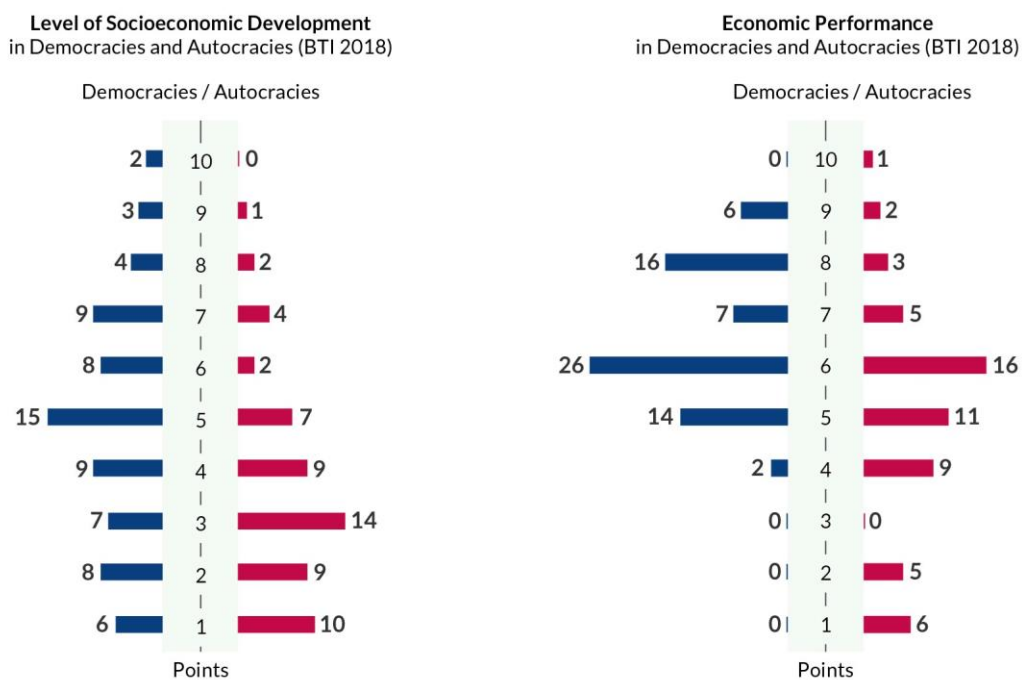
<sup>22</sup> Viktor Orbán. Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp on July 26, 2014 at: Website of the Hungarian Government, (<http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>), retrieved on July 18, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Hauke Hartmann. Perpetual Crisis Mode, in: Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.). Transformation Index BTI 2018: Governance in International Comparison. Gütersloh 2018, pp. 28–30.

during which the then prime minister was accused of transferring around \$700 million from the Malaysia Development Berhad development fund into his private accounts. When the Panama Papers were made public, international media outlets published reports about China that provided insight into the enormous sums of money that leading party officials, including the family of the head of state, Xi Jinping, had hoarded away in foreign bank accounts. China's large-scale anti-corruption campaign, meanwhile, seems to have been just as much about a party purge as it was about prosecuting abuse of office. In Rwanda, the fastest rising star among the modernizing dictatorships, the corruption prosecution against leading military figures revealed that the practices of office abuse in the area of illegal mining had been known about for years but the politically opportune moment for prosecution had only just come about.

The third observation concerns a comparison of the economic and social performance of all of the democracies and autocracies assessed by the BTI. Autocracies compare very unfavorably. Although only 26 of the 71 democracies in the BTI 2018 were given a social inclusion score of six points or higher, which denotes a moderate or good level of socio-economic development, even fewer countries (9) in the smaller group of 58 autocracies were given six or more points. Positive examples here are Belarus, Cuba, Kuwait, Russia and Thailand, in addition to Malaysia, Qatar, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates. Despite these positive outliers, the average score for autocracies is 3.55, which is more than a whole point lower than the social inclusion score for democracies (4.85). The comparison of the systems in the area of economic performance yields similar findings. The macroeconomic figures for 55 of the 71 democracies are categorized as satisfactory to good (six points or higher), whereas only 27 of the 58 autocracies fall into these categories. The average score for autocracies is 5.00, which is 1.55 points below the score for democracies.

#### Level of Socioeconomic Development and Economic Performance in Democracies and Autocracies



Source: Author's own diagram.

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Nevertheless, these observations are no cause for democratic triumphalism. In some of the larger economies in democratic countries, such as Brazil, Hungary, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa and Turkey, economic transformation is stagnating or in rapid regression. Yet in these cases too, the

economic downturn has been accompanied by a decline in the quality of democracy, along with widespread office abuse and glaring mismanagement.

As such, it should not be taken as a given that democratically ruled countries will pursue more socially inclusive policies just because there is usually at least relatively free competition to win over the electorate. In the same way, it should not be assumed that a viable foundation for democratic rule can only exist if there is a certain level of economic and social development. In many cases, a much more complex underlying interplay may exist between these two factors, alongside other country-specific influences. Even with this cursory overview of the performance of various political systems, it can be said with some degree of certainty that in the overwhelming majority of cases, authoritarian governmental structures are not positively effecting the sustainable development of market economies and social inclusion.

By collating the analysis, it can be seen that we are not looking at the global “retreat of democracy” in terms of a sudden increase in the number of countries ruled by autocratic governments. Rather, the quality of democracy is being eroded all over the world, particularly with respect to political participation and the rule of law. Commitment to democratic institutions and approval of democracy are some of the consolidation indicators that have deteriorated most in recent years. The deficits in the functionality and performance of democracies represent one reason for this development. Another reason is the influence of anti-democratic critics with populist and authoritarian origins. Populists who are in power seek to decisively undermine the supervisory bodies that constrain their power. They initially weaken the rule of law and then move on to the participatory elements. Their achievements in government, however, do not compare well with their anti-elitist promises. Many populist leaders devote themselves more and more to the goal of retaining power and developing new clientelistic structures of the kind they previously promised to abolish. The authoritarian model for development, which promises that strict state leadership will bring more efficiency and prosperity, does not tend to perform well either. In most of the autocracies assessed by the BTI, with the exception of a few successful cases, there are high levels of social inequality, economic performance is poor and corruption is rife. Bearing in mind that these alternative concepts have had very little success in practice, it is astonishing how much impact they can have on apparently insecure democratic societies. Deliberations about how to reinforce democracy around the world should therefore include the re-telling of a positive, self-assured democratic narrative.

## IV Conclusions

Under President Trump the USA has at least partly abdicated its role as a leading democratic power and rediscovered isolationist positions such as “America First.” Its value-led foreign policy has been superseded by financial, entrepreneurial considerations and developing nations are being referred to with unmasked contempt as “shithole countries.” In light of these developments, the role of the European Union, which is one of the most influential democratic powers at an international level, is particularly important. As set out in the *Analysis* section, the challenge that the EU faces is threefold. It entails discourse, self-correction and the promotion of transformation.

The discursive challenge is that of proactively presenting the benefits of a democracy based on the rule of law and of regional cooperation of democratic states – as a community of values rather than simply a free trade zone or an isolationist bloc for retaining prosperity – in a way that is both self-assured and self-assuring. There needs to be a fresh retelling of the success story of democracy and of Europe, not as a propaganda counteroffensive against populist and authoritarian positions but within a self-critical yet appreciative reflective process. In this process, democrats and

Europeans can make use of an extensive, tried and tested arsenal of discourse options, particularly those that are held at the ready by institutes for political education and by foundations associated with political parties. Furthermore, civil society initiatives such as “Pulse of Europe” are taking their pro-European and democratic views to the streets, which justifies hope in the ability of democrats to mobilize support. As the political scientist Wolfgang Merkel recently emphasized, however, it will be of elementary importance when tackling this discursive challenge that more liberally minded “cosmopolitans [...] do not [exhibit the] cognitive and moral arrogance of better-educated people and exclude communitarian positions from the discourse [...] by designating them as morally inadmissible.”<sup>24</sup> The fact that globalization has led to more intra-societal inequality cannot simply be dismissed. Nor can the fact that the supranational expansion of political spheres has contributed to a reduction in democratic governability. Furthermore, there is the risk that by marginalizing communitarian positions, the “pluralistically legitimate concern of not wanting to be excluded from the political discourse” will morph into culturally identitarian, xenophobic, right-wing populism.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the reference that right-wing populists make to the “true” will of the people is about as anti-pluralist as the technocratic insistence that there is “no alternative” to the trends in globalization, digitalization and migration.<sup>26</sup> There is a representation gap here with regard to communitarian skeptics, some of whom are of a more social democratic orientation and are proponents of a socially inclusive, cohesive society. This gap must be bridged by conveying – in a convincing way – the message that they too will be heard and considered in the democratic order and that their needs will also be represented at the European level. A cornerstone of this discursive self-assurance should therefore consist of self-criticism concerning European democratic deficits, the erosion of the principle of subsidiarity, and bureaucratic over-regulation. This must also be accompanied by the willingness to make reforms.

The challenge of self-criticism is directly linked to the process of reflection. Democratic states and the European Union need to prove their ability to act and must not leave a gap between rhetoric and governance that is large enough for populists to exploit. They not only need to act in response to the urgent problems (such as the glaring prosperity gaps between nations and the growing inequality within societies) and unresolved issues (such as European migration policy), but also in response to the anti-democratic tendencies in their own ranks. The fact that the European Commission has already initiated punitive proceedings against Poland according to Article 7 of the EU treaty in response to the way rule of law has been undermined is therefore a welcome development. In theory, this could result in the withdrawal of the country’s voting rights in the EU, although in practice, Hungary will block unanimous action. For this reason, the European Commission is already planning a link between the allocation of funds to member states and compliance with constitutional standards from 2021 onwards. This procedure can only be blocked by a qualified majority of 15 member states whose combined population constitutes at least 65 percent of the EU population. Although this could represent a sharp instrument against constitutional violations, it is ultimately only a budgetary trick. Bearing in mind, among other factors, the pending potential expansion, which would see pre-accession countries in Southeast Europe joining its ranks, the EU needs a canon of values that is not subject to a majority and that is capable of imposing sanctions. This set of values should not be restricted to rule of law matters but should also take into consideration restrictions on political participation.

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<sup>24</sup> Wolfgang Merkel. *Kosmopolitismus versus Kommunitarismus: Ein neuer Konflikt in der Demokratie (Cosmopolitanism versus Communitarianism: A New Conflict in Democracy)*, in: Harfst, Philipp et al. (eds.). *Parties, Governments and Elites: The Comparative Study of Democracy*. Wiesbaden 2017, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Jan-Werner Müller. *Was ist Populismus? Ein Essay (What Is Populism? An Essay)*. Berlin 2016, p. 115.



Finally, the challenge of promoting transformation continues to center around bringing the European Union's own political aims and interests in line with the normative aims of the European community of values in its immediate neighborhood and further afield. This is not the place to outline and discuss the main instruments of Europe's foreign policy, security policy and development policy, to elaborate on the European Neighbourhood Policy or to acknowledge the numerous successful democratization projects to which the EU has given ongoing support. Instead, with the above analysis in mind, this paper simply intends to give a warning regarding the potentially contradictory nature of the goals and their prioritization.

The migration partnerships, the agreement to take back or retain refugees, and the discussions surrounding "safe countries of origin" have already made it clear that the EU's political interests concerning migration and its measures to promote stability do not line up with the premise of promoting democracy. By supporting hard autocracies such as Ethiopia and Eritrea, the EU is contradicting the normative goals that it has set itself for taking a value-oriented approach to foreign policy. As such, it is helpful to bring to mind the three key political dimensions investigated by the BTI – stateness, participatory democracy based on the rule of law, and democratic consolidation – in order to develop a sensitivity to the tensions within these goals. Despite significant successes in supporting the crafting of constitutions, implementing judicial reform and monitoring elections, it is the constituent factors of democratization – that is, the establishment and consolidation of democratic institutions – that tend to be problematic when it comes to providing external support for democracy. This is because these institutions relate directly to local power struggles and the political order and are primarily the prerogative of the sovereign. If local political decision makers do not want to actively pursue the establishment and consolidation of democratic institutions of their own accord, then external efforts to support democratization will soon reach their limits. The enabling factors of democratization like stabilization and consolidation, in turn, allow for a broader scope of cooperation – even with authoritarian rulers and, in cases where political and social integration are being promoted, also with non-governmental players. Nevertheless, more and more authoritarian regimes have identified this vulnerability and have safeguarded against it by implementing restrictive measures. In these circumstances, if there are no democratically legitimized partners who are seeking to consolidate the rule of law or widen opportunities for political participation, external players can certainly focus on stabilization and supporting civil society. These stabilizing or civil society measures should not, however, counteract the constituent elements by helping to stabilize or legitimize regimes that are repressive, or simply authoritarian and populist. Furthermore, they should by no means capitalize on the supposed advantages of authoritarianism, as has been observed in the context of refugee policy.

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