

The Theft of Democracy in Post-Communist Europe: Democratic Backsliding through the Lens of Organized Crime and Populist Politics

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Abstract

Although the world is more democratic today than a century earlier, the decline of liberal democracies throughout the past decade poses grave concerns about democracy's future stability. This paper examines the uneven trajectories of democratic backsliding in post-Communist Europe, focusing on Hungary, Serbia, and Albania. The region faces challenges from organized crime, where criminal enterprises collaborate with state actors, fostering corruption and undermining democratic institutions. Populist leaders exploit these conditions to consolidate power, posing a significant threat to democratic principles. This paper argues that the intertwining of organized crime and politics, particularly in the context of populism, intensifies democratic backsliding. The erosion of political autonomy due to corruption weakens institutions essential for democracy, with the rise of populism reflecting broader threats to democratic stability in post-communist Europe. The relationship between organized crime, corruption, and populism serves as a significant barrier to democratic integrity, revealing a troubling pattern that jeopardizes the region's democratic future.

Keywords

Democratic Backsliding, Organized Crime, Populist Politics, Corruption, Post-Communist Europe, Democracy, Hungary, Serbia, Albania

1. Introduction

“Corruption to the degree and intensity we are now witnessing is an affront. It also brings down economies, ignites wars, exterminates peoples and species, and tears irrevocable scars across the face of the earth. It is an existential threat not just to the democratic principles we claim to revere, but to the very survival of our

society.” *On Corruption in America* by Sarah Chayes

Although the world is more democratic today than a century earlier, the decline of liberal democracies throughout the past decade poses grave concerns about the future stability of democracy. Specifically, the trajectory of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe is not uniform, as Hungary, Serbia, and Albania endure different paths of democratizing and autocratizing. Between 2007 and 2017, Hungary shifted from a liberal democracy to an electoral democracy, Serbia autocratized from an electoral democracy to an electoral authoritarian government, and conversely, Albania democratized from an electoral democracy to a liberal democracy. The region faces challenges from organized crime, where criminal enterprises collaborate with state actors, fostering corruption and undermining democratic institutions. Furthermore, populist leaders exploit these conditions to consolidate power, posing a significant threat to democratic principles. I argue that democratic backsliding, marked by a shift towards autocratic governance, is exacerbated by the relationship between organized crime and politics, particularly in the context of populist movements.

Organized crime and corruption efforts that leak into the political and economic space erode the autonomy and coherence required of political institutions. The corrupt nature of organized crime weakens crucial regulatory and judicial systems, distorts the economy, and hampers the public trust. Furthermore, a burgeoning illicit economy that manifests through organized crime systematically exploits the jurisdictional and legal framework that individual countries and international cooperation depends on (Caparini, 2022). Additionally, populism often emerges where democracy is threatened, thus revealing its presence throughout post-communist Europe. The ideology that fuels populism often operates as a mechanism in which political power can be exercised (Abdoul-Bagui, 2021). The potent combination of organized crime, corruption, and populist politics orchestrates a dangerous web that augments the problems ahead for democracy.

Post-communist Europe’s transition from communism to democracy connects to the presence of organized crime and populism in the region, and the 2008 global financial crisis compounded such a problem. Since 2008, populist politics emerged in Hungary and Serbia, yet it has failed to maintain a grasp on Albania’s politics. However, as criminal activity and populist leaders often rely on corrupt practices to attain their goals, they ultimately share the potential to continually dismantle democratic institutions’ ability to uphold the core tenets of democracy. Corruption and populism function as symptoms of weak democratic institutions that ultimately perpetuate democratic backsliding. The corruption component present in both organized crime and populist politics functions as a direct threat to the theft of democracy in post-communist Europe.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Democratic Backsliding

Electoral democracies signify governance in which citizens can elect the nation’s

chief executive and the legislature via free and fair multi-party elections (Herre, Ortiz-Ospina, & Roser, 2024). In addition to the principles of electoral democracy, liberal democracies also provide citizens with individual and minority rights that ensure their equality before the law while also implementing a system of checks and balances (Herre, Ortiz-Ospina, & Roser, 2024). Citizens maintain the right to influence the critical decisions that affect their lives and permit them to hold their leaders accountable for their actions in all forms of democracy (Herre, Ortiz-Ospina, & Roser, 2024). According to a report analyzing democracy developed by Our World in Data, the early 2010s illustrated a peak level of democracy worldwide. However, in recent history, the world has shifted away from democracy as nations have reverted toward autocracy.

Political scientist Samuel P. Huntington revived the existing theory of waves of democracy, highlighting the three significant surges of democracy that have occurred thus far. Rapid shifts in the power dynamic amongst global powers often lead to opportunities for domestic reforms that ultimately develop into waves of democratization (McIntosh, 2024). According to Huntington, the first and slowest wave of democratization occurred throughout the 19th century, and the second wave followed after World War Two (McIntosh, 2024). The mid-1970s saw the beginnings of the world's third wave of democratization; however, scholars also consider the democratic transitions of 1989-1991 to be a part of this wave (McIntosh, 2024). However, a downward trend in democratic progress became apparent in 2010 as the number of deteriorating democratic nations continuously grew (Lindberg, 2018). Democratic backsliding signifies a democratic country's gradual or rapid shift away from democratic principles and institutions while moving closer to autocratic governance. According to Antonio Benasaglio Berlucci and Marisa Kellam, democratic backsliding "denotes the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy" (Berlucci & Kellam, 2023). Such a weakening of democracy can produce critical concerns regarding a government's political stability and institutional capacity.

Guaranteed free and fair elections, minority rights, the rule of law, and freedom of the press, amongst other democratic principles, have been threatened globally in recent years (Abramowitz, 2024). Formerly robust democracies became impeded by complex domestic problems of inequality, partisan fragmentation, terrorism, immigration, and a heightened fear of the "other" (Abramowitz, 2024). I argue that corruption also plays a central role in weakening democracies, as corrupt practices destabilize a nation's political, economic, and civil society-based structures. Nevertheless, the current political climate amounts to a compilation of domestic and international crises plaguing the effectiveness of governance. Thus, democratic backsliding develops into a leading concern within political development and geopolitics discourses, as the correlated risks of political instability exacerbate matters of low economic growth, social unrest, and weak rule of law within nations.

Democratic backsliding disproportionately affects countries that democratized during the most recent “third wave” of democracy (Carothers & Press, 2022). Post-communist Europe democratized during that period, which raises interesting questions regarding how the region’s democracies weakened so soon after they transitioned to democracies. The third wave of democracy led to democracy becoming the primary legitimate form of government globally during this period (Diamond, 2011). In comparison to earlier waves of democratization, this most recent period has experienced a more rapid growth and expansion of democracy. Between 1974 and 2012, ninety-one new democracies materialized. However, thirty-four underwent a breakdown of democracy shortly after their transition (Mainwaring & Bizzarro, 2019). This current democratization period has experienced swift growth and relatively rapid decline. Earlier phases of autocratization in the 1930s and 1970s had been repaired, and countries will likely need to take similar actions to hinder current democratic backsliding concerns and maintain political stability.

Within a region with a similar history of communism, different post-communist European nations have had varying experiences with democratic backsliding. The political sociologist Claus Offe, whose research centers on the transition to democracy from communism, developed a “triple transition” understanding of the shift of post-communist states towards democracy (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017). The “triple transition” presents a three-pronged political, economic, and social evolution: from a Communist party that monopolized politics to a more plural democracy, from a planned economy to a market economy, and from a state-controlled social sphere to an independent civil society (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017). Offe’s theory exemplifies the expansive components of a nation that undergoes significant change during the transition from communist to democratic governance. The relatively rapid alteration to such critical facets of a country further complicates its endeavor to develop into a stable democracy. Post-communist Europe experienced a transitional period that laid a viable foundation for corrupt political actors and criminal networks to infiltrate the region significantly.

A distinguishing element of post-communist democracy is, and probably will continue to be for several more decades, a weak civil society (Howard, 2002). Marc Morjé Howard argues that a weak civil society almost guarantees that post-communist citizens lack the institutional representation and political leverage typically built into a democratic system through active voluntary organizations (Howard, 2002). Labor unions, non-governmental organizations, and independent research institutes, among other civil society organizations, help advocate for the accountability and transparency required of democratic governments. The fragile civil society in post-communist countries seems to limit the general public’s ability to enforce checks and balances on the government outside of the political landscape. Prior negative experiences with communist state-run organizations also translate into many post-communist Europeans exhibiting a lack of trust in political and social organizations today (Howard, 2002). With the strength of civil society

remaining essential for democracies, civil society holds the potential driving force to reverse democratic backsliding through the vocal actions of the citizenry influencing necessary reform efforts.

Concerns of state weakness and instability pervade the discourse on democracy, as both indicate the potential for democratic backsliding. Robert Rotberg argues that state weakness entails the simultaneous fluctuation of states rising and falling throughout time (Heathershaw & Schatz, 2017). John Heathershaw and Edward Schatz also express that state weakness persists “when a state doesn’t generally perform the tasks expected of it” (Heathershaw & Schatz, 2017). Political instability ultimately affects every facet of a country’s ability to govern effectively, as it complicates the potency of political institutions. According to the political scientist Samuel Huntington, “Institutions result from the slow interaction of conscious effort and existing culture” (Huntington, 1965). Public education systems, infrastructure initiatives, the judiciary, and other welfare-based projects comprise a country’s essential set of institutions that equitably provide for the well-being of all citizens. However, with corruption operating via sophisticated and successful structures, political leadership and small groups of elites seek to maximize their gains (Chayes, 2016). Such behavior diminishes the scope of political institutions that directly support a nation’s people when the political elites withhold control of public institutions.

Questions about internal political stability often occur alongside discourse on the external factors potentially threatening a democracy. Corruption and similar criminal activities that leak into the political and economic space ultimately erode the autonomy and coherence required of political institutions (Huntington, 1965). Huntington also elucidates that political officials aiming to maximize their power often weaken democratic institutions in the long run (Huntington, 1965). Nevertheless, institutions alone are not suitable for defending democracy against elected autocrats, as institutions become political weapons wielded by those in control against everyone else (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Criminal activity and populist leaders share the potential to continually dismantle the ability of democratic institutions to uphold the core tenets of democracy.

2.2. Organized Crime

Organized crime, as defined by INTERPOL (the International Criminal Police Organization), equates to any enterprise or group that repeatedly profits within the illicit economy (Carter, 1994). Money laundering, smuggling, and trafficking (of arms, humans, and drugs), amongst other things, are components of the expanding organized criminal market. Notoriously, organized crime groups, like the Italian Mafia and the Yakuza of Japan, are structured based on a “family unit,” which can be biologically or socially constructed. However, David Carter argues that Eastern European organized crime organizations have begun to act as entrepreneurs who seek economic expansion through illegitimate means (Carter, 1994). The dangerous model of organized crime in Eastern Europe comprises a

synergism between criminal operations and the state. The “entrepreneurial” nature of organized crime in Eastern Europe stems from the dysfunctional post-communist period, in which the redistribution of wealth occurred without restrictions, and a new domain of political elites emerged (Fatić, 1999). Such profit-driven criminal groups participate in the illicit economy by utilizing violence and corruption to maximize their wealth and potential earnings.

Aleksander Fatić states that by acknowledging the dangerous linkages between organized crime groups and the state, they develop into a larger market for organized criminal activity (Fatić, 1999). Organized crime’s relationship to politics weakens democracy, increasing a nation’s risk of democratic backsliding. As a link between organized crime and politics, corruption, as a behavior, diverges from the official duties of public office due to perceived personal gains acquired by abusing the power of public office (Nye, 1967). According to J.S. Nye, corruption hinders the capability of political institutions through economic wastefulness, political destabilization, and a damaging reduction of governmental capacity (Nye, 1967). The potential loss of legitimacy connected to the abovementioned reduced governmental capacity is reflected in how corruption and direct ties to criminal activity can undermine democratic institutions. Fatić asserts that higher corruption-based deficiencies within state institutions amount to an enhanced marketplace for organized crime to flourish (Fatić, 1999). Organized crime’s ties to the government continuously alter the nation’s capacity to execute the responsibilities that its citizens need.

Before the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, criminal groups could generally not operate outside the region, so international trade routes and Western financial arrangements remained extremely limited. The opening of the region’s illicit market in the late 1990s and early 2000s enabled criminal actors to drastically expand their operations into the transnational crime landscape. The nations and governments that developed after the end of communism generally consist of weak institutions, uncertain ideological frameworks, and an under-trained bureaucracy ill-prepared to navigate the ever-evolving economy (Fatić, 1999). So, malleable state institutions struggle to enforce against organized crime groups since they have permeated most of the gaps in the post-communist institutional landscape. Weak judiciary systems, a private sector with links to the illicit economy, and limited media transparency persist as mechanisms that hinder the ability of states to dismantle their organized crime networks. The region’s transition from communism to democracy developed opportunities for acts of organized crime to negatively affect a country’s ability to maintain a democracy. Nevertheless, even though such factors exist within numerous countries, not all of them endure similar experiences with democratic backsliding.

2.3. Populist Politics

Populism, as a political ideology, aims to appeal to the voters by emphasizing the division between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Molloy, 2018). In its

most democratic form, populist politics intends to defend and empower the interests of citizens (Munro, 2024). Jan-Werner Müller asserts that populist leaders declare their leadership and political party to be the only group that aims to represent the people while insinuating that the existing political elites have failed this task (Kossow, 2019). Similarly, “the will of the people” often acts as the primary impetus for populist rhetoric, representing the leader’s aims to govern on behalf of underrepresented citizens. Although populism strives to improve the scope of political representation, some forms of populist politics, especially authoritarian populism, negatively hinder the progress of democratic institutions. Populism threatens democracy, as it often utilizes nativist sentiments, regional values, and economic dislocation to dismantle a government’s ability to effectively govern (Zhai & Xu, 2020). Such ideology provides a select group of elites to take undue control over the democratic principles within a nation.

Populism, especially in extreme cases, represents an absence of constraints in which some populist leaders manipulate nationalistic ideologies and other beliefs to undermine existing democratic principles. Some forms of populism, namely authoritarian populism, aim to undermine the institutions of representative democracies by emphasizing antagonistic sentiments towards individuals or groups deemed to be elites or “dangerous others” (Lutovac, 2020). Extreme nationalism, racism, and conspiracy-mongering often become core political tactics for populist leaders. Additionally, when populism functions as a mode of centralizing power for an individual leader, the longevity of the leader’s political institutions weakens, which sets an array of problems into motion. In many ways, populist leaders threaten liberal democracy by utilizing their bully pulpit and non-legislative authorities to dismantle the existing checks and balances, which causes a degree of democratic backsliding (Berlucchi & Kellam, 2023). Though rhetoric always functions as a pillar of politics, populism heavily relies on the party’s ability to employ messaging as a significant arm of the state. Many issues linked to populist politics are reflected in how its leaders monopolize discourse, power, and democratic principles for their gain.

Anti-corruption discourses have been a consistent facet of the populist strategy for disenfranchising the elite demographic; however, populist leaders often pursue corrupt activities once in office. Transparency International, a global coalition against corruption, argues that corruption and populism feed each other in many countries (Kossow, 2019). Studies also illustrate how voters, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, believe corruption diminishes their trust in political elites, leading to their support of new politicians outside the political elite circle (Kossow, 2019). The false promise of eliminating corruption persists as the underlying driver behind the success of populist political campaigns, as the attack against the elites validates many of the constituency’s frustrations. However, a swift reversal of the anti-corruption narrative once in power diminishes the strength of democratic institutions since populist leaders betray the appeals of the voters who elected them. The exploitation of anti-corruption discourses presents populist

leaders with an opportunity to reshape existing institutions and protocols under the guise of repairing the misconduct enacted by prior leadership. The duality of corruption within the context of populism further highlights how weak democratic institutions permit the growth and success of populist leaders.

The growth of populism throughout post-communist Europe highlights the nature of populism functioning as a symptom of democratic backsliding in the region. Martin Bull claims that populist parties emerged in Europe during the early 2000s, with the 2008 financial crisis increasing their prominence (Molloy, 2018). For Central and Eastern European countries, the global financial crisis shook the region's faith in neoliberal economic reforms. This produced a rationale for new populist political contenders to advocate against reforms like mass privatization and trade liberalization (Orenstein & Bugarič, 2022). The populace's grievances amplified the spread of nationalist, authoritarian populism throughout the region. During this period, populist leadership claimed that the elites had enriched themselves, eroded cultural values, and taken away the democratic voice of the nation's people (Statista Research Department, 2024). Yet, after populist leaders and political parties gained power, their messaging and actions often shifted towards benefiting their new community of elites. Protecting their elite constituents' interests becomes a priority to maintain their stronghold on power over time. Nevertheless, the burgeoning significance of populist leadership throughout Central and Eastern Europe remains a concern throughout the region's understanding of democracy.

3. Case Studies

When measuring degrees of democratic backsliding in post-communist Europe, three nations underwent contrasting legacies of democratization and democratic backsliding. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace produced a table documenting the democratic transition of European countries between 2007 and 2017 (Lindberg, 2018). Hungary, Serbia, and Albania each have different trajectories regarding democratization or democratic backsliding. Hungary shifted from a liberal democracy to an electoral democracy, meaning the country's democratic principles have decreased (Lindberg, 2018). From an electoral democracy to an electoral authoritarian government, Serbia's autocratization trajectory means that democratic norms broke down to the extent that the electoral process persists as some of the nation's last active democratic principles (Lindberg, 2018). Conversely, Albania democratized as the country progressed from an electoral democracy to a liberal democracy during this period (Lindberg, 2018). The discordant paths of democracy in the region introduce questions of what causes democratic backsliding to occur. As Hungary, Serbia, and Albania share similar histories linked to communism and some degree of cultural overlap, the disparities between each country's ability to maintain a democracy spark further exploration of democratic backsliding throughout the region.

These three European nations share histories of the post-communist transition

and the 2008 global financial crisis, yet they have varying experiences with democratic backsliding. Since an assortment of variables impacting democracy exists throughout the region, interesting questions arise about how such factors affect democracy. How do three countries struggling with organized crime and corruption experience contrasting relationships to democracy? Does populist political leadership exacerbate the nature of already feeble democratic institutions? What threats to democracy upset the stability of democratic institutions, and how can a country curb such a phenomenon?

3.1. Hungary

In the last few decades, Hungary, one of the five European nations facing distinct democratic backsliding during this period, has encountered setbacks amidst the government's attempts to cultivate the rule of law, fair electoral competition, and civic participation (National Democratic Institute, 2023). In the 1990s, Hungary transitioned into a democracy, which replaced the nation's formerly communist political structure (National Democratic Institute, 2023). The nation's current prime minister, Viktor Orbán, held his first term from 1998 to 2002, which brought the Fidesz party into leadership (Britannica, 2024). Since losing in the 2002 national election, Orbán and the Fidesz party returned to and maintained leadership from 2010 onwards (Britannica, 2024). Orbán and the Fidesz party spurred their return to power by appealing to Hungarians' frustration with the former socialist-led government's response to the 2008 financial crisis, which led to massive unemployment (Carothers & Press, 2022). Although Hungary persisted as a liberal democracy for approximately two decades, Prime Minister Orbán has asserted his desire to transform the nation into an illiberal democracy on numerous occasions.

The Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) produced by V-Dem, a Varieties of Democracy data project that publishes data on democracy and human rights, measures the degree of democratic backsliding in different countries. Antonio Benasaglio Berlucchi and Marisa Kellam used the Liberal Democracy Index in their analysis of Hungary as an example of extreme democratic backsliding (Berlucchi & Kellam, 2023). Hungary's democratic breakdown since 2009 marks one of the steepest autocratization periods in recent history (Nord et al., 2024). During Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's recent terms in office, a 24% drop in LDI occurred during his second term between 2010 and 2014, and a 27% drop in LDI ensued during his third term spanning from 2014 to 2018 (Berlucchi & Kellam, 2023). The consistent deviation away from liberal democracy that the data represents emphasizes the country's democratic backsliding. For instance, Viktor Orbán had campaigned on an anti-corruption platform during the 2010 election. However, after nearly a year in office, Orbán and his network of elites dismantled democratic institutions through which they captured the state (Kossow, 2019). Corruption and other criminal activity introduce additional risks to Hungary's ability to maintain a stable democratic state, especially when populist leaders like Viktor

Orbán enable such behavior.

Alongside scholarship regarding the post-communist transitional period, Bálint Magyar, among others, introduced the notion of a mafia state, which refers to the connectedness between the new ruling political elites and criminal enterprises (Magyar, 2016). The mafia state operates as a privatized version of the parasitic state that remains in the control of a small ruling elite with networks of contacts and relationships (Magyar, 2016). Bálint Magyar emphasized the similarities between traditional mafia operations and governments operating under a similar style, including loyalty through kinship ties, hierarchical power structures, and trends of violence and criminal activity. Extortion, money laundering, fraud, racketeering, and other abuses of public office function as fundamental attributes of a mafia state (Magyar, 2016). Hungary, specifically under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, persists as a mafia state through which organized crime aligns with the actions of the nation's political leadership. Authority in Hungary's public institutions differs from a traditional mafia system, as the government utilizes a bloodless method of enforcing its political will (Magyar, 2016). The country's more discreet tactics for wielding power consistently manifest through the collaboration between organized crime and political actors in Hungary.

The Hungarian National Central Bureau, the liaison branch to INTERPOL, detailed the smuggling of black-market alcohol, tobacco, and electronics as the foundation of the country's illicit economy, which the bureau deems to be hard to control (Carter, 1994). Marked by a criminality score of 4.62 out of 10 from the Global Organized Crime Index, Hungary remains deeply involved in human trafficking, smuggling, and the drug trade that operates in conjunction with a web of state-embedded criminal actors (The Organized Crime Index, 2023b). As a significant source and transit country for human trafficking, Hungary maintains a corrupt system of personal connections between business owners, public officials, and politicians who bolster the illicit market. The United Nations states that individuals of 136 nationalities are victims of human trafficking in 118 different countries, in which seventy-nine percent of victims are trafficked for sexual exploitation (Rij, 2016). Hungary has developed an intricate network of human trafficking that spans from local prostitution to trafficking routes reaching the Netherlands.

Based on Jorn Johannes Marinus van Rij's study of Hungary's trafficking routes, patterns emerge as the exploitation of Hungarian people occurred on a local, national, and then international level. The women get trafficked from local villages to larger cities within Hungary before being smuggled along routes to other countries (Rij, 2016). An additional pattern highlights the notion that human trafficking in Hungary primarily centers around kidnapping or pressure from family members (Rij, 2016). Women from van Rij's study detailed how their parents, who needed money, forced them to solicit themselves on the streets, which led to their introduction to the trafficking market. Katerina, a woman from the study, recounted how her grandmother, who formerly worked in prostitution, forced Katerina into prostitution at the age of eleven in her neighborhood (Rij, 2016). From

that point on, Katerina was exploited as a prostitute in Hungary and other Western European countries (Rij, 2016). Katerina's story, alongside others, illustrates the depths of exploitation occurring along Hungary's human trafficking networks. Interwoven connections of traffickers and corrupt public officials in Hungary persist as a lucrative enterprise, yet the available protections for Hungary's exploited women remain insufficient.

Surrounding Hungary's array of criminal enterprises, the scope of corruption within Hungary escalates its organized crime problem, as the overlap between crime and politics drastically weakens the nation's institutions. Such institutional weakness creates ripple effects that limit Hungary's ability to prevent and crack down on organized criminal activity. Informal patron-client networks allow Hungary's economic elites to unduly influence national and local government institutions alongside civil society organizations (The Organized Crime Index, 2023b). Corruption entails a group of actors who unduly gain a political or financial advantage, which equates to such actors acquiring something without providing anything of equal value in return (Kállay, 2015). A network of corruption persists in Hungary due to the prevalence of corruption at multiple levels of Hungarian society, from the local to the national level and between the private and public sectors. Pervasive corruption enables the persistence of organized criminal activity, as corrupt law enforcement officers and border control officials often receive bribes to allow people and goods to be smuggled into and out of Hungary. The links between organized crime and corruption continually impede Hungary's ability to govern effectively as the complex web of corrupt actors forms a bridge between crime and politics.

Hungary's branch of Transparency International, an organization fighting against corruption, cited fraud and corruption as a critical component of the country's misuse of funding from the European Union (EU). Between 2007 and 2020, the European Union allocated development funding for Hungary, which equated to 60% of the country's annual GDP (Kállay, 2015). The EU's structural assistance funding, which Hungary has received, provides financial backing for development projects focusing on climate protection, physical infrastructure, and civil society promotion (Koenen, 2023). Journalist Szabolcs Panyi asserted that under Orbán's leadership, the state's and the EU's money is treated as private money, signifying the embezzlement of funds on the national and international levels (Kalan, 2020). Furthermore, an expert on Hungarian corruption, David Janciscs, detailed that "it's not like the best Hungarian businesses are awarded contracts, but the most loyal" (Kalan, 2020). Janciscs' sentiments depict the scope of the ruling Fidesz party's control over the procurement of public contracts, which narrowly determines who receives resources intended for the entire Hungarian population.

According to Transparency International Hungary, public procurement contracts became increasingly tailored to the desired bidder, determining development project costs notably higher than market prices and unjust influence

affecting the project selection process, amongst other methods of misusing EU funds (Kállay, 2015). Individuals and groups with personal relationships with the political actors in charge of allocating the public contracts receive preferential treatment that prevents Hungary's development process from being equitable. A report that analyzed 250,000 Hungarian public contracts between 2005 and 2020 determined that 41% of those contracts were signed due to a lack of fair competition (Kalan, 2020). The lack of regulation and impartial oversight of government contracts ultimately dismantles the stability of a core institution of democracy.

Viktor Orbán, the current prime minister of Hungary, and his Fidesz party have led the nation since 2010 through illiberal populist leadership. Although Orbán initially ran for office on an anti-corruption platform, his government has deconstructed democratic institutions throughout Hungary. Data collected by Statista in 2018 determined that Hungary has the highest share of populist votes cast in elections in comparison to other European Union nations, which amounted to 65.09% of the country voting for populist parties (Statista Research Department, 2024). Increasing from its share of 43.7% of Hungarian voters in 2008, populism has spread throughout the nation in recent years (Statista Research Department, 2024). With Viktor Orbán's populist leadership sparking concerns within the European Union and more broadly amongst democratic allies, Hungary's expanding relationship with populism poses queries about the future of the nation's democracy.

The authoritarian populist nature of Hungarian politics manifests through the ruling Fidesz party's leadership, as it operates beyond the boundaries of political constraints. Scandals have permeated Prime Minister Orbán and his party's legacy in office, especially those that correlate to the nation's broader corruption concerns. For instance, the country endured a pardoning scandal in February 2024 that resulted in the resignation of Hungary's president and the justice minister. The Fidesz party fundamentally advocates for Christian family values to remain at the core of the nation's political landscape. However, in April 2023, then-President Katalin Novák, a close ally to Viktor Orbán, granted a collection of political pardons, one of which exonerated an individual criminally charged for covering up a sexual abuse case within a foster home (Cseh, 2024). The scandal put the Fidesz party under the microscope, as the pardoning directly contradicts the party's core messaging. More importantly, the resignations of former president and justice minister Katalin Novak and Judit Varga highlighted the minimal power high-ranking officials held while Prime Minister Orbán sustained his leadership (Cseh, 2024).

Viktor Orbán has maintained his position as the frontman of Hungary's political leadership for nearly fifteen years. His control over his political party and the nation's government institutions allows him to usurp power in a damaging manner. Orbán's authoritarian populist leadership style negatively affects Hungary's present relationship with the European Union. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Hungary's consistent refusal to support any

strategic or financial aid packages for Ukraine has stalled the EU's progress. Thus, Hungary has become an adversary to the institution and its member countries. Orbán's recent string of political actions has forced the European Union to consider its protocols for defending democracy within its organization. Still, Viktor Orbán's leadership maneuvered based on the Fidesz party's and its leader's aspirations, which subsequently failed to advocate directly for the constituency. The manifestation of populist politics in Hungary depicts a charismatic leader's pursuit of political control throughout the nation.

3.2. Serbia

In 2000, the peaceful overthrow of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, who had instigated a series of genocidal wars in the former Yugoslavia in an attempt to create a "Greater Serbia", reoriented Serbia toward democratic rule and enhanced European integration (National Democratic Institute, 2019). Serbia gained its independence in 2006 and subsequently became a parliamentary republic (The World Factbook, 2024). However, as of 2023, Freedom House's Nations in Transit report characterizes Serbia as a transitional or hybrid regime, meaning its authoritarian leadership utilizes elements of democracy to legitimize its regime (Burazer, 2024). Democratic backsliding has amounted to an abandonment of core democratic principles like freedom of speech, the weak rule of law, and corrupt networks connecting business and politics in Serbia. Yet, President Aleksandar Vučić continues to contend that his Serbian Progressive Party is the only viable option for Serbia to attain its political stability goals (Carothers & Press, 2022). As an autocratizing country, Serbia, under Vučić's leadership, is deviating further from the standards and values of democracy.

The presence of organized crime in Serbia persistently endangers the country's ability to maintain its democracy, as the illicit collaboration between politicians, criminal actors, and members of the private sector perpetuates the nation's instability. The Global Organized Crime Index deems Serbia to hold a criminality score of 6.22 out of 10, which stems from the considerable presence of mafia groups, criminal networks, and state-embedded actors within the country (The Organized Crime Index, 2023c). Serbia's nexus of state officials, special police forces, and multi-ethnic organized crime groups arose during the 1990s and have continued over the past few decades (Mladenovic, 2012). Scholar Nemanja Mladenovic noted that a notorious saying, "Every state has its mafia, but only in Serbia the mafia has its state," further amplifies the troublesome connections between crime and politics within the country (Mladenovic, 2012). In 2002, Dr. Zoran Djindjic, then-prime minister of Serbia, declared an official fight against organized crime, which led to the adoption of the law on the Fight against Organized Crime (Mladenovic, 2012). However, a year later, as the first democratically elected Serbian Prime Minister, Dr. Zoran Djindjic was assassinated by a sniper in the nation's capital by an organized crime group (Mladenovic, 2012). Djindjic's death marked the longevity of the intertwined relationships between organized crime and the

government that persist today.

Within Serbia's business sector, businessman Igor Sabo's control of companies in the Serbian agriculture industry highlights the interplay of crime, governance, and business dealings within the nation (Jovanović, 2016). In May 2013, Serbian prosecutors charged Igor Sabo, the former Minister of Agriculture, and nineteen others in an intricate fertilizer-selling scheme that prosecutors deemed cheated the state-owned firm Azotara (Jovanović, 2014). A network of conspirators diverted subsidized fertilizer to companies that failed to qualify for the subsidy, allowing participants to share the illicit proceeds (Jovanović, 2014). The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project determined that the agriculture conspiracy defrauded Serbian taxpayers of nine million euros (Jovanović, 2014). Igor Sabo has orchestrated or participated in many other offshore financial schemes in Serbia and abroad. Serbia's economic stability falters due to networks of businesses that eagerly participate in offshore finance, which transfers substantial wealth outside of Serbia's official channels. Without significant protections against the illicit economy, dynamic relationships between criminal actors, companies, and public office steal wealth from public institutions.

Football hooligans—ultra-fans of a football team who often participate in violent acts within the context of the sporting event—have a unique link to Serbia's government officials and security agencies. Football hooligans occasionally act as proxies for political initiatives by committing crimes of money laundering, protection rackets, drug dealing, and other violent acts (Windelspecht, 2017). Dobrivoje "Dan Tana" Tanasijevic, the former president of the Belgrade football team Red Star, explained, "The politicians use the hooligan gangs for their own means, and in exchange, protect them from getting in trouble" (Windelspecht, 2017). Rooted in national, ethnic, religious, and football-related symbolism, the culture of football hooliganism disguises potentially political acts of violence as simple conflict over beloved sporting events. Serbia's current prime minister, Aleksandar Vučić, embraces the extensive role of football hooligans within the country, maintaining a direct linkage between organized criminals and the government. Using existing criminal groups as arms of the state allows government actors to obscure their involvement in organized crime.

Beyond obscuring the linkages between crime and politics, the presence of corruption within Serbia's criminal justice system prevents violent crimes from being solved and punished. The Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) highlighted the prevalence of gang-related murders not being thoroughly investigated in Serbia and neighboring Montenegro between 2012 and 2023 (KRIK, 2017). According to their database entitled "The Black Book," out of the 193 murders within the database, only 27 were legally resolved, and unfortunately, the perpetrators remain unknown in 102 of the cases (KRIK/Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023). In most instances, the victims, both targeted individuals and bystanders, often were ambushed by automatic weapons and car bombings (KRIK, 2017). The high level of corruption in Serbia effectively prevents victims of violent crimes

from receiving any degree of justice. Crime expert Dobrivoje Radovanovic explained to KRIK that the ongoing connections between organized crime and police structures, prosecution, and security institutions exacerbate the lack of identification of gang-related murderers (KRIK, 2017). The corrupt criminal justice system fails to prioritize the victims and collateral damage of these violent crimes. This exemplifies the notion that the interdependence between business owners, politicians, and criminal actors not only threatens the stability of democratic governance in Serbia but also endangers the safety of Serbia's citizens.

Serbia's authoritarian populism and anti-pluralism politics relate to the nation's transition towards state capture. In the 1990s, populism flowed through the leadership of socialist President Slobodan Milošević, who utilized nationalism and intermittent cooperation with the right-wing Serbian Radical Party to maintain his power (Lutovac, 2020). Populism returned to Serbian politics in 2012 through the Serbian Progressive Party's moderate, pro-European approach to populist leadership (Spasojević, 2024). While taking a centrist political position, the Serbian Progressive Party utilized blame game strategies and the creation of enemies to accrue power, which only increased when the party reached the presidency in 2017 with Aleksandar Vučić (Spasojević, 2024). Serbia's political transition towards democracy heavily reflects its continuous links with populist politics. President Vučić, the current leader of Serbia, has maintained a firm grasp on the nation through authoritarian populist leadership that removes necessary constraints that ideally prevent the undermining of democracy. In many ways, President Aleksandar Vučić, one individual, has significantly captured the Serbian state.

Serbia's ruling populist party, led by President Vučić, wields its power throughout all sectors of the nation in a manner that curtails valued liberties and opportunities. With coercion, manipulation, and deception as core attributes of the party's political strategy, Vučić cultivates control over the nation (Lutovac, 2020). For instance, individuals and groups aiming to hold Serbian leadership accountable often get their bank accounts blocked by the tax authorities before being placed under investigation for alleged financial misdeeds (Error, 2018). Protests throughout Serbia in recent years depict the public's outrage towards a myriad of concerns, namely mass shootings, election fraud, and the Serbian state television networks. Nevertheless, Vučić's secure control over the nation's power structures, namely the media, stamps out any potential dissent against his party and leadership.

Uniquely, in Aleksandar Vučić's Serbia, the nation's formal democratic institutions continue to exist; however, they increasingly lack substance. Compelling and deceptive rhetoric heavily marks Vučić's leadership's political discourse, solidifying his presence as a "man of the people." His political communication strategy intends to spark emotional responses from Serbia's citizens instead of relying on fact-based messaging. However, President Vučić's rhetoric oscillates between a pro-Europe and pro-Russia foundation depending on the political circumstances of the moment. Treading water on both sides of a geopolitical conflict, Serbia has

often simultaneously negotiated with the West and Russia. The European Union and the United States sought allies in the Balkan region to maintain a buffer between Russia and the Middle East and the West. However, this stance has conversely permitted leaders like Vučić to evade any repercussions for its authoritarian tactics domestically and abroad. Serbia's ongoing political legacy, mainly through President Vučić's leadership, derives from the consistent prevalence of an authoritarian populist leadership style that weakens the nation's democratic structure.

3.3. Albania

After enduring one of the communist world's most unorthodox dictatorships of Enver Hoxha, spanning from 1944 to 1991, Albania underwent a tumultuous transition to democracy (*The BTI Transformation Index, 2024*). In January 1997, Albanian citizens protested against their new "anti-communist" government, which had become a one-man rule that seized control over the country's security forces and other critical government institutions (*The BTI Transformation Index, 2024*). Albania's poorly implemented economic transition additionally weakens the nation since an array of pyramid schemes pilfered money throughout the country. However, beginning in 2013, the Socialist Party aimed to overthrow Albania's entrenched corruption system and strengthen the state's core institutions (*The BTI Transformation Index, 2024*). Despite an arduous beginning to the country's post-communist period, Albania uniquely remains the only European country to reverse the process of democratic backsliding during the post-communist period that began in 1991.

The country's democratic transition aimed to establish a pluralist political system to protect and advance fundamental human rights (*National Democratic Institute, 2021*). Politics in Albania encounter challenges based on its high polarization and partisanship, which fractures any progress toward anti-corruption and rule-of-law reform (*National Democratic Institute, 2021*). The ongoing rivalry between the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party threatens the country's ability to implement institutional reform and democratic consolidation effectively (*Allkanjari, 2023*). The ongoing emigration of skilled workers, the spread of Russian propaganda, and a lack of political will to implement crucial reforms also undermine political stability in Albania. The implementation of pivotal reforms, especially those focused on strengthening the rule of law and reinforcing civil liberties, will soon remain a core component of the nation's path forward; nevertheless, the country has managed to avert any significant shift away from democracy in recent years.

Albania's public opinion generally favors embracing liberalism, European Union membership, and more involvement with the West (*Allkanjari, 2023*). Edi Rama, the Albanian Prime Minister, echoed this sentiment at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in September 2022, in which he expressed that "the faith of Albania and its European destiny is our anchor to the future"

(Allkanjari, 2023). Over the past decade of European Union accession negotiations, Albania implemented judicial reforms that protect the judicial system from succumbing to bribery and corruption in the future (Allkanjari, 2023). With Prime Minister Rama and Albanian citizens remaining optimistic about the potential of the country's future EU accession, such sentiments coincide with a hopeful path forward for Albania's democratic endeavors. However, Albania's upward trajectory as a democracy questions why other countries, especially in the region, continue to autocratize away from democratic values.

Organized crime continuously emerges throughout Albania's struggle to maintain democracy, as the nation's extensive illicit economy handicaps any attempts at political stability. The pervasiveness of the political power wielded by Albanian organized crime groups has developed into a critical concern for national politics and their European Union accession aims. With the drug trade, cyber-crimes, and financial crimes maintaining a role in Albania's illicit economy, the country earns a criminality score of 5.17 out of 10 from the Global Organized Crime Index (The Organized Crime Index, 2023a). Similar to Serbia's framework of criminal actors, the collaboration between mafia groups, criminal networks, and state-embedded actors in Albania also exacerbates the nation's organized crime problem (The Organized Crime Index, 2023a). Criminals influencing Albania's political governance efforts establish a system of mutual dependence that further solidifies the relationship between crime and politics within the nation. As in other post-communist European countries, the opening of the region to the West led to extensive flows of emigration, smuggling of illicit goods, and the trafficking of women in Albania (Zhilli & Lamallari, 2016). Albania's ability to maintain democratic institutions simultaneously weakened, thus complicating the development of the reforms necessary for European Union accession.

Albania's informal economies promote tax evasion among criminal enterprises, private sector actors, and state-embedded actors. Tax evasion and other organized financial crimes amount to significant wealth leaving the country, thus damaging the nation's economy (Ridley, 2007). Shadow economies consist of legal business activities that operate outside government oversight, making them exempt from taxation (Muharremi et al., 2014). Construction and agriculture labor, taxi services, babysitting, and other cash-based business dealings exist outside the traditional economy, thus permitting undeclared work or under-reported revenues to affect the nation's economic landscape (Muharremi et al., 2014). The lack of government regulation of such enterprises decreases the taxable wealth eligible for redistribution into the public goods supporting the citizenry, especially infrastructure and national security. As of 2024, Albania's shadow economy comprises 32.5% of the nation's gross domestic product (World Economics, 2024). The International Monetary Fund determines that the global shadow economy equals 31.9% of the entire global economy, based on data figures from 2018 (Medina & Schneider, 2018). So, even though Albania remains close to the global average, the size of the nation's shadow economy still bodes trouble for Albania's future.

Effectively combatting the shadow economy would allow the government to improve the country's long-term economic growth while funding more robust social services.

The trafficking routes of drugs, illicit goods, and people that flow out of Albania's port cities significantly contribute to the nation's battle against organized crime. In March 2018, Albanian police seized 613 kilograms of Colombian cocaine disguised in a shipment of bananas at an Albanian port, which ultimately was deemed to be a 220-million-dollar value of drugs (Papachristou, 2018). As a transit country for the drug trade, mainly cocaine, the operation plays a critical role in the illicit economy, as a collection of non-state actors causes ripple effects for Albania's economy. The Albanian-speaking criminal group *Kompania Bello* utilized an intricate system of encrypted communication to negotiate directly with South American drug cartels for the product before organizing the massive shipments of cocaine to numerous European ports (Klein, 2020). Contacts and accomplices in Italy, the Netherlands, and Albania facilitate the distribution of cocaine across European borders for the organization (Klein, 2020). Numerous criminal enterprises like the *Kompania Bello* group penetrate Albania's weak law enforcement and legal institutions. Thus, the trafficking industry maneuvers around existing institutions in a manner that entrenches the illicit economy as a core component of Albania's civil society, economy, and political space.

Alongside the presence of organized crime, corruption threatens Albania's already weak institutions, thus ensuring the untouchability of criminal actors in the criminal justice system (Zhilli & Lamallari, 2016). Albania's corruption problem also hinders the nation's candidacy for the European Union and limits its potential for foreign direct investment (KnowYourCountry, 2024). Due to Albania's close relationship between corruption and politics, state capture persists in government institutions where individuals and groups have excessive power over the state's decision-making process and actions. A network of clientele-based relationships, corrupt judicial proceedings, and tailor-made laws to benefit the interests of the elites are the cornerstones of Albania's state capture problem (Vurmo et al., 2021). The state capture crisis in Albania grew between 2008 and 2019, meaning the illicit economy has become increasingly entrenched in political activity (Vurmo et al., 2021). Until Albania detaches the illicit economy from the political sphere, the country's core institutions will fail to adequately operate on behalf of everyday people, as the public resources will continue to be orchestrated by a small group of elites.

Even though Albania endured an array of organized criminal activity and state capture concerns, comprehensive reform efforts have worked to deconstruct the linkages between crime and governance. Namely, Albania's parliament passed a "decriminalization law" banning convicted criminals from holding public office, which helps neutralize the influence of criminal actors on political decision-making (Mejdini, 2018). This law became one of Europe's harshest criminal laws targeting the presence of criminal actors in politics (Zhilli & Lamallari, 2016). To

comply with European Union accession requirements, Albania's justice system began implementing a comprehensive reform of the justice institutions in 2016. An enhanced vetting process of existing judges and prosecutors and establishing new justice institutions are critical pillars of the national reform effort (Vurmo et al., 2021). Albania's ongoing process of significant institutional reform transforms the country's ability to democratize despite extensive histories of crime and corruption.

Beyond the institutional reform response to the country's organized crime problem, the people of Albania are incensed by the continual infiltration of crime into their government systems. In January 2018, tens of thousands of citizens protested on the streets of the nation's capital, expressing their outrage towards Prime Minister Edi Rama's failure to combat organized crime, with the crowds exclaiming messages like "Rama go" and "No to narco-state" (Papachristou, 2018). Such discontent sparked after Rama's former interior minister, Saimir Tahiri, was placed under house arrest due to criminal charges of drug trafficking and corruption (Papachristou, 2018). The collusion between criminal actors and politicians throughout Albania remains a fundamental roadblock between the nation and solidifying the longevity of its democratic institutions. Reform leaders, both in the government and civil society, have advanced valuable legal frameworks to debilitate the burgeoning presence of organized crime nationally. While Albania's substantial reform breakthroughs set it apart from other post-communist European nations, a pursuit of eradicating the lingering aspects of organized crime must continue earnestly for the future of Albania's democracy.

Populism in Albania has hampered public trust by damaging its democratic institutions and reducing the degree of accountability between public offices and their constituents. Albania presently operates as a democratic, pluralist system, yet clientelist party politics centered around individual leaders stagnate further advancement (Freedom House, 2023). During Albania's transition from communism to democracy in the 1990s, the critical lack of democratic traditions, political experience, and weak rule of law impacted the country's ability to maintain democratic principles today. The general parliamentary elections of 2013 saw a populist movement become a political party, the Red and Black Alliance (RBA), fighting for seats in the parliament (Bino, 2017). Although the RBA's aims as a civil movement sought to mobilize citizens against the government's corrupt, anti-democratic behavior, the party's messaging ultimately centered around hard-line nationalistic and anti-establishment sentiments (Bino, 2017). Regardless of its potential as a prominent political party, the RBA could not navigate Albania's political party system.

Albania's populist leaders often practice nationalist rhetoric, as it amplifies the significance of national identity and sovereignty on a cultural and political level (Nezha & Muçollari, 2023). Activating a quintessential rhetorical strategy, Albania's populist leadership emphasizes anti-immigrant or anti-globalization messaging intending to induce fear of change amongst the citizenry (Nezha &

Muçollari, 2023). Political polarization and manufactured divisions amplify the populist ideology of “us versus them,” which allows the division to distract from the actions of the populist leadership. Significantly, Albania has managed to navigate populism in a way that a populist leader does not manage to have a stronghold over the entire democracy.

Even though populism impacted the early stages of Albania’s transition to democracy, the political ideology hardly continues to influence the country’s path toward democratization. Albania’s prime minister since 2013, Edi Rama, has embarked on a trajectory of comprehensive reforms at the judicial, electoral, and fiscal levels of government. The negotiation requirements for European Union accession are crucial for Albania, as EU membership provides political, strategic, and economic guarantees for a member nation. A 2020 Euronews Albania poll illustrated that almost 96% of Albanians supported the country’s future EU membership (Homel, 2023). Positive public opinion towards Albania’s relationship with the EU suggests an optimistic pendulum swing towards increased democratic reforms. Issues of endemic corruption, organized crime, and pro-Russian propaganda linger as obstacles to Albania’s EU accession. Yet, the reform efforts of recent years demonstrate substantial early steps toward the nation’s goal of solid democratic institutions.

4. Conclusion

Organized crime has continuously played a significant role in the social, political, and economic spaces of Hungary, Serbia, and Albania. Similar networks of trafficking and smuggling flourish throughout all three countries, illustrating a shared concern about organized crime’s impact on the region. Likewise, corruption and government influence on criminal activity damage each country’s illicit economy. In contrast to Hungary and Serbia, Albania’s civil society and political institutions have initiated reform attempts to dissolve the existing relationships between crime and politics. When considering the state of democracy in Hungary, Serbia, and Albania, crime and corruption drastically weaken the strength of their democracies, which contributes to their experience with autocratization.

Populist politics establishes myriad political strategies that appeal to the constituency’s real social, economic, and political concerns. Such efforts often simultaneously disguise the populist leadership’s pursuits to gain control of the substantive democratic institutions. In Hungary, Serbia, and Albania, populism surfaced as a primary political ideology during a weak point of their democracies. Since populism fails to self-regulate, implementing populist politics in these countries exacerbated the backsliding of their already weak democracies (Rusciano, 2021). The willingness of populist leaders to ignore or delete existing rules amounts to the political ideology’s ability to destroy institutional structures that protect the public (Rusciano, 2021). Thus, populist politics persists as a threat to democracy throughout post-communist Europe.

The corruption component present in both organized crime and populist

politics functions as a direct threat to the theft of democracy in post-communist Europe. Bakke and Sitter contend, “In order to backslide, powerholders need motive, opportunity, and the absence of constraints” (Berlusconi & Kellam, 2023). Organized crime and the illicit economy often fracture the political landscape by providing powerholders with the aforementioned “motive, opportunity, and absence of constraints” that damage existing principles of democracy. Since connections between politicians and organized crime operate as an opportunity to weaken a country’s democracy, populism, especially in extreme cases, represents an absence of constraints, in which some populist leaders can monopolize ideological motivations for anti-democratic infringements with minimal hindrance. An amalgamation of organized crime, corruption, and populist politics develops into harmful symptoms of democratic backsliding, inhibiting a nation’s ability to reverse democratic backsliding. When considering the lasting significance of democratic backsliding, shifting from global democratic norms toward authoritarian practices exhibits a setback for fundamental freedoms. Beyond post-communist Europe, similar patterns of organized crime and populism plaguing the strength of democracies persist globally.

Similar to the interplay of crime, populist leadership, and democratic backsliding in post-communist Europe, the United States has encountered similar crises affecting the stability and longevity of its democracy. The former president of the United States, Donald Trump, governed as an authoritarian populist, running against the limits of his constitutional authority and rejecting the advice of others (Mounk, 2021). Trump’s Republican Party exhibits similarities to Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz Party in Hungary, as both leaders maintain valuable backing from members of their party while they attack democracy. Since the United States has a weaker party system than other populist nations, members of the Republican party face more flexibility in terms of acting in opposition to the populist party’s leader (Mounk, 2021). Nevertheless, critical issues remain as corruption and populism continue to affect a nation’s ability to maintain democracy.

In the United States, weak and anti-democratic institutions have bolstered the rise of populism and corruption, negatively impacting the nation’s democracy. While political parties and the Electoral College have operated as gatekeepers of American democracy, politicians, scholars, and the American public often debate whether these entities adequately protect democratic elections. The Electoral College remains a core facet of the American election process, as 538 members indirectly elect the president every four years (Pierson, 2022). Those electors primarily get selected by the political parties, yet the legal framework surrounding the selection process differs between states (Pierson, 2022). As an institution emanating from the U.S. Constitution, the Electoral College preserves its role as a pillar of democracy. Strong arguments against the Electoral College center around the notion that without winning the popular vote, a candidate fails to obtain the support of the actual majority of voters. The Electoral College hands the presidential election to 538 intermediaries, so the American public cannot guarantee that their

votes are accurately represented. As seen in the 2016 presidential election, the Electoral College system misrepresents the electoral choices made by all nationwide voters.

On November 8, 2016, Republic candidate Donald Trump lost the popular vote to the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton by over 2.8 million votes. However, his victory of thirty states through the Electoral College solidified his presidency. A presidential candidate winning the election without securing the popular vote has only occurred five times throughout the nation's history. Trump's success in large states like Florida and Pennsylvania, albeit by narrow margins, drove his campaign toward Electoral College victory (DeSilver, 2016). That directly contrasts the notion that he obtained the seventh-smallest winning percentage of the popular vote since 1828 (DeSilver, 2016). Many argue that both statements should not equate to an overall presidential win. In some respects, the loss of the popular vote equates to a candidate not receiving enough votes directly from American citizens in the election. Thus, the Electoral College is an example of a weakening political institution through which faults permeate the cracks of a system intending to promote equitable elections. A gap in the political structure resulted in the governance of an authoritarian populist, President Donald Trump, to dismantle core democratic institutions throughout his four-year term.

Democratic backsliding on a global scale undermines fundamental freedoms and induces economic and security risks (Abramowitz, 2024). Suppose many countries are autocratic and repressive. In that case, ripple effects occur that potentially dissolve important treaties and international institutions, destabilize regions, and provide violent actors with the space to navigate. As of March 2024, 71% of the world, 5.7 billion people, live in an autocracy, representing a 48% increase over the past decade (Nord et al., 2024). The decline of democracy experienced in Eastern Europe has reached the levels last seen in the period directly before the Soviet Union fell in the 1990s (Nord et al., 2024). Thus, an enhanced understanding of the causes and symptoms affecting the region's democratic backsliding requires a sense of urgency. Historical analysis shows that 48% of all autocratization episodes make U-turns, transitioning back to democracies (Nord et al., 2024). Such historical precedent reflects the existing potential in democratic reform efforts, which wield the power of protecting democratic institutions.

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