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'I've Seen This Before'

What Failed Democratization Can Teach Us About Democratic Erosion

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Introducing a series offering observations, lessons, and cautions on the authoritarian playbook with contemporary examples from Russia and other eastern European countries.

For the 19th consecutive year, freedom worldwide has declined. That is according to Freedom House, the global watchdog on democracy and civil liberties.

Between 2022 and 2024 alone, rights and civil liberties worsened in 60 countries, while only 34 showed improvement.^[i] Looking at 66 of the national elections held in 2024, over 40% were marked by election-related violence. Meanwhile, autocratic leaders in Russia, Iran, Kuwait, Venezuela, and others continued to entrench their power further by manipulating elections and suppressing (or in some cases eliminating) opposition. In 2025, only 20% of the world's population reside in states that are rated "free" and twice as many live under "not free" regimes.^[ii]

Freedom, it seems, is once again not a universal right, but a privilege.

Political science offers abundant and growing literature explaining the turn to authoritarianism and the dangers it poses to world peace. Domestically, populism often leads to unrealistic promises that result in ill-conceived authoritarian policies that suppress or deny rights. Outwardly, authoritarians eagerly pursue aggressive politics that justify oppression at home and the consolidation of power

at the hands of despotic regimes. Most of this literature comes from scholars of comparative politics – that is all of us who study something different than the U.S. Alas, it seems that the U.S. might have something to learn from scholars around the world where the authoritarian playbook has transcended generations.

So, do authoritarians have a playbook? Well, yes. One contemporary dictator who has perfected the authoritarian playbook is Russian President Vladimir Putin. In 25 years of power, he managed to consolidate his power and accumulate wealth that would make Joseph Stalin envious.

In the following series of dispatches, I will offer some observations, lessons, and cautions on the authoritarian playbook with contemporary examples from Russia and other eastern European countries. I shall draw on the work of Juan Linz, one of the most influential scholars of comparative politics. Linz's work shaped scholarly consensus around the study of modern authoritarianism, democratic transition and consolidation, and democratic breakdown and erosion. While Freedom House does not credit Linz directly, its methodology — from language defining typologies to indicators of its analyses — is highly influenced by his work.

To be fair, Linz's work offers a great many angles to approach democratic erosion and authoritarianism. For instance, in his similar essay "Problems of Presidentialism" published in 1990^[iii], Linz argued that presidential systems are more susceptible to democratic erosion and authoritarian usurpation than parliamentary systems because of the institutional weight of presidency. Linz also argues that political polarization and institutional weakness can create democratic breakdowns. All of these would be fantastic and relevant discussions in modern U.S. context. Although Linz observed that the U.S. avoided the fate of other presidential systems mostly due to the lack of bipartisan polarization, and lack of party discipline that give legislators the ability to work across the party lines. Things have changed a bit in the decade or so with some of my colleagues arguing that Linz's warning is now very much applicable to the U.S.

I propose to focus this discussion on a different set of ideas outlined by Linz and his colleague Alfred Stepan in their "Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation."^[iv] In this volume, they propose a theoretical overview of democratization as a transformational process by which non-democracies can arrive at consolidated democracy. By consolidation, they mean a moment when democracy becomes "the only game in town." That is, there is no significant political group that seriously attempts to overthrow the democratic regime. Even in face of serious economic or political situation, an overwhelming majority of citizens trust in democratic process of political change, and deviation from democratic norms results in serious reputational and political damage to the perpetrator.

Consolidation of democracy, however, is not the final stage. Erosion of consolidated democracy is a very real possibility. Moreover, the trajectory is nonlinear, and not all transitions end in democratic consolidation. Transitions from one non-democracy can very well lead to consolidation of another type of non-democratic regime. For more nuances, Linz and Stepan propose that democratic consolidation requires five interrelated and mutually reinforcing arenas. These include - free and lively civil society, autonomous political society, rule of law that ensures citizens' rights and liberties, functioning state bureaucracy, and institutionalized economic society.

When teaching Russian politics to undergraduates, I used to organize my syllabus thematically along the five arenas of democratic consolidation as outlined by Linz and Stepan. This allowed my students to imagine a transitional road map, and while tackling each "arena," we could see where and how the choices made by actors fostered, or in Russian case, mostly hindered the process. Russia, of course, is a complicated case, where other things like history and culture are often used to explain political trajectories. However, I am of the mind that these deterministic approaches gloss over specific political actors and deprive us of deeply understanding the effects of their actions. Is Russia doomed to be a brutal dictatorship regardless of its leaders? That is, if Putin was not given the power to rule in 1999, would we have a similar outcome? This was not so evident in 1992, 2000, or 2008. Moreover, the leaders of existing Russian opposition, including those in exile, do not believe in a predetermined autocratic outcome.

Consolidation of Russian authoritarianism under Putin was a slow but steady process of political choices and policies that the regime, and more specifically political leaders, made over two decades. A similar story can be observed in Hungary, where the democratic transition of 1989 set it on the course of democratic consolidation, further bolstered by European integration. Some methodical but impactful steps included targeting and limiting civil society, undermining political society, creating a vertical of power that would dismantle the rule of law,^[v] and forming a system of asymmetrical corruption, cronyism, and pocket oligarchy.

Can the consolidated and oldest democracy in the world learn anything from these derailed consolidations? As I mentioned, Linz argued that presidential systems – that is, those countries that have a directly elected president and elected legislature – are doomed to failure. Spain, Argentina, Venezuela, and, yes, Russia, are such cases. Yet, the U.S. was the only empirical case that managed to avoid these pitfalls. In his interview in 2013^[vi], Linz argued that this was due to some political wisdom – including that legislators and courts kept the power of president in check. Yet, he warned of increased political polarization along the party lines that could undermine the ability of the legislator and create a window of opportunity for presidential authoritarianism.

I am not making a deterministic case that the U.S. is sliding into authoritarianism, although plenty of my colleagues do. My goal here is not prediction or condemnation. There are arguments to be made about the importance of institutions and persistence of political culture. Yet, this is not a direct focus of my short analyses here. I seek to raise a few examples from cases of post-communist derailed consolidation that come to my mind as I observe contemporary U.S. politics. Many of my colleagues in comparative politics, and folks who lived through authoritarianism, are triggered by the unfolding events of the past six months of the second Trump administration.

So yes, we have seen this movie before, in a different setting and with different actors, but the plot twists seem very familiar. In this series of dispatches, I'd like to share some of these episodes with the readers.

[i] Gorokhovskaia, Yana and Catherine Grothe. . "Freedom in the World 2025 : The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights" Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2025/uphill-battle-to-safeguard-rights>

[ii] Freedom House uses a 100-point scale to rate freedom around the world in two categories, political rights and civil liberties. Political Rights are scored in three categories: Electoral Process, Political Pluralism and Participation, and Functioning of Government. The civil liberties questions are grouped into four subcategories: Freedom of Expression and Belief, Associational and Organizational Rights, Rule of Law, and Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights. The combinations of scores are used to determine the status of "Free," "Partly Free," and "Not Free." Find the methodology of Freedom House here: <https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology>

[iii] "The Perils of Presidentialism" — Journal of Democracy (1990)

[iv] Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation (1996, with Stepan)

[v] In Russian and Hungarian cases this meant literally amending and re-writing the constitution.

[vi] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/01/22/monday-we-celebrated-our-presidential-democracy-juan-linz-thinks-thats-mistaken/>



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