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Opposition and Resilience Strategies against Democratic Backsliding



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1.

Executive summary

The aim of this report is to contribute to a “democratic playbook” to counter the “authoritarian playbook” that democracy backsliders commonly follow. We examine insights and lessons from theoretical and empirical sources, our own broader research and experiences on the ground, as well as the four cases we discuss in this report. We then present a conceptual framework and key strategies aimed at enabling defenders of democracy to resist and defeat, but also to *recover* from democratic backsliding.

In countries that experience democratic backsliding, defenders of democracy (which we shall call “democracy defenders”) often become demoralised and more critical and distrustful of each other than the backsliding government itself. Their beliefs about how anti-democratic, dogmatic and unapproachable government supporters are also tend to become entrenched. We explain that these perceptions are often misguided and themselves products of democratic backsliding and its frequent companion, pernicious polarisation. Thus the most important task for defenders of democracy is to develop a common set of strategies – language, goals and actions – that will enable them to transcend their normal differences and cooperate, while redefining the political field and winning over at least some government supporters. We call these “extraordinary strategies”.

We argue that even though successful cases of democratic recovery are rare because of the unique difficulties that democratic backsliding poses to democracy’s defenders, there are many successful “practices” and “episodes” from which democracy defenders should learn. Some takeaways include:

- Backsliding political actors typically become powerful by forming diverse coalitions that they hold together on the basis of shared goals and by feeding a polarising antagonism in relation to their opponents. Democracy defenders also need to form diverse coalitions by transcending their differences based on what we call the extraordinary goal of democracy defence. They do not necessarily need to agree on ideology, values and policies, but do need to coordinate their strategies in two key areas: polarisation and what we call “regime uncertainty” (threat level to democracy).
- With regard to polarisation, what we call “active depolarisation” strategies – actively trying to restore unifying ties and deactivate divisive faultlines – may suffice to reverse democratic backsliding at a relatively early stage. But in relatively advanced stages, “transformative repolarisation” strategies – temporarily repolarising politics on a new axis of fundamental reforms – may be necessary to amass support for large-scale political and socio-economic reforms that may eventually depolarise politics.¹ Transformative polarisation strategies may also be needed to solve the problems that move many people to support backsliding governments in the first place, regardless of how deep and advanced backsliding is. To overcome the regime uncertainty barrier, we propose enhancing awareness among democracy defenders and developing cross-ideological, extraordinary coalitions to restore and rebuild democracy.
- In backsliding countries, voters have often lost trust in established politicians and parties, and long for new faces, names and ideas. Hence, it is crucial that democracy-defending opposition actors bring forward new and competent political leaders and candidates and achieve organisational and programmatic renewal.
- Political parties may challenge backsliding governments successfully when supported by social movements. And social movements and protestors are more likely to achieve sustained results when they coordinate with political parties, produce a clear set of demands and coalesce around a political agenda and strategies, while maintaining their independence from political parties. When opposition political parties are weak or discredited, social movements can be transformed into political movements or seek to recruit new candidates. Either way, it is critical for political parties, social movements and protestors to establish a positive synergy, as well as a principled distance from each other.
- After defeating a backsliding government, reforming governments should prioritise policies that will improve people’s daily lives and what democracy delivers to them in terms of tangible goods and services, as well as social and economic rights and opportunities. The overarching goal should be to retain voter support for the reformer government. It often takes time to reverse the

¹ McCoy and Somer (Forthcoming); Somer, McCoy, and Luke (2021).

undemocratic legacy of a previous government, for example by replacing a loyalist judiciary with a non-partisan and professional one, and these efforts should not overshadow policies to secure concrete improvements in ordinary citizens' quality of life.

- While trying to undo and bring to justice past undemocratic practices, such as partisan state capture and corruption, it is important to make every effort to stick to legal, unifying and democratic methods. Often, extraordinary legal and political measures are necessary to overcome resistance from partisan institutions and to remove the illegitimate policies of previous governments. While doing so, however, it is very important to maintain a firm commitment to meritocracy, fairness and inclusiveness, especially when making new appointments. It is crucial to explain to the public that these measures are temporary and that the social and ideological identities that previous governments polarised will no longer be a source of division. This is important to reunite society and avoid creating new resentments and divisions. Just as importantly, the reforms should aim not only to restore pre-backsliding institutions and practices but to build more inclusive and effective ones by listening to the concerns of the people who supported the backsliding government.
- External and international actors such as the European Union (EU) and the United States should abstain from creating new intra-opposition rifts through excessive interference with domestic politics and generating good cop/bad cop distinctions among social and political actors, labelling them democratic or autocratic. They should also encourage reformer governments to prioritise socioeconomic recovery and avoid backing discriminatory or polarising policies to reverse the policies of past backsliding governments.

2.

What is democratic backsliding and why is it different?

Democratic backsliding (or democratic erosion) is the gradual and piecemeal erosion of the quality of democracy under elected governments. It is widely noted to be the primary challenge to the quality and even survival of democracy as we know it in the twenty-first century.² It has been taking place in such disparate countries as Hungary, India, Indonesia, Mauritius, Mexico, Moldova, Poland, the United States, Turkey, Venezuela and Zambia. It can develop on different pathways but typically leads to the accumulation of powers in a powerful executive.³ The leader or governing party then increasingly treats criticism and opposition as nuisances or irrelevant, and governs opaquely and arbitrarily, free from democratic accountability and most checks and balances. These regimes may still have competitive politics and a vibrant civil society but lose major democratic qualities, such as a free media and an independent judiciary, recognition of political rivals and opposition as legitimate, and free and fair elections. Backsliding can also result in democracy's actual demise and the rise of a full-fledged autocracy, as happened in Venezuela. In this case, the ruling group governs arbitrarily and without any checks and balances, treating real opposition as illegitimate.

Democratic backsliding is an interactive process. Usually, one group – such as the ruling party or person – is primarily responsible for it in both the causal and normative senses. However, democratic backsliding becomes possible and advances not only through the actions of the governing group. It is also enabled and sometimes driven by the shortcomings, actions and reactions of “opponents”. These generate intended and unintended consequences. Opponents include the institutions and social and political groups that oppose the governing group's actions. Not all opponents are necessarily pro-democracy actors. But they involve many democracy defenders – in other words, personal and institutional actors whose primary motivation is to oppose democratic backsliding and to defend democracy – who are the main audience of this report.

In the gradual process of backsliding, opponents retain many opportunities and instruments to stop it and regen-

erate democracy before an autocratic incumbent consolidates power and it becomes “too late”. Why then do opponents seem to miss many of these chances? How can they do better?

Two characteristics of backsliding that contrast with more sudden autocratisation – for example, through military coups – help to explain the slow reaction of democratic oppositions.

- First, it happens over time. “Sudden deaths” of democracies also often have precursory periods in which democratic politics deteriorate and tensions escalate. But there is usually a moment when we can say that democracy is suspended. This happens for example in a military takeover or civilian “self-coup” (*autogolpe*).⁴ Such a moment is very hard to identify in the course of democratic backsliding. “Democracy dies”⁵ slowly, and some democratic spaces of opposition remain fairly open until late in the process.
- Second, it occurs under elected governments that remain popular and maintain some democratic legitimacy until late in the game. Wherever they can, these backsliders avoid using coercive, violent and utterly illegitimate methods. They prefer non-violent and seemingly non-coercive, legal and democratic methods. Such methods include winning competitive elections on a tilted and manipulated playing field, introducing omnibus bills that bypass democratic scrutiny, winning referendums that they turn into plebiscites, legal but partisan/loyalist appointments, and controlling the media and civil society through legal but corrupt buyouts and impositions.

As a result, opposition actors react only after some delay and resort to past strategies used against obvious known threats, such as violent takeovers, totalitarian ideologies, and specific, visible antidemocratic transgressions. They have more difficulty interpreting and reacting to threats that are ensconced in seemingly legal and democratic mechanisms.

² Bermeo (2016); Carothers and Press (2022); Croissant and Tomini (2024); Haggard and Kaufman (2021); Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018); Lührmann and Lindberg (2019); Riedl et al. (2024). See also the debate in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 57:2 (April 2024).

³ Riedl et al. (2024).

⁴ Cameron (1998).

⁵ Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

Some common practices during democratic backsliding at early stages

It is important to increase awareness about common practices likely to appear at an early stage and treat them as early warning signs. This is because they may go undetected as they occur under the facade of legality and with pretexts such as “previous democratic governments used them, too” or “they happen in other (democratic) countries as well”. However, the contexts are different. Individually, backsliding policies may look similar to occasional transgressions in working democracies, but when seen in context, they are very different. All democracies experience norm violations, but the question is whether they are exceptions or on the way to becoming the rule.

Democracies also resort to practices that postpone or moderate normal democratic restrictions in order to allow governance in exceptional circumstances. For example, it may be legitimate to confer on the president certain powers to pardon individuals or to sack high level officials. Rapid introduction of legislation without sufficient deliberation or imposition of a state of emergency may be necessary during disasters or security crises. However, an early sign of democratic backsliding is that such practices become regularised and defended as legitimate by backsliding governments and their supporters. Second, they do not occur in isolation; different examples of such practices may happen simultaneously and reinforce each other. For example, a government may issue a number of questionable pardons, regularly introduce omnibus bills to the legislature and try to “redesign” free media within the same period.

Omnibus bills

Box 1

An omnibus bill is a single legislative package that bundles together multiple, often unrelated measures, and is passed with one vote. If used rarely and under specific circumstances, it's a way for lawmakers to consolidate diverse provisions into one comprehensive law. It can also speed up legislation on relatively uncontroversial and technical laws, or reforms on which there is societal consensus. When regularised and used with ill intent, however, it can become a way of bypassing democratic transparency, debate and scrutiny.⁶ Democracy defenders should interpret it as a big red flag if a government introduces omnibus bills without acknowledging the need to properly justify them to its opponents and the public.

Perniciously polarising rhetoric

Box 2

Pernicious polarisation is a “process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’”.⁷ It is a type of polarisation that is especially harmful to democracy.⁸ Pernicious polarisation benefits backsliders and disarms democracy defenders in many ways. Most importantly, the supporters of backsliders become willing to tolerate their representatives’ transgressions because they feel an existential fear of the other side (“them”) coming to power and do not want to weaken their own side. For similar reasons, democracy defenders tend to adopt behaviours that are defensive, reactionary and focused on consolidating their own camp or push back against the backslider. They neglect to invest in the development of programmes and platforms that may win over and mobilise a winning majority of society by addressing their concrete needs.

Backsliding actors regularly employ the language and logic of “perniciously polarising politics”. This kind of politics have certain features that go beyond other – more manageable, temporary and potentially constructive – types of polarizing politics that social and political actors including democracy defenders often use, for example to win an important referendum or to pass key reforms. These distinguishing features of perniciously polarising politics can be summarized in “three how’s”:⁹

- 1. Black and white division of “us vs them” AND vilification of the other. Backsliders not only create and simplify divisions, but also demonise the other side as villains as opposed to rivals. Rivals can recognise each other as legitimate and shake hands when a competition ends. Unlike rivals who can commit to a set of rules and respect boundaries, villains cannot be trusted to do so. Villains not only need to be defeated but also punished, if not eliminated.*
- 2. Deemphasise or devalue cross-cutting and unifying ties with the other side. Backsliders not only redefine politics in terms of an overarching division, but also trivialise cross-cutting ties that soften the differences between political opponents while doing so. Their rhetoric actively discredits or ignores what rival camps have in common. They exclude people from the other side in their actions and policies.*

3. Describes a permanent and existential divide rather than a temporary and programmatic one. *Backsliders do not talk about a temporary divide – say a crucial referendum or reform programme – but a permanent, existential division. They redefine the whole political field as a permanent battle between us vs them, for example, in terms of a cultural, moral or civilisational divide.*

Mistreatment of journalists and media buyouts

Box 3

Long before democratic backsliding reaches an advanced level and governments openly censure media and imprison journalists, more subtle misdeeds begin to erode media freedoms and an open and minimally respectful and civilised public sphere.¹⁰ Backsliders typically launch a rhetorical war against critical journalists, while politicising and blurring objectivity and neutrality. They charge that journalists who do their job and ask “tough questions” are biased, malicious and under-qualified. They also employ a divide and rule strategy. They vilify, mistreat and impose financial strains on critical media while they praise and materially reward – for example, with licenses, access to information and ad revenues – individual journalists and media outlets who defend them or keep their heads low. They also promote journalists who take a “passive neutral” (the government said, the opposition said) position even when it is plain that a democratic transgression is taking place, such as a policy that clearly breaches the constitution. It is, of course, well-established good journalistic practice for reporters to report all viewpoints, but they should also investigate and report which claims do not survive the test of contemporary and historical evidence. Backsliders also politicise state-owned media outlets while gradually packing them with partisans, loyalists and conformists.

Meanwhile, backsliders enable their allies in the business world to buy out private media with cheap state loans or in return for favours, such as lucrative government tenders. To citizens who do not follow politics on a day-to-day basis, all of these actions look legal, democratic and harmless.

Some common practices during democratic backsliding at later stages

Constitutional changes passed under undemocratic conditions

Box 4

Unless they enjoy a supermajority in the legislature, as Viktor Orbán did in Hungary, it is hard for backsliders to accomplish comprehensive constitutional reforms at an early stage of backsliding because it is still possible for a relatively free opposition and civil society to check them. At advanced stages of backsliding, however, they often seek to push through sweeping constitutional reforms that consolidate their rule. If the opposition and civil society no longer have adequate access to media, or a state of emergency curtails dissent, then they cannot present their arguments against such constitutional changes. The public does not have the ability to express their opinion on individual provisions, some of which may be desirable and others, such as abolishing presidential term limits, violate democratic norms.

Controlling the judiciary

Box 5

Many backsliders begin early on to appoint loyalist jurists to vacant spots. They may then turn to forced retirements, expanding the size of the court, taking control of appointment procedures, or replacing permanent judges with provisional appointments to keep the judges vulnerable to political pressure. The result is to severely weaken the judicial mechanism of accountability and judicial review.

⁶ Hermanto and Mas Aryani (2021); Kimya and Özcan (2025).

⁷ McCoy, Rahman and Somer (2018); McCoy and Somer (2019).

⁸ Somer et al. (2021).

⁹ McCoy and Somer (Forthcoming).

¹⁰ Jones (2025).

3.

What does the empirical record suggest about reversing backsliding?

There is a considerable empirical research effort to measure and identify examples of democratic backsliding worldwide. The scholars involved are divided between optimism and alarm. A key divider is the following question: how rare or common is it that democracies successfully reverse democratic backsliding? The answer often depends on how different studies operationalise and measure democratic backsliding and recovery. Our reading of the record is that there are more than enough reasons to be both alarmed and proactive.¹¹

No bullet-proof success cases

By using “Varieties of Democracy” liberal democracy scores and applying criteria¹² to identify democratic backsliding (as opposed to coups for example), we found twenty-five country cases that we could identify as having suffered what we understand as a process of democratic backsliding at some point since the 1990s.¹³ As of the end of 2025, nine of them were still **ongoing**, such as Mexico and Hungary. Hungary’s April 2026 elections offered a hopeful and instructive case when Péter Magyar’s Tisza Party ended sixteen years of Fidesz rule — but it is too early to judge how durable or successful this democratic recovery will prove.¹⁴ Six of them had what we call **arrested reversals**, in the sense that they had reversed their backsliding but their scores began to decline again after a few years, such as Bolivia since 2021 and Moldova since 2022. Another six had experienced **ongoing but uncertain reversals** because their liberal democracy score began to improve (less than five years ago) or had not yet recovered the level at which it stood at the onset of backsliding. They include Botswana since 2023, Guatemala and Poland since 2023, and the Philippines since 2021. Among the twenty-five backsliding country cases, we could find only one example that fit our criterion of recovery (recovering and sustaining its pre-backsliding quality of liberal democracy for five years or more), namely Sri Lanka.

Be ready for a long haul

Democracy defenders in countries suffering from democratic backsliding should be ready for a long-haul fight to defeat democratic backsliding.

It will be a long struggle first because long-term structural factors seem to be driving it. Democratic backsliding often occurs under populist governments. They are elected by people who expect them to deliver outcomes that make it worthwhile for them to overlook their democratic transgressions and backsliding. While we do not yet sufficiently understand this, mounting evidence suggests that it is correlated with structural problems haunting democracies, such as mounting economic inequalities, uncertain changes in international power balances, demographic transformations, migration flows and related value conflicts, the problems of social media, climate change and rapid technological transformations, such as AI. These are contemporary problems that have some historical parallels but no one-to-one equivalents. They produce widespread social, political and economic dislocations, discontent, *anomie* and anxiety in democratic societies, through both direct and indirect mechanisms.

Second and relatedly, democracies have developed institutional weaknesses that undermine their ability to address “big questions and problems”, such as fixing social and economic inequalities and making sure that technological changes or advances serve society as a whole. For example, political parties may fail to tackle such issues if they become disconnected from society and dependent on corporate financing. Likewise, media in democracies often fail to adequately inform citizens, hold governments accountable and act as an inclusive forum of democratic deliberation on issues that matter, even when they are free from formal government censorship. This results from financial pressures, market competition, journalists’ professional training and culture, and the peculiar dynamics of social media.

¹¹ Bermeo (2022); Bianchi, Cheeseman and Cyr (2025); Somer and McCoy (2026). See also the debate in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 57:2 (April 2024).

¹² These criteria involve for example a continuous decline over at least five years, a minimum total decline of 0.1 during the episode, and a maximum annual decline below 0.084 (to capture »gradual erosion« criteria and to exclude »sudden deaths«). See Somer and Yilmaz (2023) for details.

¹³ See Somer and McCoy (2026) for a complete list of countries and discussion.

¹⁴ Ésik (2026).

Third, we lack strong democratic ideologies and political programmes that directly confront and commit to address these substantive and institutional problems, much less any consensus on possible solutions. It will take time and both intellectual effort and learning from experience to develop new solutions.

In the meantime, undemocratic political actors and programmes fill the gap and become popular, often by making false promises to solve these problems or merely because they promise “change”. They may also destroy existing institutions without putting new and sustainable institutions in their place.

Fourth, democratic backsliding is in many ways a novel form of autocratisation and we have not yet accumulated sufficient practical and theoretical knowledge to be able to fight it. Furthermore, although we now have a substantial and growing body of empirical research on democratic backsliding, we still do not have many successful examples of how to defeat it. As already discussed, while there have certainly been relative or partial successes, they are relatively rare and cannot yet be described as fully recovered and healthy democracies that are likely to prove relatively immune to democratic backsliding in the foreseeable future. Most are also fairly small countries, such as North Macedonia, Moldova and Mauritius. Major democracies such as the United States and India still exhibit no signs of recovery. Meanwhile, though democracies such as South Korea and Brazil seem to have reversed serious democratic backsliding for the time being, they have not yet addressed the underlying problems and eliminated the risk of democratic backsliding resurfacing.

Having said that, research reveals many **episodes, practices and strategies** that have delivered positive results against democratic backsliding. These can be found in both ongoing instances of backsliding with various degrees of democratic regression and autocracy, such as Turkey, Venezuela, Serbia and the United States, as well as in cases of recent reversal and relative success, such as Brazil, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Hungary. These practices and strategies also shed light on ways of fully reversing and overcoming democratic backsliding.

We therefore argue in this report that both scholars and practitioners should seek successful practices and strategies rather than take country examples, which may turn out to be misleading blueprints.

Defeating a backsliding incumbent is not the same as defeating democratic backsliding

Six country cases in the empirical analysis mentioned before¹⁵ are *arrested reversals*, in the sense that they reversed backsliding but their scores began to decline again after a few years: Bolivia, Croatia, Moldova, Nicaragua, Serbia and Slovenia. In all of them, the reversal involved a change of backsliding incumbent but did not produce sustained reversal or recovery.

In Bolivia, for example, social mobilisation and political actions by the opposition forced the resignation of Evo Morales, who had weaponised a politicised judiciary to extend his incumbency for another term. However, this defeat of a backsliding incumbent did not produce a democratic recovery. The revanchist and repressive policies of the new government deepened rather than healed political polarisation. This unleashed political instability, including a new election won by a faction of Morales’ MAS party and a failed coup attempt against it in 2024.

Slovenia presents a less violent and tumultuous example. Prime Minister Janez Janša (Slovenian Democratic Party, SDS) risked democratic backsliding, in particular because of his confrontational style and attacks on media independence. He lost the elections in 2022 to Robert Golob’s Freedom Movement (*Gibanje Svoboda*), a newly formed centrist-liberal party (GS). The new government, however, has not been able to achieve democratic recovery by successfully addressing pernicious polarisation, economic difficulties, strains on the health-care system, media vulnerabilities to political influence and debates about security policy. In the 22 March 2026 elections the GS again came out first with a razor-thin plurality over SDS, but only after suffering major losses compared with its performance four years ago.¹⁶

Similarly, in Czechia, Andrej Babiš was re-elected at the end of 2025. This raised fears that Czech democracy may begin to backslide again, just as it did during Babiš’ previous term in office between 2017 and 2021.

Poland is a paradigmatic case in which democratic backsliding may resume despite the electoral defeat of the democratically backsliding Law and Justice Party-led government in 2023. The new coalition government led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk of the centrist Civic Platform (PO) has not yet been able to deliver on his election promises, for example, to depoliticise the judiciary and depolarise Polish society, as we will discuss further. A pro-PiS president was re-elected in 2025, Karol Nawrocki, who has different views and priorities and has obstructed many of Tusk’s attempted judicial reforms.

¹⁵ Somer and McCoy (2026).

¹⁶ Tkáčová (2026).

Finally, the most important lessons may be drawn from the United States. Analysts typically trace the starting point of US backsliding to President Donald Trump's first election in 2016. However, many precursors of backsliding, challenging American democracy, had already been visible before Trump, for example, under his predecessors George W. Bush and Barack Obama. These precursors and frequent companions of backsliding included pernicious polarisation, declining trust in institutions, deepening and egregious social and economic inequalities and declining quality of democratic deliberation.

Furthermore, Trump's election loss to President Biden in 2020 failed to eliminate the risk of recurring backsliding. The Biden administration was unable to properly address the social, institutional and economic problems underlying public discontent and the demand for major change. Nor were the Democrats able to fix their party's weaknesses in connecting with voters and producing viable new candidates. Donald Trump was re-elected in 2024 and redoubled his efforts towards democratic backsliding by launching a blitzkrieg attack on democratic institutions and norms. Meanwhile, factors such as the war on Iran and ongoing economic weaknesses seem to have seriously weakened Trump's popularity. However, If the Democrats win the mid-term elections in November 2026, and even the next presidential elections in 2028, will they merely replace a backsliding administration without halting democratic decline and mitigating pernicious polarisation, or will they be able to tackle the institutional, informational and socioeconomic weaknesses that generate popular demand for backsliders?

Democratic backsliding is made not only by incumbents but also by oppositions who fail to stop it

Until an advanced stage, democratic spaces may come under pressure but remain relatively amenable to challenging the democracy-backsliding policies of the incumbent. Some opposition actors may not use these spaces adequately, however, because they harbour anti-democratic values and goals themselves. But even well-meaning democracy defenders may engage in behaviours that unintentionally facilitate or deepen democratic backsliding. Violence and the use of force, such as coup attempts, legitimise incumbent governments in their efforts to pursue further backsliding and government repression, for example.

Alternatively, opposition actors may agree on the goal of defending democracy, but fail because of internal divisions and in-fighting. They may not be able to overcome their internal differences, such as ideological rifts or disagreements over how to defend democracy. Thus, they become divided over the means and undermine each other. Furthermore, democracy defenders may reach agreement on common strategies

but fail to convince the public. Policies and discourses based on 'fighting fire with fire' often play into the hands of backsliding actors, for example, unless framed in values and policy goals that unite the majority public. Thus, a growing body of academic research now investigates how opposition actors directly or indirectly contribute to democratic backsliding through their actions or inaction, and what kinds of strategy and approach may produce better results.¹⁷

An urgent and growing need for international and transnational cooperation to defend and strengthen democracies

Despite the lack of successful country cases, democracy defenders should learn from the many examples of more local successes, as well as influential social movements, electoral mobilisations, institutional reforms and depolarisation campaigns in other countries. Democracy defenders can combine and build upon these practices in order to design re-democratisation and recovery strategies that may also work at country and regional levels. The importance of such practices should not be underestimated also because, arguably, democratic backsliding would have been deeper and proceeded more rapidly without them.

In order for such strategies to work, international and transnational defenders of democracy should cooperate more than backsliders do, establishing cross-ideological alliances based on shared democratic ideals, principles and methods of conflict-resolution, not neglecting international law. The victims' and perpetrators' nationality and ethnic-religious identity should not matter when it comes to condemning violations of democracy, law and human rights.

¹⁷ Cleary and Öztürk (2022); Gamboa (2022, 2023); Jiménez (2023); Somer and McCoy (2026); Somer et al. (2021); Yabancı, Akkoyunlu, and Öktem (2025).

4. Fundamental dilemmas

Polarise or depolarise?

Democratic backsliding is highly correlated with polarisation, especially the affective and pernicious types of polarisation under the aegis of which the cross-cutting ties shared by rival blocks lose their social and emotional weight, and negative views, sentiments and distrust of the ‘out-group’ shape political behaviour.¹⁸ Perniciously polarising politics, which often takes populist form, delivers important advantages to democracy backsliders, among other things by undermining dialogue and compromise, which are often necessary to prevent the decay of democracy.

When confronted by a backslider’s polarising rhetoric and actions that disrupt and vilify normal politics, and endanger social cohesion, democracy defenders and democratic oppositions face a variety of tough choices, as Figure 1 shows.

¹⁸ Somer et al. (2021).

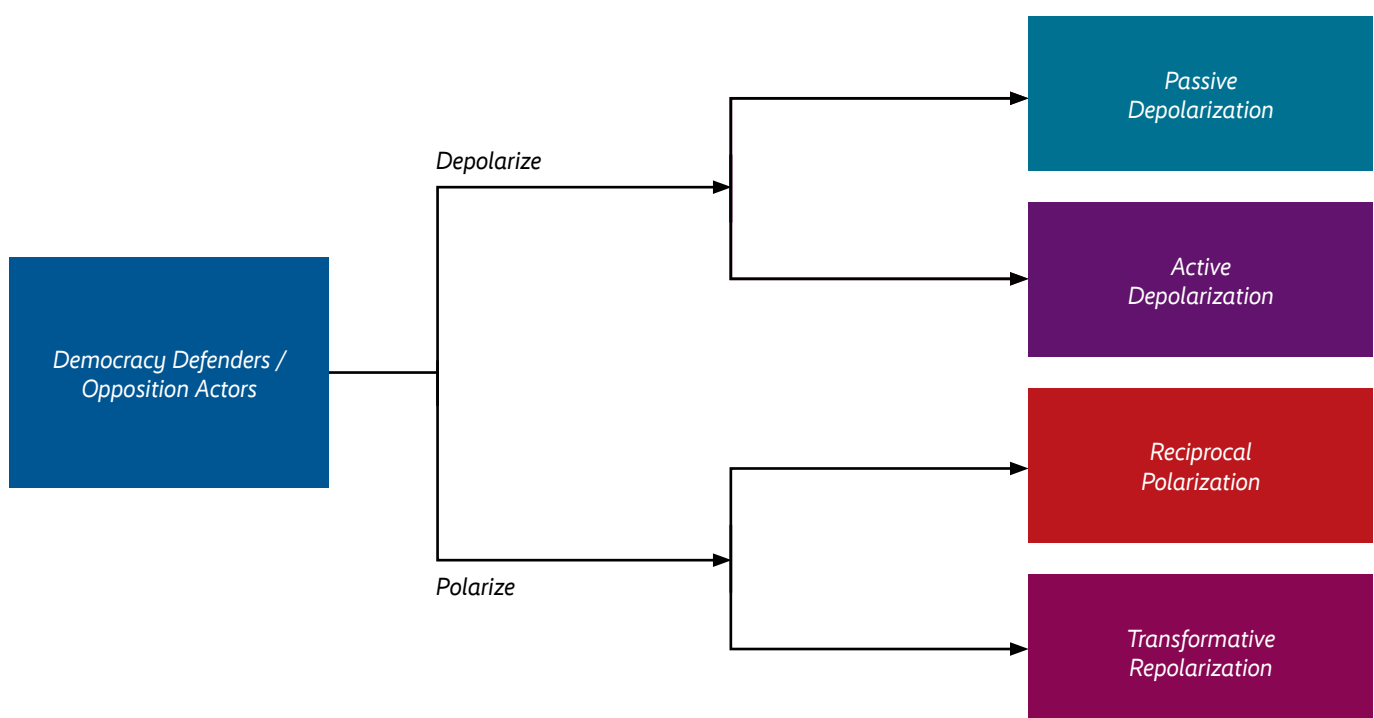
¹⁹ Benedek (2026); Gamage and Dassanayake (2026).

Active versus passive depolarisation – reciprocal versus transformative repolarisation

While each country’s conditions may require different strategies, in cases in which society is already perniciously polarised, active depolarisation at a relatively early stage or transformative repolarisation at a relatively advanced stage may have more potential, as the advantages and disadvantages set out in Table 2 suggest. Active depolarisation actively tries to restore unifying ties and deactivate the divisive faultline. “Transformative repolarisation” temporarily repolarises politics on a new axis of fundamental reforms. This strategy may eventually depolarise politics once people feel the positive impact of the reforms. Elements of transformative repolarization could be found in the consequential elections and political change in Sri Lanka in 2024 and in Hungary in 2026.¹⁹

Choice of polarisation strategies

Figure 1



	Polarise	Depolarise
Reactive (passive) strategies: respond on same axis of polarisation	Reciprocal polarisation Advantages Animates the opposition; opposition is vibrant and fights back; may consolidate the opposition block; may be able to postpone further backsliding Disadvantages Reinforces and deepens pernicious polarisation; may encourage the opposition to turn revanchist, vindictive and authoritarian themselves; may foster even more backsliding; may lead to violent conflict	Passive depolarisation Advantages May slow down polarisation and backsliding; does not attack back; to some extent may be helpful in avoiding blame for polarisation Disadvantages May suspend elite polarisation but only mask underlying divides; may make the incumbent's actions look legitimate; is unlikely to animate strong opposition to defend democracy; may make the opposition look weak, oblivious and negligent; unlikely to prevent either polarisation or backsliding insofar as the backslider's policies are intentional and self-interested
Proactive (active) strategies: change the axis of polarisation	Transformative repolarisation (aims at eventual depolarisation after reforms) Advantages Defines a new axis of polarisation in an attempt to create a new majority on a platform of democratic and inclusive reforms; it can bring opposition actors to power and have a chance to bring these reforms to life; once the inclusive reforms are brought to life, it can reunify and depolarise society; may eliminate the weaknesses of the democratic system that created discontent and motivated major portions of society to support the backslider; may help to rebuild a stronger democracy and strengthen social cohesion Disadvantages All repolarisation strategies carry the risk of spiralling out of control and turning pernicious; transformative repolarisers therefore need to keep emphasising that the division they are creating is temporary, policy-based and not attempting to vilify the other side	Active depolarisation Advantages The opposition does not look weak, passive or oblivious but active and vibrant, with a different and more unifying perspective than the backslider; weakens the divisions that the backslider is promoting by highlighting the importance of ties that crosscut the perniciously polarising divisions; can disarm and work against pernicious polarisation in contexts in which there are no major societal expectations for reform and change; may work especially in local politics Disadvantages Is unlikely to convince people who want major change on a national level and therefore support the backslider; may weaken the axis of polarisation constructed by the backslider but is unlikely to bring together a new majority based on a new political cleavage and identity

Regime uncertainty: are we backsliding or merely disagreeing on policies and ideology?

Backsliders are nevertheless elected governments and typically go to great lengths to insist that they represent the popular will, that their intentions are democratic and that their approach is democratically legitimate. This may confuse democracy defenders. Uncertainty and divisions emerge among democracy defenders about the nature of the threat that they face and have to fight. Do the threats come from individual policies or from the political backsliding that their accumulated effects create? Should they view and frame

their aim as defence of democracy or as policy advocacy? In previous research, we have called this confusion “*regime uncertainty*”: whether there is actually a threat to the democratic regime, and if there is, how imminent that threat is.²⁰ From the viewpoint of democracy defenders, the presence of an imminent threat calls for extraordinary measures to prevent it. But it may become difficult for democracy defenders to agree on the existence of such a threat, especially among actors who care primarily about their own interests rather than democracy, not to mention achieving consensus on what measures to employ. Should they prioritise institutional methods such as voting in the legislature and appealing

²⁰ Somer and McCoy (2026); Somer and Tekinirk (2024); Somer, McCoy, and Tuncel (2022).

to the judiciary, or non-institutional methods such as protest movements? If they focus on institutional means, should they rely on “normal-regular” ones or also extraordinary ones, such as impeachment and government shutdown? If they concentrate on non-institutional strategies, should they employ “normal-regular” ones such as strikes, or “extraordinary” ones, such as general strikes and civil disobedience. Extraordinary measures are destabilising, risky and costly, but they may be necessary to defend democracy if a back-sliding government does not respond to any other actions.

Hence, as Figure 2 illustrates, regime uncertainty splits democracy defenders into three groups: cautioners, alarmists, and strategic alarmists.

→ *Alarmists* perceive an imminent threat to the democratic regime and think that the opposition’s overarching goal should be defence of democracy using extraordinary institutional or non-institutional methods (boxes B and D in Table 2) before it becomes too late. Many alarmists are realists who interpret the government’s actions as forming a pattern of behaviour and revealing a set of in-

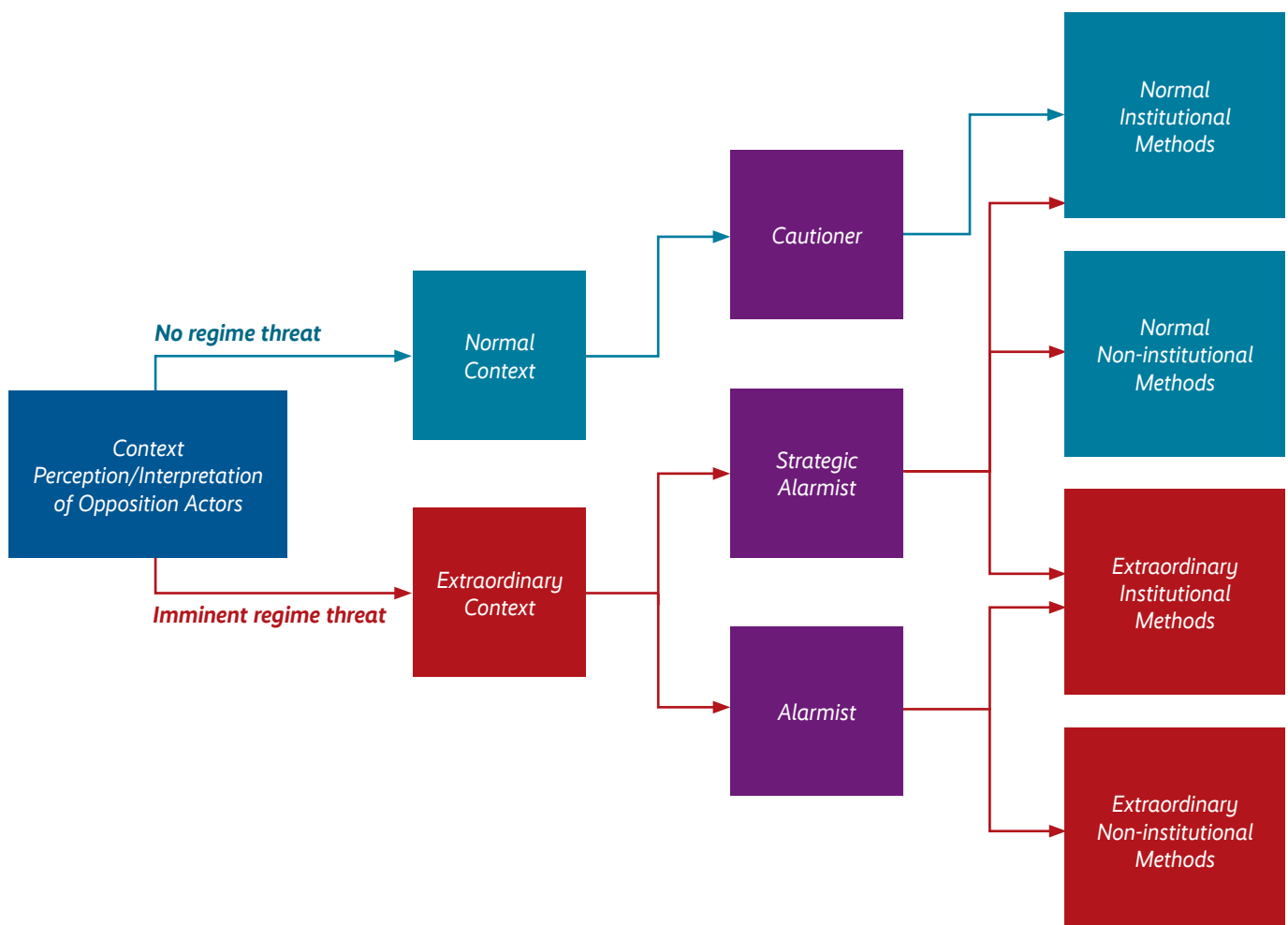
terests preconditioning the government to seek more and more power at the expense of democracy.

→ *Cautioners* warn against drastic measures before sufficient evidence is accumulated that points to serious erosion of checks and balances. They see some democratic violations but do not yet perceive an imminent danger to democracy and therefore feel that only normal institutional opposition behaviour (box A in Table 2) is necessary and legitimate.

→ *Strategic alarmists* see a regime threat to democracy and think that regime defence should be the opposition’s goal; nevertheless, they think that opposition actors should engage as much as possible in normal politics for strategic reasons, such as their assessment of power balances, the difficulty of convincing a diverse and imperfectly informed citizenry and their credibility with the public and international actors. Thus, they consider methods presented in boxes A, B and C in Table 2. They eschew extraordinary non-institutional methods (box D).

Choice of polarisation strategies

Figure 2



Depending on their interpretation of the threat presented by the incumbent regime, opposition actors then choose strategies. Table 2 illustrates strategies that may fall into each box or cell. We expect Cautioners, Alarmists and Strategic Alarmists to choose strategies from among the boxes, as we identified with each group above.

Reactive and proactive strategies to counter pernicious polarisation

Table 2

	Normal context (no imminent threat)	Extraordinary context (imminent threat)
Institutional methods	A	B
	→ motion of censure → issue-specific opposition in legislature → judicial review → electoral alliances	→ whistleblowing → impeachment → walk-outs → party ban → judicial activism → big tent pro-democracy electoral alliances → nonviolent anti-incumbent protests → recall referenda → constitutional hardball → denying government funding/government shutdowns
Non-institutional methods	C	D
	→ sector-specific and temporary strikes → consumer boycott → issue-specific sit-ins → issue-specific protests and civil society activity	→ general strike → election boycotts → civil disobedience → armed resistance → promissory coup

5.

Roadmap for opposition actors

Non-violence principle

As long as they duly invest in “relationship-building, grass-roots organising, strategy, and planning”, non-violent campaigns against backsliding have a greater chance of success because of two strategic advantages.²¹ First, a commitment to nonviolent methods enhances domestic and international legitimacy, fostering broad-based participation that translates into increased pressure. Second, while governments can easily justify using repression against violent campaigns, regime violence against nonviolent movements is more likely to backfire against the regime itself.

Principled distance and avoiding maximalism

Cooperation between non-violent social mobilisation and political leaders and parties is crucial for creating sufficient pressure on backsliders and reverse backsliding. However, two more conditions are crucial for successful re-democratisation. First, there must be principled distance between social mobilisation and political representatives so that social mobilisation can hold opposition politicians accountable as well and prevent them from turning authoritarian and corrupt themselves, especially if they win office. Second, opposition groups should focus on finding common ground rather than putting forward maximalist demands lest they turn against each other and weaken the democratic momentum.

Actions and framing

Whichever strategy they choose, it is crucial for democracy defenders to frame their actions in terms of convincing justifications to the public. Often, democracy defenders fail not necessarily because they pick the wrong strategy but because their framing misrepresents their goals and motivation, fails to convince the public, or lacks a common discourse.

Normal-institutional measures work best at an early stage

Identify the stage of democratic backsliding at which your country finds itself. Normal-Institutional methods work

effectively if they act decisively at an early stage. The more advanced backsliding is, however, the more institutions become politicised and/or the public becomes polarised to such an extent that democracy-defending actions are perceived as politically motivated and divisive. Furthermore, incumbents may amass sufficient power to ignore them.

Overcome regime uncertainty

Overcoming regime uncertainty is a must for opposition actors. There is no single correct reading of the political context, but it is crucial that political and civil society actors agree on a common interpretation and frame to avoid undermining each other.

Do not interpret early signs as isolated events

Backsliding is a continuum of interactive changes and results from their cumulative outcomes. Each transgression facilitates another.

Identify the democratic erosion pathway and form your strategies

Democratic backsliding commonly advances through four main pathways.²²

1. Legislative capture: an executive uses a strong, disciplined party coalition to control and weaponise the legislature to pass laws and constitutional reforms that erode checks and balances. It uses its majority to ignore the opposition and paralyse the legislature’s normal deliberative functions. On this pathway, electoral mobilisation and competition, as well as local governments and, in relevant cases, EU elections remain important democratic spaces for opposition.
2. Plebiscitary override: this pathway is used primarily when an incumbent lacks a legislative majority but has broad popular support, allowing them to use referenda or plebiscites to bypass or override existing legislative and judicial institutions. On this pathway, early institutional resistance

²¹ Chenoweth (2020).

²² Riedl et al. (2024).

and mass protests can be successful, especially when focused on broadly popular causes or when linked to an electoral mobilisation strategy. Organised civil society can contest issue referenda or executive-led recall referenda. Referenda can even be used, ironically, as a tool to restore democratic institutionality, as seen in Ecuador under President Lenin Moreno.

3. Executive power grab: this pathway involves the executive attempting to bypass other democratic institutions and the voters, often because the president lacks legislative control and sufficient electoral support to concentrate power legally through constitutional change. It is the most extra-institutional and visibly autocratic path, initially. The possibility of resistance depends heavily on the independence of institutions of accountability, such as electoral authorities and judiciaries, and their appointment processes. Opposition coordination and credibility are key, as are the continued impartiality of the military, and external and popular pressures.
4. Elite collusion: this pathway involves political elites from different factions agreeing to power-sharing arrangements, often insulating them from popular demands and undermining institutional oversight over corruption. While it erodes democracy, it does not necessarily concentrate power in the executive alone. Independent civil society and social protest are critical forms of resistance.

6. Case studies

Poland

Poland represents a relatively successful case of defending democracy against the serious backsliding that occurred under the governments led by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) between 2015 and 2023. However, it is too early to say definitely whether this represents an instance of successful recovery from backsliding, in which the background drivers of backsliding have been addressed.

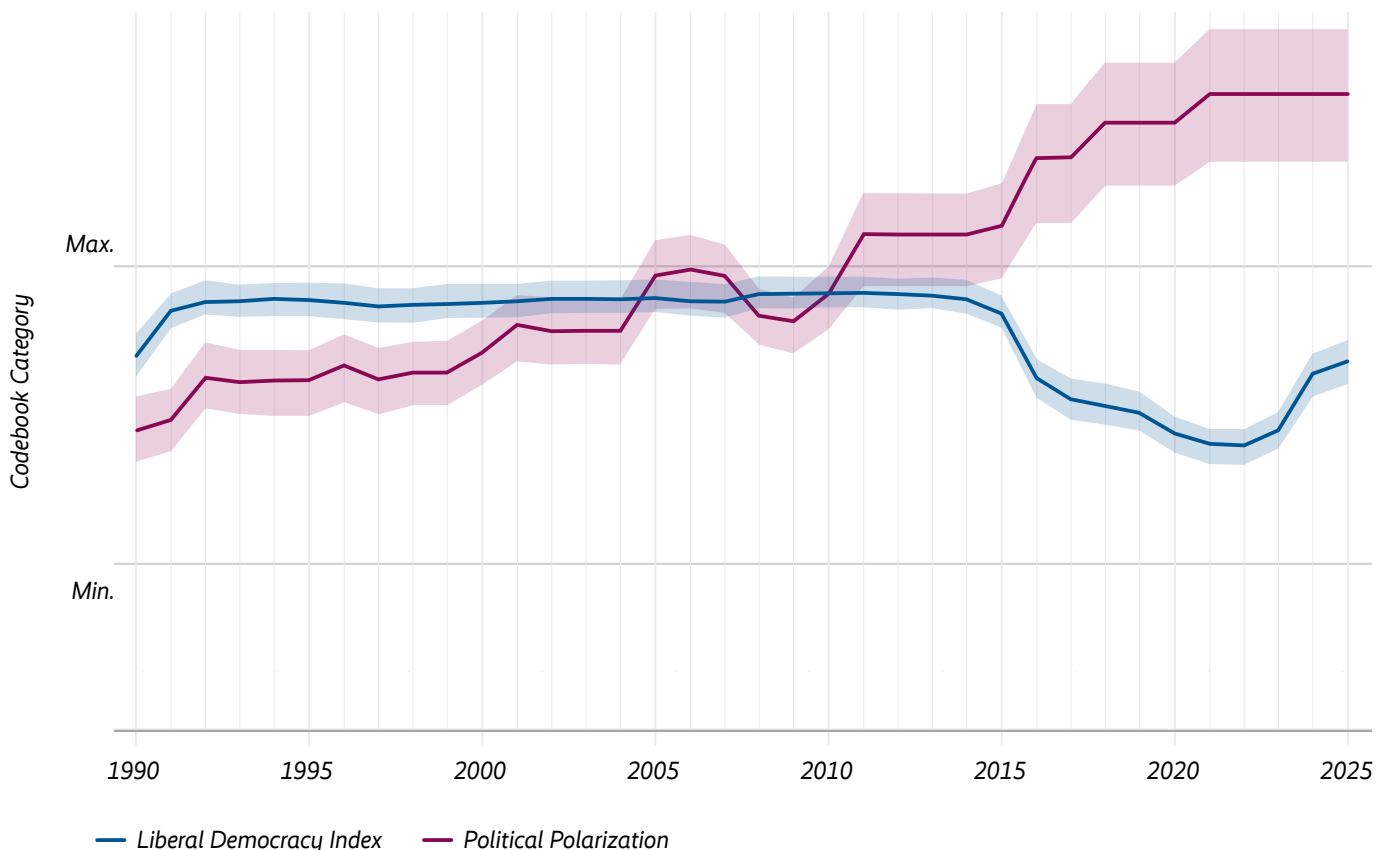
According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) approach, Poland's liberal democracy score fell from 0.78 to 0.42 during the period of backsliding (under PiS). This happened

mainly through partisan state capture and policies that concentrated power in PiS, weakening democratic checks and balances and the rule of law. Throughout the period, however, social and political opposition challenged and managed to slow these policies down. Poland's democratic backsliding followed a pattern of legislative capture, in which the conservative-nationalist and Eurosceptic PiS used ordinary legislation, partisan appointments and political control over the judiciary and media to reshape the democratic landscape.²³ In addition, the dominant PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and President Andrzej Duda were key figures in backsliding, advancing a national-conservative, majoritarian reform agenda.

²³ Tworzecki (2024).

Poland – Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) approach

Figure 3



Source: Highcharts.com, V-Dem data version 16.

Perniciously polarising politics were instrumental in the implementation of these policies.²⁴

in 2023, a peaceful transfer of power occurred to a coalition of six pro-EU, right-wing and left-wing parties led by Civic Platform (KO) and its leader Donald Tusk, former president of the European Council. Democratic recovery was among the coalition's main promises. The government has indeed restored a great deal of democratic quality.

However, Poland's democracy has not yet recovered to its pre-PiS level, with a liberal democracy score as of 2025 of 0.65. There are several main reasons for this.

First, the Tusk government has struggled with the “post-illiberal trilemma” that challenges all governments aiming to reverse an illiberal legacy in the teeth of illiberal institutional resistance. In short, how to achieve quick and effective results without taking illiberal and legally dubious steps?²⁵ This also concerns a trade-off between the short-term but expedient goal of restoring democracy, on one hand, and long-term and essential goals such as “cultivating a governance culture of legality, transparency, and institutional restraint” on the other.²⁶ In the face of serious obstacles posed by continued PiS institutional influence through its previous appointments to the high courts, state media and the presidency, the government has oscillated between self-constraint and iron-fisted measures on the edge of illegality.²⁷ The latter raised the spectre of reverse backsliding and partisanship, while the former have hindered rapid and effective reforms. As things stand, the coalition government has not yet succeeded in bringing to life many of its policy promises, such as liberalising Poland's strict anti-abortion laws and “substantial institutional [as opposed to rhetorical] transformation”.

Second, the new government has applied a strategy of transformative repolarisation to keep its coalition intact and garner public support for removing past corruption and partisanship. The promise of this strategy is eventual depolarisation when people whose existential fears are relieved by inclusive reforms no longer feel the need to close ranks in large “us” versus “them” blocs, instead reuniting around normal, multiple and cross-cutting political issues and allegiances. However, this happens only when successful and substantive institutional and socioeconomic reforms make major improvements in people's lives and sense of well-being. Such major transformations have not yet happened in the lives of ordinary Poles. But pernicious polarisation is a major factor hindering achievement of the government's goals, such as normalisation, re-democratisation and institution-building. Hence, pernicious polarisation continues to be a

barrier to liberal re-democratisation in a Poland divided by politics, as well as spatial and socioeconomic differences.²⁸

Third, the government has found it difficult to tackle the background problems that provide fertile ground for democratic backsliding in Poland. These deficits involve socioeconomic inequalities and distrust of institutional politics among major segments of the population, political elite polarisation, and social polarisation and “culture wars” between urban-secular and rural-religious values. A particularly intractable question concerns what kind of nationalism/patriotism and notion of sovereignty can unite and strengthen rather than divide and undermine Polish democracy, while helping the country to make peace with its past.

In 2025 Karol Nawrocki, who was handpicked and backed by PiS, won the presidency through popular elections. This has weakened the coalition government in Poland's parliamentary system, in which a popularly elected president has important veto powers. Compared with Prime Minister Tusk who looks to deeper EU integration for Poland's security and development, Nawrocki leans toward less EU integration, more sovereign policies and a closer US alliance. The current coalition government has not yet produced a narrative that may accommodate the emotions underlying the continued popular support for PiS and President Nawrocki, while highlighting the shared ties unifying pro-government and pro-opposition Poles in line with the active depolarisation strategy.

When PiS came to power, Poland was already a polarised country. The divisions involved:

- elite distrust between major politicians such as Donald Tusk and Jarosław Kaczyński (Kaczyński brothers until 2010);
- neoliberal versus social market economic policies (reinforced by the 2008 financial crisis);
- protective-sovereign versus liberal-cosmopolitan and EU-cooperative responses to the 2015 refugee crisis;
- religious-conservative nationalism versus liberal post-nationalism;
- urban versus rural interests and values;
- secular versus religious and post-material versus material values;
- relaxed versus strict abortion policies.

²⁴ Tworzecki (2019).

²⁵ Bill and Stanley (2025).

²⁶ Jakubek-Lalik (2025), p. 49.

²⁷ Bill and Stanley (2025). See also Karolewski and Sata (2025).

²⁸ Cześniak, Szczupska, and Sychowiec (2026); Tworzecki (2019).

In addition to gaining popularity by delivering on its electoral promises, PiS accumulated power by exploiting these divisions by constructing a political identity that combined social market economics with cultural-religious conservatism and nationalism. PiS also made polarisation more pernicious by politicising an old division, introducing a new one, and framing them all in a pro-PiS/anti-PiS discourse. The first is the controversial memory and painful transformations of the post-communist transition. Rather than encouraging an honest and inclusive debate, the party weaponised this period to blame its political rivals and liberal EU values for everything that caused pain or went wrong during this period.²⁹

Meanwhile, the party's backsliding policies generated a democracy/autocracy division between alarmist and strategic alarmist democracy defenders, on one hand, and PiS supporters and those who called for caution on the other. Finally, by bundling all of these issues together, PiS created an "old regime/new regime" division between pre-PiS and PiS Poland, similar to other backsliding countries.³⁰ It tried to concentrate power in its own hands by discrediting its opponents as supporters of a corrupt old regime. Democracy defenders in political parties, as well as civil society tried, with partial success, to challenge these backsliding policies, based on a mixture of "alarmist, strategic alarmist and cautioner strategies" and "normal and extraordinary methods" as we defined before.

In containing democratic erosion, democracy defenders were also helped by consensus-demanding institutions that decentralised power, such as a bicameral legislature and powerful local governments.³¹ Hence, while PiS successfully captured the Constitutional Tribunal, the National Council of the Judiciary, and the management and parts of the prosecutorial apparatus, other institutions resisted. Segments of the Supreme Court, the Ombudsman and the majority of local governments (for example, Warsaw and Gdańsk) acted as alarmist defenders, grounded in constitutional and European rule-of-law norms. These actors preserved elements of horizontal accountability, a key domain in resistance pathways. Last but not least, Poland's EU membership and integration were surely key factors in hindering deeper backsliding.

Relative success also seems to have come from the emergence of a division of labour between political actors and contentious political elements (civil society and social movements) over time.

Another major advantage from which Poland has benefitted is its legacy of social movement resistance. After all, Poland eroded communism and moved to democracy in the 1980s under the leadership of a workers' movement that came to embrace Polish society across the board, namely *Solidarność*. Polish civil society thus maintained issue-based normal protests throughout the backsliding period while switching to extraordinary pro-democracy mobilisations before elections. Pro-choice women and men who mobilised in the so-called Black Protests (2016) and the Women's Strike (2020) delayed illiberal changes but could not ultimately thwart the October 2020 Constitutional Court ruling against abortion. Judicial associations such as *Iustitia* and *Themis* organised public marches and international advocacy, exemplifying professionalised civic resistance under backsliding. While conservative groups such as *Ordo Iuris* aligned with PiS's illiberal reforms, feminist movements, rights-based NGOs and judicial associations (*Iustitia*, *Themis*) raised the alarm, mobilising against authoritarian-leaning policies and defending judicial independence. The public broadcaster TVP was transformed into a partisan instrument but independent outlets such as TVN24, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Onet* and *OKO.press* served as alarmist watchdogs, preserving informational pluralism through investigative reporting and fact-checking, thereby defending the informational arena and exposing corruption. Their efforts contributed a great deal to keeping elections competitive.³² The Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD) organised street protests defending the Constitutional Tribunal and denouncing the politicisation of state media and civil service.³³

The social and political opposition joined forces while maintaining a principled distance. Activists often refrained from asking voters to vote for specific parties. From the very beginning, opposition politicians joined the protests of the Committee for the Defence of Democracy while harnessing their slogans to shape their own rhetoric.³⁴ Activists organised around the social media hashtag *#SilniRazem* (#Strong-Together) and pushed the opposition parties to cooperate to defend democracy, while Civic Platform appropriated the group's slogan.³⁵ Pro-choice women framed women's freedoms in the defence of democracy. All these things were instrumental in the opposition's election victory in 2023.³⁶

In turn, political parties were dynamic, changing leaders, merging organisations, forming cross-ideological coalitions and renewing their policies with a view to defeating the incumbent. In the early years, they shifted between alarmism and strategic alarmism. They employed normal and

²⁹ Bernhard (2021).

³⁰ Laebens and Ślarzyński (2025), p. 13. Also see Somer and McCoy (2019).

³¹ Ilonszki and Dudzińska (2021); Jakubek-Lalik (2025); Tworzecki (2024).

³² Laebens and Ślarzyński (2025), p. 3.

³³ Bernhard (2021).

³⁴ Bill and Stanley (2025).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Markowski (2024).

extraordinary institutional coordination, most notably the 2019 Senate Pact, which reduced vote fragmentation and weakened PiS's structural dominance. These patterns are consistent with strategic adaptation under legislative capture. At moments of heightened crisis, parties also adopted extraordinary-institutional tactics, such as the 2016 parliamentary sit-in, which served as a public alarm signal and helped to trigger wider societal mobilisation. They also used alarmist rhetoric and filibustering, based on a democracy/autocracy logic.³⁷

Over time, however, they focused on electoral strategies, leaving alarmist strategies to social movements. They focused on building electoral coalitions and minimised bickering among themselves between the 2019 and 2023 elections.³⁸ In addition, they engaged in strategic policy adaptation and took advantage of seasoned politicians such as Tusk to convince voters. The Civic Platform accommodated PiS in socioeconomic policies where the incumbent had an advantage and moved away from PiS on polarised cultural issues that were important for its base, such as abortion.³⁹

Transformative polarising politics based on the promise of rebuilding liberal democracy, and the particularly high level of polarisation in the run-up to the 2023 elections⁴⁰ might have helped to increase voter turnout and the opposition coalition to win a parliamentary majority. However, polarisation still remains at alarming levels after two years, and even increased following Nawrocki's election. This may culminate in a backsliding government returning to power in 2027. Hence, reducing polarisation and addressing the other background drivers of backsliding through successful transformative policies are the main challenges of Polish defenders of democracy.

Turkey

Turkey shows how deeply an established electoral democracy can backslide despite the presence of early institutional resistance and vibrant social and political opposition, unless the conditions we identified earlier are met. Opposition parties and social protests must build synergy and cooperation with each other; opposition parties need to see the writing on the wall and renew their programmes, organisations and leadership; and democracy defenders have to coalesce around common strategies against pernicious polarisation and regime uncertainty.

If opposition actors do not move fast enough, strong resistance and partial opposition may be able to slow down backsliding, but can also have unintended consequences. The vibrancy of opposition political parties can feed regime uncertainty by enhancing the public impression that democracy is still functioning normally, even though democratic backsliding renders elections less and less winnable for the opposition. And unless it manages to bring about a change in government, strong resistance can trigger more government crackdowns, leading to more entrenched authoritarianism. Both these things happened in Turkey.

Since 2002, Turkey has been transformed from an electoral democracy that was gradually moving towards liberal democracy in the early 2000s (as Figure 3 shows) to an electoral autocracy in the grip of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his supporters. Democratic backsliding occurred through the incumbent's control of the legislature and incremental capture of the state, together with many crises and political "trench warfare" with the opposition.⁴¹ Erdoğan-led governments weaponised their majority in the parliament to rubber stamp their democracy-eroding policies, discredit opposition parties as ineffectual and make elections increasingly unfair for their rivals. Perniciously polarising politics was the other main instrument that Erdoğan governments skilfully employed to win elections and to govern without accountability.⁴² They came to power on a populist and anti-establishment platform that exploited Turkey's cultural divisions but also promised democratic reforms. After coming to power, they increasingly utilised their incumbent advantages to turn their supporters into a perniciously polarised and blindly loyal base. Their constituency backed the government increasingly, and primarily, based on negative emotions toward rival parties and their voters, such as fear, anger and dislike, rather than the government's own policy performance.⁴³

Turkish opposition actors initially responded to democratic backsliding based on "known perceived threats", such as anti-secular Islamism. It took some time for them to realise that Erdoğan's backsliding policies represented a new kind of authoritarianism and posed different challenges.⁴⁴ Over time, they experimented with a wide variety of strategies.⁴⁵ These strategies helped to curtail backsliding and sustain the anti-incumbent public mobilisation, as opposition parties maintained roughly half of the voters' support. However, despite partial electoral breakthroughs such as the June 2015 national elections, opposition efforts fell short of changing the government, on an increasingly unfair playing

³⁷ Ilonszki and Dudzińska (2021); Muliavka, Kwiatkowska, and Plisiecki (2025).

³⁸ Bill and Stanley (2025).

³⁹ Laebens and Ślarzyński (2025).

⁴⁰ Markowski (2024).

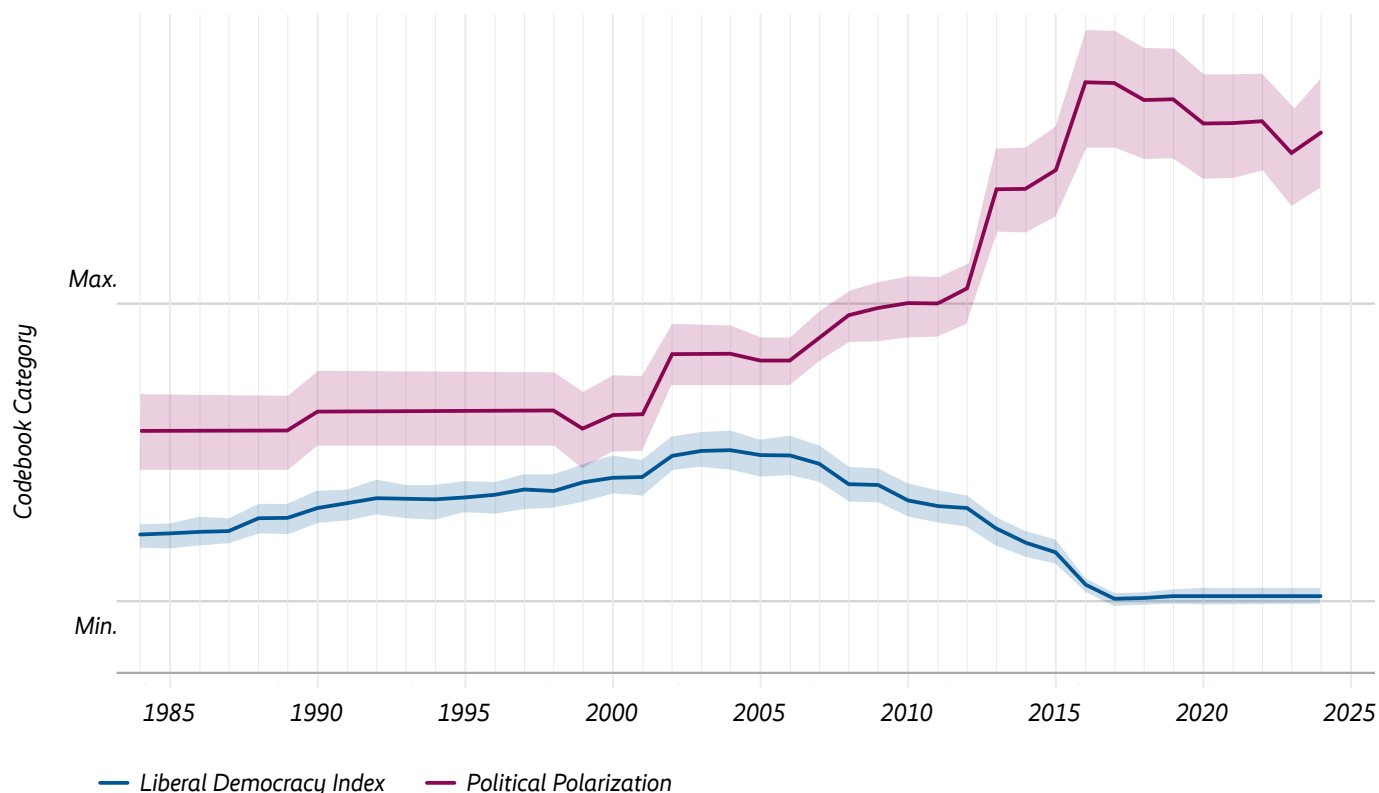
⁴¹ Esen and Gumuscu (2016); Öktem and Akkoyunlu (2017); Somer (2017, 2024).

⁴² Somer (2019).

⁴³ Aytaç, Irmak, and Söylemez-Karakoç (2025); Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerçi (2025).

⁴⁴ Somer (2016, 2020).

⁴⁵ Arslanalp and Erkmen (2025); Somer (2024); Somer and Tekinirak (2024); Yabancı et al. (2025).



Source: Highcharts.com, V-Dem data version 16.

field.⁴⁶ Major opposition electoral wins occurred only in the 2019 and 2024 local elections, with a major debacle in the 2023 national elections in-between. With the incumbent still in power and controlling the state apparatus, opposition successes in local elections brought about more backsliding and deeper authoritarianism, as the government ramped up repression in response.

Several lessons emerge from opposition experiences during these two decades of backsliding.

First, “strong” institutions can help by resisting state capture and upholding the rule of law at an early stage, but they cannot do so for long without the help of political and social opposition. In Turkey, high-level institutions such as the pro-secular President, Constitutional Court and military used their veto powers in the 2000s, while low-level bureaucrats have instrumentalised bureaucratic red tape throughout the backsliding period to discourage policies such as unqualified partisan appointments.⁴⁷ However, the authoritarian baggage of state institutions due to their past encroachments on democratic politics limited their

credibility and public support, while allowing Erdoğan to discredit legitimate checks and balances as politically motivated. The incumbent was able incrementally to capture and neutralise the institutions.

Second, the greatest challenge facing Turkish opposition parties has been to shift the axis of political competition and polarisation from various manifestations of divisive culture wars, such as secular/religious and urban/rural divisions to another axis, such as democratisation and economic justice, where they can win a strong majority. They could do so, for example, by transforming their discourse of “secularism for democracy and development” into a discourse of “democracy and development for secularism”.⁴⁸ However, in the early years it was not easy for opposition parties to focus on democracy and economic issues as the AKP managed the economy relatively well. Furthermore, regime uncertainty was high because the AKP captured the pro-EU/pro-democratisation position in Turkish politics by stigmatising as anti-EU/anti-democracy even those critics who supported EU integration but opposed specific policies during the accession process.

⁴⁶ Aydın-Düzgüt, Kutlay, and Keyman (2023); Esen and Gumuscu (2016).

⁴⁷ Sağlam (2025); Somer (2024).

⁴⁸ Somer (2007).

Shifting to new political axes required parties to transform themselves through ideological and organisational reforms. Turkish political parties were not prepared to undertake such reforms because they are extensive and well-established organisations that are deeply anchored in clientelistic relationships held together by strong leaders and powerful local patrons.⁴⁹

As backsliding became increasingly entrenched, opposition parties began to seek ways to coalesce around an emerging “democracy/autocracy cleavage”.⁵⁰ They formed electoral alliances on pro-democracy platforms.⁵¹ Learning from its failures, the main opposition party CHP moved gradually from a rigid stance “characterised by identity-based polarisation” to a more flexible stance “involving strategic alliances and inclusive discourse” in an effort to win over new constituencies,⁵² while trying to develop “extraordinary strategies” to overcome autocratisation.⁵³

Third, the Turkish experience showed that opposition coordination and alliances to reverse backsliding work better if they are built upon bottom-up voter alliances rather than through top-down party elite alliances. The pinnacle of Turkish opposition parties’ efforts to unite against backsliding was in the lead up to the 2023 elections. Opposition parties supported a joint presidential candidate, promised a return to democracy and joined in two major electoral alliances. However, they suffered a devastating loss in both the presidential and parliamentary votes.⁵⁴ A major reason why the main “Table of Six” alliance formed by the CHP and five right-wing parties could not convince many voters was that it was top-down and elite-driven. It was disconnected from social opposition on the ground and voters perceived it as a self-promoting project. By comparison, the opposition registered its greatest electoral victories in the 2019 and 2024 local elections when the CHP did not establish a formal alliance with other parties and instead worked on forming informal alliances with voters of other parties on the ground and sought other parties’ endorsement of specific candidates in each district. This model was dubbed the “Istanbul alliance” (2019) or the “Turkey alliance” (2024).⁵⁵

Fourth, active depolarisation strategies pursued by capable political leaders work better than passive ones. CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu pursued a passive depolarisation strategy by making major efforts to moderate the political divisions that

had been politicised and exploited by the AKP. In 2014, he reached agreement with the far-right nationalist party MHP to nominate a respected religious figure for the presidency, namely the former chair of the Islamic Conference İhsanoğlu. However, they suffered an embarrassing defeat. Before the 2023 elections, Kılıçdaroğlu reached out to make peace with social groups who were against his party because of its past authoritarian nation-building and secularisation policies.⁵⁶ While appreciated as a well-intentioned effort, this so-called *helalleşme* (reconciliation and moral reckoning) policy seems to have had little, if any impact on voter choices. By comparison, CHP won a major victory in the Istanbul elections when its charismatic mayoral candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu concentrated on *reactivating* shared ties with AKP voters based on his “radical love” campaign, instead of trying to *deactivate* politicised divisions.⁵⁷

Fifth, opposition parties need to make sure that their new strategies become credible in the eyes of their voters through new leadership, spokespersons and policy proposals. This brought the CHP success in the March 2024 local elections and aroused the ire of the government. The very morning after the 2023 election defeat, CHP’s Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu posted a video arguing that the party should change its ways because success would not be found by doing the same things. Five months later, the party convention elected his ally Özgür Özel as the new CHP chairman in a competitive race. This prepared the ground for the party’s electoral success with many new mayoral candidates another five months later. Even after the crack-down on the party that began in late 2024 and led to the arrest of İmamoğlu and nearly twenty other popular CHP mayors,⁵⁸ the new party leadership continued its reform efforts, among other things by overhauling the party programme in November 2025.

Sixth, many governments in retreat from democracy, including Turkey and Serbia,⁵⁹ skilfully cloak themselves from the outside world as guarantors of domestic order and regional stability. This posture fortifies their position. It enables them to convert their country’s geopolitical weight into external bargains and backing, while eroding the standing of democracy defenders. Hence, one challenge for defenders of democracy in such countries is to illustrate how they can better govern their country’s external relations.⁶⁰ This requires the development of alternative foreign policy visions and international

⁴⁹ Baykan and Somer (2022).

⁵⁰ Esen, Yardımcı-Geyikçi, and Yavuzylmaz (2026); Selçuk and Hekimci (2020).

⁵¹ Esen et al. (2026); Musil (2024).

⁵² Korkmaz (2024).

⁵³ Somer and Tekinrk (2024).

⁵⁴ Esen, Gumuscu, and Yavuzylmaz (2023).

⁵⁵ Cinar, Kursat (2024); Esen and Gumuscu (2019, 2025).

⁵⁶ Somer (2022).

⁵⁷ Demiralp and Balta (2021); Wuthrich and Ingleby (2020).

⁵⁸ For CHP’s own accounts of the events, see Özel (2026); Poyrazlar (2026).

⁵⁹ Bieber and Günay (2026).

⁶⁰ Korkmaz, Şar and Gasco (2026), Somer (2026).

and transnational linkages, as the CHP has been trying to do in Turkey.⁶¹

Finally, while both social and political opposition to backsliding have been vibrant in Turkey throughout the period, the two have not worked together, even though this may be a crucial success requirement for democratic reversal.⁶² CHP began to try to change this, with some novel and partially successful practices, only after the recent crackdown on the party.⁶³

As this report was being finalized, a court lacking any semblance of independence nullified the CHP's 2023 convention, removed Özal as chairman, and reinstated Kılıçdaroğlu — a textbook case of autocratic lawfare.⁶⁴ When Özal and the party membership denounced the ruling as politically motivated and refused to comply, riot police stormed party headquarters and forcibly ejected them. Özal took to the streets with his supporters, demanding new primaries and vowing to fight on.⁶⁵ Turkish democracy is as embattled as ever, and

the opposition as repressed. Yet autocratic overreach has a way of backfiring: the crackdown has pushed opposition parties closer together and forced the Özal-led CHP into deeper alignment with broader social movements, potentially remedying one of the opposition's most persistent weaknesses. Whether and when Turkish democracy can recover from this breakdown remains to be seen.

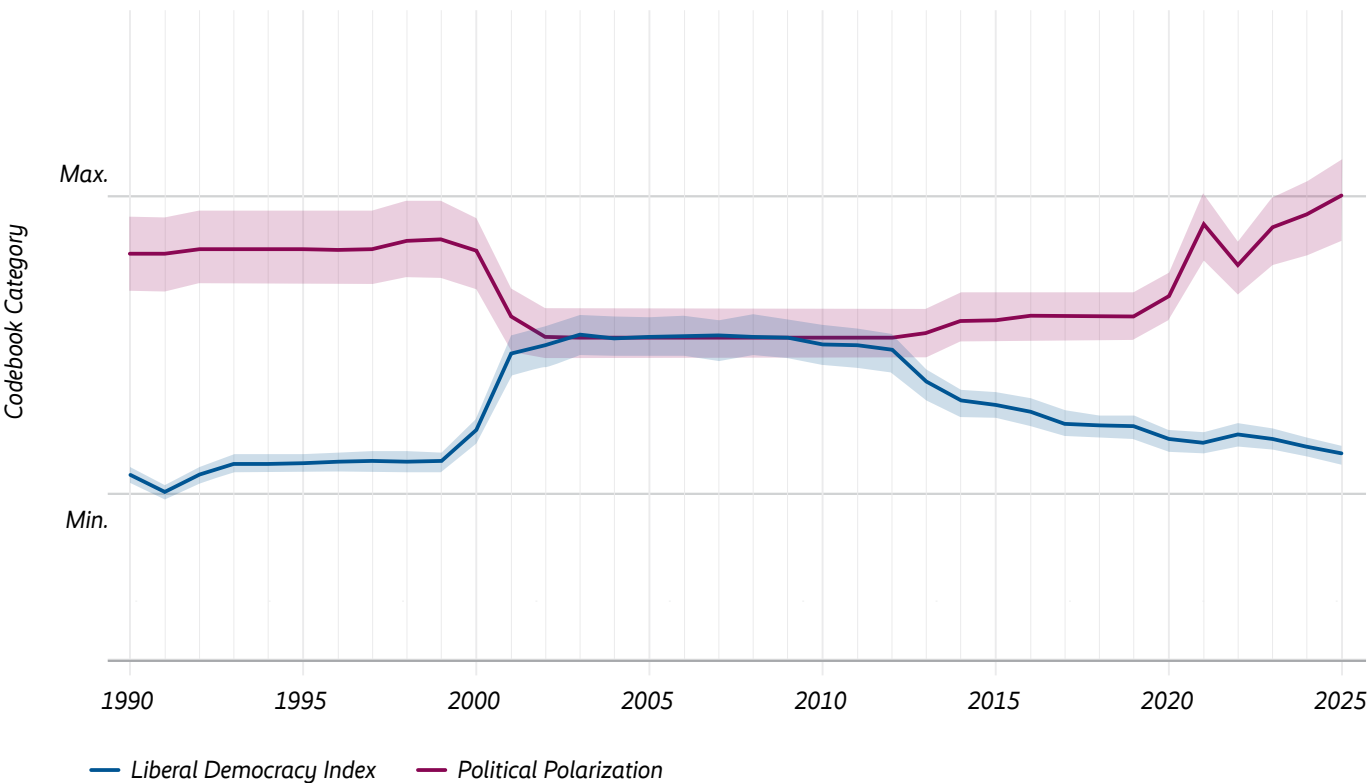
Serbia

In Serbia, the remarkable vitality of bottom-up mobilisations against democratic backsliding, corruption and organised crime has not translated into synergy with political parties. In addition to their own ideological fragmentation and the government's denial of their legitimate voice within institutions and the media, these parties seem to have weakened themselves through their own strategic mistakes. Since 2012, Serbian democracy has backslid along the path of "legislative capture" by

⁶¹ Coşkun (2026); İmamoğlu (2026a, 2026b); Özal (2026); Somer (2026); Tan (2026).
⁶² Pinckney (2020); Pollozhani and Bieber (2025).
⁶³ Somer (2025).
⁶⁴ Çağlar (2025); Scheppele (2018); Thumann (2026).
⁶⁵ Özal (2026).

Serbia – Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) approach

Figure 5



Source: Highcharts.com, V-Dem data version 16.

SNS-led coalition governments.⁶⁶ On this path, resistance within the legislature and electoral mobilisation are the most important sites of resistance.⁶⁷ However, since 2017, centrist and left-wing opposition parties have repeatedly boycotted parliamentary participation and elections and referenda,⁶⁸ thereby foregoing these sites of contestation and rendering themselves irrelevant in the eyes of the public. Rather than resorting to boycotts, they could have staged more effective protests against government transgressions by using extraordinary institutional strategies within the legislature, focusing on electoral campaigns and cooperating with social protest movements.

The autocratic Milošević government was brought down in Serbia in 2000 through the joint efforts of social mobilisation and political parties. As of 2026, however, a disconnect is palpable between civil and political society. In addition to strategic miscalculations, a main reason for this is the inability of civil and political society to create a transformative political identity and vision. Even though Vučić's ruling SNS was founded as an offshoot of a far-right party, since 2012 it has managed to monopolise the political centre as the "reasonable" representative of Serbia's major fault lines. Closeness to Russia and China makes sense because these countries support Serbia in the UN Security Council on Kosovo, a national cause for Serbia. But SNS is also pursuing EU membership, which a significant majority of Serbs favour. SNS is pro-EU but distrustful of Western intentions, which caters to the Serbian public's bitter memories of the NATO bombing of Belgrade and Western recognition of Kosovar independence. Finally, Vučić has remained neutral in the war in Ukraine based on a "self-preservation first" logic, and runs on a platform of socioeconomic development through cooperation with multiple external powers. The opposition's challenge is to offer an alternative and more democratic program to represent such a bundle of interests and sentiments.

The fragmented political opposition front is divided into two main camps. The first consists of Pro-European opposition forces (such as the Democratic Party, the Party of Justice and Freedom, and the Green-Left Front), who are anti-backsliding and formed the "Serbia Against Violence" electoral coalition in 2023. This coalition has an opportunity to build bridges with social movements by, for example, presenting a new political centre to voters based on a transformative agenda that combines the goals of democratisation, EU integration, fighting corruption and organised crime and a form of national pride and nationalism in line with democracy.

The second opposition camp is the ethnonationalist opposition (Dveri, Novi DSS, We-Power of the People), which, despite being anti-Vučić, is ideologically closer to the ruling

majority – SNS is often seen by them as "not being ethnonationalist or pro-Russian enough" – and has a dubious commitment to liberal democracy.

In the electoral arena, opposition actors have oscillated between "normal politics" (participation) and "extraordinary politics" (boycotts), often with detrimental results. A critical strategic error was the decision to boycott the parliament in 2019 and the general elections in 2020. This strategy backfired significantly; the election proceeded without them, resulting in a parliament with virtually no opposition. This voluntary abandonment removed the opposition from the only institutional arena where they could exercise oversight, effectively turning the assembly into a "rubber-stamp" body that accelerated executive aggrandisement.

Together with civic groups, opposition parties attempted to correct this by forming the "Serbia Against Violence" coalition for the 2023 elections, achieving moderate success by winning over a third of the votes in Belgrade. However, following allegations of fraud and a subsequent re-run of the Belgrade elections in 2024, the coalition fractured. One faction chose to boycott again, demanding a level playing field that the regime was unlikely to grant. This partial boycott ultimately handed the SNS an absolute majority, cementing the regime's control over local democratic spaces.

A general distrust of politics and established opposition parties and disenchantment with veteran politicians undermines well-meaning efforts to combat backsliding. Hence, it seems critical for democracy defenders to recruit new figures, organisations and talent into politics if they are to attain success.

One of the primary tools utilised by the Serbian opposition has been contentious politics, specifically mass protests aimed at delegitimising the regime. Over the past decade, civil society and opposition parties have successfully mobilised thousands of citizens in multiple waves of resistance. Following the 2017 presidential election, the "Dictatorship" protests mobilised young voters who accused Vučić of rigging the election. This was followed by the "One Out of Five Million" protests in 2018–2019, which demanded an end to political violence and a return to democratic norms.

Civil society remains one of the few arenas open for contestation and resistance. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and activists (such as the CRTA and the grassroots movement "Don't Let Belgrade Drown") are pro-democracy, promoting human rights, monitoring elections and uncovering fraud, as well as conducting investigative journalism. They have played a crucial anti-backsliding/resistance role by organising mass popular protests, including the "One Out of Five Million" and "Serbia Against Violence" move-

⁶⁶ Milačić (2024).

⁶⁷ Riedl et al. (2024).

⁶⁸ Spasojević (2024).

ments. Despite their non-violent resistance, they are subjected to attacks and delegitimisation by the incumbent and its allied media.

The most significant recent mobilisation occurred in 2023 under the banner “Serbia Against Violence” (see above). Sparked by two mass shootings, these protests evolved into broad anti-government rallies supported by approximately 50 per cent of the citizenry. Despite this widespread dissatisfaction, these movements failed to translate street energy into electoral victory. The regime successfully weathered these storms by strategically ignoring the protests rather than violently suppressing them, while simultaneously branding organisers as “foreign mercenaries” or agents of instability. Consequently, the protests largely faded over time without achieving institutional change.

Since November 2024, Serbia has witnessed regular mass anti-government protests triggered by the railway station canopy disaster in Novi Sad, which revealed government corruption and unaccountability. After a while, students took the lead in the protests and recently embarked on an ambitious and creative project to inject new blood into political society by finding and nominating trustworthy technocratic candidates in upcoming elections. Presumably, if victorious they would form a transitional government tasked with rebuilding democracy. Opposition political parties, except for the Democratic Party, however, feel excluded and do not support this project. The students’ apparent rejection of “politics” also within their own movement raises doubts over the prospects of their plans; experience shows that cooperation between social movements and democratic and positive versions of politics is necessary for democratisation efforts to succeed.⁶⁹

The media landscape is sharply divided but integral to the backsliding strategy. Pro-government media (including Prva, Pink, Happy, B92, and public broadcasters RTS/RTV) function as the SNS’s “mouthpiece”, disseminating propaganda, glorifying Vučić and contributing to his personality cult. Their role is pro-backsliding/facilitating, effectively limiting diagonal accountability and discrediting opponents as “national traitors” or “mafia associates”. Conversely, the few remaining independent or critical media outlets strive to muster resistance by monitoring and reporting on government corruption and backsliding. In 2025, media organisations affiliated with the United Media group, including N1, Nova S, Danas and Radar, published a “manifesto in defence of independent journalism” in the face of increasing pressure and attacks. These outlets face severe intimidation, smear campaigns and the denial of broadcasting licenses.

In the institutional sphere, the judiciary’s independence was curtailed through the appointment of SNS loyalists, who were mindful of Vučić’s broad electoral appeal. Other oversight institutions (such as the Media Regulatory Body [REM], the Citizens’ Ombudsman and anti-corruption bodies) were likewise captured by SNS loyalists and used to sanction opposing actors and restrict accountability. These institutions therefore held a pro-backsliding/facilitator position. Oversight institutions such as REM, the Ombudsman and anti-corruption agencies were likewise captured and repurposed as tools for sanctioning opposition forces and restricting accountability. The structural passivity of these institutions aligns with broader global patterns in which captured legislatures and weakened judicial bodies reinforce the incumbent’s dominance.

Moldova

Moldova is a small but highly complex country in which territorial questions, security concerns and the involvement of international actors complicate domestic politics and often overshadow the primacy of democracy and what democracy should deliver to people in terms of tangible goods, such as jobs and public services. Major political fault lines involve questions such as whether Moldova should unite with Romania or continue as a sovereign country, join the EU and NATO or move closer to Russia, and implement a neutral, pro-Russian or pro-Western foreign policy. The question of how much and how the authoritarian regime in neighbouring Russia interferes with Moldovan politics aligns with specific domestic political actors and organised crime and affects election outcomes, feeding political divisions and alarmism.⁷⁰ Another complicating factor is the power and influence of oligarchic and corrupt business interests in democratic politics.

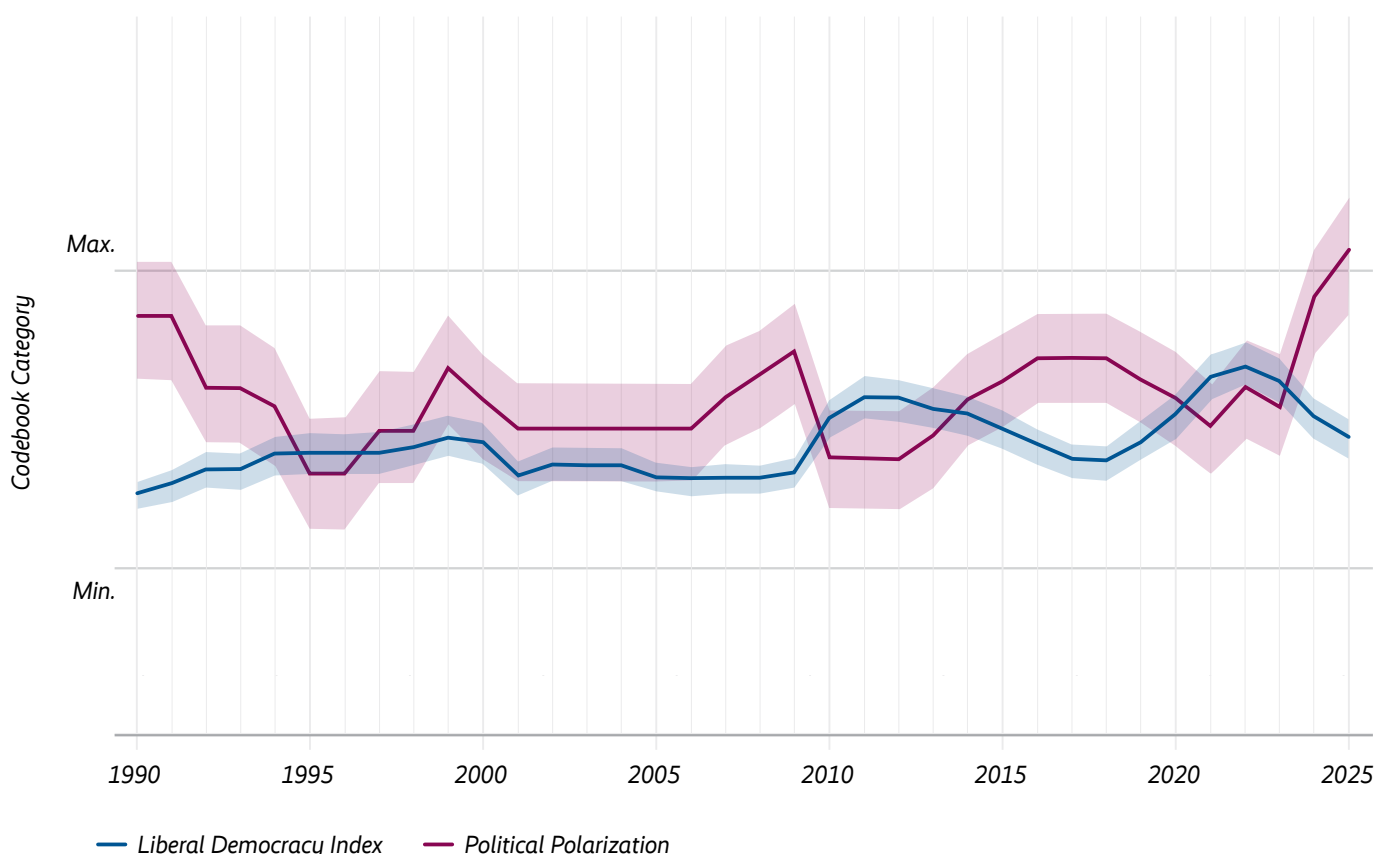
The EU enjoys widespread, albeit not unchallenged public and political support. However, some of its interventions are perceived as overreaching, dominating or favouring specific actors, giving rise to polarisation and legitimate resentments. A significant majority of Moldovans think that discussions about the EU and EU integration have rather divided the populace.⁷¹ These questions all foster distrust among social and political actors.

Despite these divisions and challenges, Moldova represents an informative example because the defenders of democracy have managed to unseat backsliding governments twice – in 2009 and 2019 – with help from social protests, as well as political cooperation, repositioning and manoeuvring among political parties.

⁶⁹ For example, Pinckney (2020b). See also McCoy and Somer (Forthcoming), for the defense of positive versions of politics serving societies’ collective interests – as opposed to a self-serving and often corrupt enterprise.

⁷⁰ Glod and Branea (2026).

⁷¹ Petruti (2026), p. 30.



Source: Highcharts.com, V-Dem data version 16.

The transition to the current pro-EU and pro-democracy government started when a coalition of two newly-founded parties did well in 2019 elections and became the third largest party in parliament: the current President Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS, formed in 2016), and the anti-corruption movement Dignity and Truth Platform (formed as a party in 2015). Then, miscalculation and defection within the ruling oligarchic coalition carried this new actor to power. President Dodon's PSRM chose to form a coalition with them by breaking its alliance with former President Plahotniuc's PDM. The coalition fell apart five months later, however, when Sandu and PAS looked set to zero in on corruption, and Dodon and PSRM, fearing repercussions for themselves, did not want to relinquish the levers of control. The conflict was ultimately resolved, with Western international support, by popular mobilisation on the streets, which elected her President in 2020 and gave PAS an absolute majority in the parliament after forcing early elections in 2021.

The current government led by Maia Sandu and PAS is decidedly pro-EU and pro-liberal democratic, determined to integrate Moldova with the West and perhaps also merge with Romania. Delivering on its promises, the government has also taken major steps to pursue past cor-

ruption (both Plahotniuc and Dodon were prosecuted) and has been fighting to redress state capture and corruption under governments led by Vladimir Plahotniuc between 2009 and 2019. As democracy indicators show, Moldova has democratised and things are generally better now than under previous governments.

However, corruption and socioeconomic problems have endured, and one third of Moldovans are still below the poverty line. The government is also criticised for feeding pernicious polarisation by labelling all critics as pro-Russian and for using unilateral and discriminatory methods to transform illiberal institutions with EU endorsement. De facto power seems to have been concentrated in the presidency with weakened checks and balances. The media and judiciary appear politicised in a pro-EU and pro-government direction and excluding critical voices. Unless the mainstream media find more inclusive and representative ways, this may feed cynicism and weaken the credibility of democracy among some segments of society.

Democracy is new in Moldova and Moldovan parties are predominantly elitist, leader-dominated and personalist. Furthermore, the majority of existing politicians suffer from weak public distrust because of the shifting roles they played

in the corruption and backsliding episodes during the past two decades. Hence, perhaps the most important challenge facing Moldovan democracy defenders may be to bring in to the political arena new personalities and talents with no reputational baggage from the past and with strong links of trust with grassroots movements.

Moldova may draw on the fact that political deals among opposition parties and social protests managed to successfully reverse two democratic backsliding episodes.⁷² The first episode (2001–2009) occurred via legislative capture, when a dominant political party established a quasi-authoritarian system, which was eventually reversed by electoral processes and pro-democracy protests. The second decline (2014–2019) was characterised by oligarchic collusion and grand corruption, a more subtle form of erosion that ended through cross-ethnic mobilisation, institutional changes and contentious politics.

Successful opposition strategies against democratic backsliding in Moldova thus relied heavily on a combination of contentious politics, strategic institutional changes and the formation of broad coalitions. During the first backsliding episode (legislative capture, 2001–2009), a consolidated, united opposition successfully challenged the ruling party by combining forces, staging anti-government rallies and using existing institutions to create institutional stalemate. They blocked the selection of the president, which provoked snap elections that the opposition subsequently won. The incumbent's mistake of brutally suppressing mass protests further consolidated the pro-democratic camp and caused defections from the ruling party.

In the second episode (oligarchic collusion, 2014–2019), recovery was sparked by grassroots mobilisation and cross-ethnic, trans-ideological protests against large-scale corruption, with civil society groups transitioning into political parties that ultimately ousted the oligarchs via electoral politics and street demonstrations. Key strategies included focusing on anti-corruption, crafting inclusive multiethnic appeals, utilising new communication technologies such as social media for mobilisation, leveraging institutional changes (such as the reinstatement of direct presidential elections), and forming broad ruling coalitions that overcame ethnolinguistic and ideological polarisation, often with overwhelming international backing.

⁷² Marandici 2024.

7.

Conclusions and Key Takeaways

- **It is critical to address democratic discontent and alienation by crafting political and economic reform agendas to address legitimate grievances, and to cultivate new leadership to mobilise a new majority around an inclusive and democratic programme.** In two of the case studies in this report, Serbia and Moldova, there is widespread disenchantment with existing opposition parties and politicians, and with politics in general. This undermines democracy defenders' capacity to reverse, and in the case of Moldova, recover from backsliding. In turn, in Turkey, the main opposition party CHP registered its greatest electoral gains and became the first party in the polls after recruiting new mayoral and presidential candidates and democratically changing its chairman, leadership and then its programme. This has prompted the Erdoğan government to initiate a vicious "autocratic-legal"⁷³ crackdown on the CHP from 2025. However, this policy may also have the unintended consequence of making the government even less popular and losing the next elections against the CHP, which remains unbowed and promises to revive Turkish democracy.⁷⁴ But after more than two decades of backsliding, voter fatigue and disenchantment with politics is a risk factor in Turkey as well. In Poland, the domination of the political field by long-standing charismatic politicians may be a factor feeding political polarisation. All this suggests that finding new political talent and faces is a major task for democracy defenders against backsliding.
- **A major task facing democracy defenders is to develop liberal and inclusive narratives of national identity, nationalism and patriotism and to foreground the defence of democracy as a better way of defending national interests and pride.** In two of our cases in particular, Turkey and Serbia, the ability of backsliding governments to create a public image of themselves as the authentic nationalists and true guardians of the national interest and pride has been instrumental to their ability to vilify their opponents and monopolise the electoral field. This is a general trend in many backsliding countries.⁷⁵
- **External pro-democracy assistance is helpful but insufficient and often inconsistent.** External actors such as the EU can mean well but often prioritise first and foremost stability and other interests. Among our cases, while EU membership is an important safeguard of democracy in Poland, the EU has been criticised for cooperating with – and boosting the image of – backsliding autocrats in Turkey and Serbia.⁷⁶ Some pro-EU Moldovan interlocutors have criticised how EU support has become a black-and-white question and a taboo that stifles rational debate over necessary democratic and socioeconomic reforms. While promoting democracy in backsliding countries, external actors such as the EU should avoid creating categorical labels and distinctions between pro-democracy and pro-autocracy domestic actors – as our case studies of Moldova currently and Turkey in the early 2000s suggest. Hence, while taking advantage of external support and inspiration, democracy defenders may be advised to prioritise and rely on building strong domestic coalitions for democracy.
- **Shift the axis of polarisation from issues on which the backsliding government has an advantage in policy performance to policy issues that can unify democracy defenders.** Anti-corruption platforms are one instance in which democracy defending political actors can have an advantage in policy performance and public perceptions, as Moldova has shown. With new political leadership and movements, anti-establishment platforms can also have success, as examples such as Sri Lanka's 2024 elections have shown.
- **Connect directly to voters, visiting areas of regime support and listening to understand the reasons behind the support for backsliding governments.** The Turkish opposition did this successfully to win local elections throughout the country in 2024.
- **Since bullet-proof country cases of re-democratization are rare at best, build on practices and strategies that proved successful in various countries rather than take country examples, which may turn out to be misleading blueprints.**

⁷³ Scheppele (2018).

⁷⁴ Özel (2026).

⁷⁵ Milacic (2026, 2026a); McCoy and Somer (Forthcoming).

⁷⁶ Bieber and Günay (2026).

- As the cases of Moldova in 2019–2020 and Turkey in 2024 suggest, **bottom-up voter alliances rather than top-down party elite alliances may be more promising to form electoral coalitions and to unite a pro-re-democratization opposition.**
- **Avoid the temptation to use questionably legal methods to rapidly dismantle an autocratising system after ousting a backslider.** To maintain legitimacy and rebuild democratic resilience, democracy defenders need to avoid the temptation to make use of the same anti-democratic methods used by the backsliders, even where that means they will have to wait to replace some constitutionally-designated authorities such as judges or media oversight bodies. The Polish and Moldovan cases warn of the risks of a rush to change. At the same time, it is critical to explain to the public the continued constraints imposed by the vestiges of the old regime. A focus on economic and social policies, as well as de-criminalising dissent may be the most promising initial steps in democratic recovery.
- **Produce a positive – as opposed to a dismissive – narrative that acknowledges the legitimacy of current grievances and the mistakes and democratic deficits from the past.** Most importantly, provide a positive reform agenda explaining how these problems will be addressed.

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Opposition and Resilience Strategies against Democratic Backsliding

This report contributes to a “democratic playbook” to address the thorny dilemmas of reversing democratic backsliding in contemporary democracies. It presents a conceptual framework and key strategies for democracy defenders to resist, defeat, and recover from democratic backsliding, with emphasis on two key areas: pernicious polarization, and opposition confusion and regime uncertainty. The authors draw out the policy implications from new theories of democratic resistance and depolarization, and identify key takeaways from empirical research and four illustrative case studies included in the report: Moldova, Poland, Serbia and Turkey.

The report explains the dynamics of contemporary democratic backsliding and how the concept of regime uncertainty – competing interpretations about the degree of threat to the democracy – undermines opposition unity. It shows how democratic backsliding is often associated with pernicious political polarization, and how two strategies can combat it: active depolarization in early stages and transformative repolarization in more advanced stages.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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