



How to Strengthen Democratic Resilience: Five Lessons for Democratic Renewal

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Introduction:

What is democratic resilience?

The ongoing trend of democratic erosion around the world has led academics and policymakers to increasingly ask how to insulate political systems from authoritarian subversion and strengthen their democratic resilience.¹ By most counts, democracy suffered a 20-year recession that left no region of the world untouched. While many authoritarian states have become more repressive, a wide range of democracies – including those in the global north – have had their images tarnished. In addition to undermining the rights and liberties of millions of citizens, this process has significantly complicated the challenge facing pro-democracy citizens, policymakers, civil society groups, and international donors in several ways.

Domestically, fewer citizens are convinced than in the past that democracy is the best system of government to deliver development and security, in part because a new wave of populist leaders has told them that it does not. Internationally, the growing number of authoritarian states has emboldened would-be autocrats and made it even harder to build international and regional consensus around the value of democracy. At the same time, intensifying international competition between western states and countries such as China and Russia means that the temptation to trade democracy off against other foreign policy goals is strong. New technology is also complicating the battle for democracy, which must now incorporate efforts to counter disinformation and build societal consensus around agreed facts. As a result, it is even harder to foster and sustain democratic values and institutions than it was in the early 1990s.

There is also a somewhat different focus to the work of many civil society groups, policymakers, and donors today. In the 1990s, the democracy community focused mainly on helping transitions to democracy in what had previously been authoritarian regimes or ensuring that such transitions did not stall. The core assumption underpinning this approach was that democracy was in the ascendant and that, according to researchers, “once consolidated, democracy is a stable or resilient political system”.² The last two decades have demonstrated that this assumption is deeply misleading, and there are growing concerns about democratic erosion in what were once called established democracies. There has therefore been a rapidly escalating focus on democratic resilience in both academic research and the projects and priorities of pro-democracy organisations and funders.

At its most basic, democratic resilience refers to the ability of a political system to withstand and adapt to challenges, threats, and crises without compromising its core principles, institutions, or processes. This concept involves maintaining the integrity of democratic governance, including the protection of civil liberties, the rule of law, free and fair elections, and political pluralism, even in the

face of internal or external pressures. There is also a growing recognition that resilience includes the ability of political systems to modify their structures and processes to make them more robust – and more truly democratic.

The new focus on democratic resilience is distinct from previous approaches in at least three respects. First, it recognises that democracy is never consolidated and that the processes of protecting and building it are never-ending but require constant attention and investment. Second, it focuses on the weaknesses of states that are currently recognised as democratic as well as those that are clearly authoritarian. Third, it puts a greater emphasis on factors that can be shaped by civil society groups and international donors in the short term because of the imperative of identifying practical steps to halt the slide towards authoritarianism.

This is reflected in some of the approaches that have so far been proposed to strengthen democratic resilience. These include familiar strategies, such as bolstering civil society so it can act as a check on government excess and educating citizens about their constitutional rights and responsibilities. Yet, they also comprise newer responses to more recent challenges, such as countering disinformation by promoting digital literacy and fact checking. Other measures along these lines include reducing economic inequalities and fostering integration and trust between different communities to reduce the extent of political polarisation and craft more cohesive societies.³

The new stress on protecting democratic systems from attack has led to a greater emphasis on the concrete measures that can be used to insulate constitutions and democratic institutions from subversion from both outside and inside the political system. This has involved discussions of the merits of increasing the threshold required to change fundamental aspects of the system and a strong emphasis on enhancing the independence of the judiciary so that it can reject unconstitutional actions and legislation.⁴ There is also a growing focus on resistance as a potentially critical and distinctive element of democratic resilience and, hence, on ways to support individuals and groups that may come to play key roles in resisting autocratisation, including students, faith-based organisations, and urban residents.⁵

Yet, despite growing research on the efficacy of these measures and other important questions, such as the relationship between citizens' attitudes and democratic stability and how to insulate states against coups, much remains unknown about how resilience works and can be strengthened. There has also been relatively little thinking about the relationship between specific acts of resistance and systemic resilience as well as insufficient crossover between the emerging findings of academic studies and the policy community. This report seeks to bridge this gap.

Why democratic resilience matters and how to get it right

This report aims to enable activists, civil society groups, policymakers, international donors, and researchers to better understand democratic resilience by:

1. explaining what democratic resilience is and why it matters;
2. providing guidance on the most effective ways to strengthen resilience;
3. communicating recent academic research findings to a broader audience; and
4. highlighting important areas for future research.

Taking an in-depth look at autocratisation and its remedies, the report offers five main lessons about how to reconceptualise and defend democratic resilience. These lessons are particularly relevant for civil society groups and the global democracy community.

First, strengthening democratic resilience must be as much about adapting political systems to make them more robust as about overcoming authoritarian threats. Achieving a democratic U-turn in a country that is starting to drift towards authoritarianism is likely to prove a hollow victory if the vulnerabilities that lead to democratic erosion are not systematically addressed. Moreover, the democracies of the 2010s were often felt, especially by minorities, to be unfair and exclusionary. Simply returning to the previous situation would therefore leave groups such as women, the LGBTQI+ community, and ethnic minorities vulnerable to continued discrimination. It is essential to improve existing democracies and build back better, both to address these concerns and to boost sustainability. If this is not done, there is a serious risk that states will yo-yo between more democratic and more authoritarian episodes, as Georgia and Senegal have done in recent years.

One corollary of this point is that investments from civil society groups, international donors, and concerned citizens in strengthening democratic resilience are worthwhile – even in countries that currently do not face an obvious authoritarian threat – for several reasons. Done well, these investments improve the quality of democracy, with benefits for a wide range of citizens, including women and historically marginalised groups. Research also shows that high-quality democracies are more likely to achieve sustainable development goals and stability while keeping corruption low.⁶ Investing in resilience can save money because it can be much more difficult, time consuming, and costly to reverse autocratisation than to keep an existing democracy stable. Moreover, many of the programmes and investments required are in the kinds of areas to which civil society groups and international donors have historically been committed.

The second lesson is that the tendency to focus on democratic resilience exclusively at the national level is unhelpful and misleading. Democracy is also under threat at the local, regional, and international levels, and processes of autocratisation are often particularly difficult to turn around because they are reinforced from both below and above. To give one example, in the last 40 years there has been a sharp increase in the number of authoritarian regional organisations that aim to promote solidarity and economic assistance among undemocratic governments. In Latin America, the creation by countries such as Cuba and Venezuela of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) was explicitly designed to provide a regional alternative to pro-democracy bodies.⁷ In the last five years, ALBA enabled the use of Venezuelan oil wealth to prop up authoritarian allies in states such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua while consistently rejecting international criticism of human rights abuses in these countries.

National democratic gains will therefore remain vulnerable if they do not go hand in hand with parallel changes locally, regionally, and internationally. It is also important to recognise that resistance to autocratisation is unlikely to be equally distributed in a given country. Regions that feature sizeable ethnic groups that are not represented in government, and urban areas where citizens have greater access to information, have been shown to be more likely to resist the centralisation of power.⁸ Understanding local variations can therefore be essential to designing an effective strategy of democratic resilience.

Third, it is unhelpful to look for a silver bullet that will strengthen democratic resilience across all countries. In reality, it is constellations of mutually reinforcing factors that collectively build resilience. It is crucial to understand these constellations and how they come about, as leading democracy scholar Larry Diamond did when arguing that renewing democratic momentum requires focusing on a trio of mutually reinforcing factors: “power, performance, and legitimacy”.⁹

At the very least, it is important to take into account the roles of key democratic institutions that can constrain abuses of power as well as the capacity of citizens and civil society groups to mobilise in defence of democracy. One reason for this is that popular support can help countervailing institutions to endure, while strong and independent institutions can maintain the civic space that civil society groups need to operate effectively. In Malawi, for example, the determination of judges to defy the executive and nullify the results of the flawed 2019 general election was underpinned by months of mass protests.

Fourth, there will not be a one-size-fits-all set of factors that can be relied on to consistently protect democracy.¹⁰ When it comes to authoritarian pathways, there have been coups in which governments were overthrown by military actors; cases of executive aggrandisement, in which an incumbent president or prime minister undermined democratic checks and balances from within; and processes of populist polarisation, in which leaders and activists deliberately sought to exacerbate social divisions to mobilise support from the opposition. In other words, autocratisation comes in many forms.

Understanding these different pathways is important, because each has specific implications for political rights and civil liberties. While many forms of autocratisation have undermined women's rights, for example, this has been particularly pronounced when right-wing populists have come to power. This report therefore explains what kinds of context matter by showing how variations in authoritarian threats and state capacity shape the ways democracy erodes and can be best protected.

The final lesson is that the process of redemocratisation is different from the initial experience of democratisation, generating distinctive opportunities and challenges that democratic stakeholders do not always anticipate. In Poland, for example, the new government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk has struggled to enact reforms necessary to remove authoritarian forces from supposedly democratic institutions. This is in part because bodies that provide key checks and balances, such as the courts, are now staffed with individuals who are loyal to the previous authoritarian administration.

This raises thorny questions with both ethical and empirical considerations. Is it acceptable for democratic governments to break the rules – for example, by summarily sacking officials without following due process – to clean up the political system? And if governments do so, what is the risk that they will undermine their legitimacy and further weaken key institutions? Answering these questions will require researchers and practitioners to better understand how best to take advantage of democratic windows of opportunity without increasing the risk of a future authoritarian relapse.

By looking at each of these points in turn and highlighting the new kinds of policy options and research that are required, this report aims to provide a road map for efforts to strengthen democratic resilience. It does so based on a systematic review of over 45 sources of emerging scholarship on democratic resilience and an extensive survey of some 400 cutting-edge articles and books on patterns of autocratisation in recent decades and responses to them. This work was identified through searches of relevant databases using terms such as “democratic resilience” and “democratic resistance”.

The research also draws on wide-ranging conversations with activists and policymakers in Argentina, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Fiji, Finland, Germany, Ghana, Hungary, Kenya, Malawi, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tonga, the United States, and Zambia. In particular, we provide examples from countries that have been identified as either experiencing episodes of autocratisation or showing evidence of democratic resilience according to datasets such as those of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute. These examples include cases as diverse as Brazil, Mali, and Poland. The report ends by identifying knowledge gaps that make it harder to design effective strategies to defend democracy – and that will need to be addressed if effective responses to the global wave of autocratisation are to be devised.

Bringing together some of the common themes of the five lessons, the report concludes by emphasising the importance of democratic innovation. Traditional approaches are unlikely to be effective in the current context, and many tried and tested responses to democratic erosion now generate unwanted side effects. While a transnational analysis suggests that democracy aid has a positive if modest effect on the quality of democracy, it is much more effective in countries that are not predominantly authoritarian and are moving towards democracy. This implies that there is likely to be a need to bolster aid with smart diplomacy if it is to have an effect on states that are moving towards autocracy at pace.

At the same time, processes of authoritarian learning among undemocratic leaders and regimes mean that would-be autocratisers are now much better placed to counteract the standard policies employed by the donor community. Switching aid modalities from governments to non-state actors, such as civil society groups, to avoid funding repressive regimes is much harder now than in the past. This is because of the greater speed with which authoritarian governments move to repress, regulate, and co-opt civil society in the wake of increases in donor funding. To turn the tide, the democracy community – both academics and practitioners – will need to be as innovative as its authoritarian counterpart has been over the last decade.

Lesson one: Democratic resilience is about more than countering authoritarianism

There is a growing recognition that a clear understanding of what is meant by democratic resilience is needed to develop coherent and effective responses. Some key steps have been taken in this direction already, but much of the work remains to be done. While it is clear that the term invariably refers to the ability of democratic systems to avoid collapse, it is also important to recognise that true resilience is about more than just the capacity to withstand authoritarian challenges.¹¹ It requires, for example, being able to adapt and rebuild so that democracy rests on stronger foundations. True resilience is not limping from one crisis to the next but learning from past struggles to build less crisis-prone democratic systems and practices.

This focus on adaptability has long been a feature of resilience in other fields, such as disaster relief, humanitarianism, urban geography, and environmental studies.¹² Researchers in these areas recognise the transformative potential of major crises, as they encourage new thinking on how to build more durable systems. A good example is the twofold emphasis during the Covid-19 pandemic on both managing the disease and building more inclusive and effective health, economic, and political systems. While the distance between aspirations during the pandemic and post-pandemic reforms is large, this is a critical point for democratic resilience.

Authoritarian challenges should not be thought of as bolts out of the blue in otherwise untroubled democracies. Multiple forms of racialised, gendered, and class-based exclusion have undermined democratic institutions' legitimacy.¹³ Authoritarian and illiberal practices have also grown in democratic countries, eroding accountability and rights.¹⁴ Treating resilience as a return to the previous situation is therefore normatively untenable and poor advice to policymakers. In line with this, international institutions have already begun to develop an understanding of democratic resilience that emphasises the need to adapt and transform while rebounding. For example, the International Institute for Democracy Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) both speak of "innovation" and "adaptation" as essential components of this process.¹⁵

Moving forwards, analysts and policymakers will also need to think more carefully about the meanings of "withstanding" and "adapting", and how they relate to each other. There is often an implicit assumption that these are stages of resilience that occur in a sequence.¹⁶ This makes intuitive sense – in that first you need to survive the threat to democracy, and then you can decide how to adapt – but it is also problematic. For one thing, this approach assumes that there will be clearly defined periods of crisis and stability. In reality, countries that feature weak democratic institutions at low levels of state capacity may suffer multiple overlapping threats to democracy that are not easily resolved – at least for many years.

This was the situation in states such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger over the last two decades. In these cases, waiting until the challenge has been withstood may mean waiting decades. Even in supposedly more clear-cut cases of democratic backsliding, the gradual nature of processes such as executive aggrandisement makes early detection and intervention difficult. Thus, while distinct phases may be discernible in hindsight, they are not always visible to the actors living through them.

Indeed, one of the main points made by researchers working on other forms of resilience – such as conflict and climate change resilience – is that this rigid temporal thinking overlooks the fact that adaptation starts during a crisis. Moves towards adaptability and progressive change can be built into preparations for, and responses to, authoritarian challenges. This insight has been at the heart of disaster relief, for example, and notions of nexus have stressed the need for integrated approaches in work on humanitarian responses.¹⁷

This is not to deny the importance of responding urgently and effectively to a particular crisis. But it is essential to be aware of how the strategies chosen to contest autocratisation can themselves affect the prospects of genuine adaptation and, hence, the long-term sustainability of democracy. This is a lesson peace actors have long recognised. Building more resilient and durable communities after conflict is now largely understood to require conflict prevention, meaningful inclusion, and sustained rehabilitation throughout the peace process. Because more inclusive processes have been found to decrease the risk of future conflict, efforts to resolve conflict using more exclusionary strategies may generate short-term successes but are less likely to prevent conflict in the longer term. In other words, choices made in the early days of a response can have beneficial or detrimental impacts on the prospects of adaptation and resilience down the line.

Similarly, those seeking to promote democratic resilience should think about the longer-term implications of the early decisions they make, whether they redress or exacerbate the conditions that made the country crisis prone in the first place, and how to integrate approaches that promote more inclusive political systems and economies into the defence of democracy.

Lesson two:

Resilience is needed at multiple levels

Democratic resilience is currently discussed predominantly as something that takes place and is built up at the national level, within states. This view neglects the local, regional, and international dimensions of resilience. There is growing evidence that autocratisation may take place at different rates in different areas of a country, and that it also occurs in regional organisations and global multilateral institutions, creating an inhospitable environment for democratic actors.¹⁸ In short, autocratisation does not only take place at the national level, and the responses to it need to reflect this. Analysts and policymakers therefore need to think about democratic resilience as something that is supported and built – or challenged – both within and beyond individual states (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Strengthening democratic resilience on three levels

Resistance to autocratisation needs to be simultaneously built on three levels:

- **Local:** Enhancing sub-national political institutions, such as local, district, county, state, or provincial governments, and investing in community and regional associations to foster pro-democratic neighbourhoods.
- **National:** Creating stronger protections for key democratic institutions while fostering social cohesion and educating citizens to counter disinformation and polarisation.
- **International:** Building more effective and dynamic pro-democracy alliances while countering authoritarian efforts to hollow out democratic, multilateral institutions and create more autocratic regional bodies.

Within states, it is important to look past national averages to consider the ways in which democracy may be more resilient in some places than in others. It has often been argued that rural areas, for example, are more prone to authoritarian control than their urban counterparts.¹⁹ Even within rural and urban areas, some districts may demonstrate a greater capacity to resist autocratisation, either because they have greater access to information and resources – as is often the case with capital cities – or because they have histories of opposition politics and mobilisation.²⁰ Mapping sub-national democratic capacities is therefore a critical step towards a more accurate assessment of the potential for polities to resist democratic decline and the form such resistance is likely to take.

Analysts' understanding of democratic resilience also needs to extend above the state to assess how broader global changes are shaping democratic sustainability. To be fair, the international level has not been completely absent from conversations on resilience, but it has yet to be made into a core feature of discussions of ways to support it.

Doing so could draw on some of the key insights into how regional factors and trends reinforce autocratisation or create opportunities to challenge it. For example, political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have stressed that a state's susceptibility to international pressure to democratise is shaped by the extent to which it is networked into systems of political and economic linkage and leverage with western states.²¹ Meanwhile, the literature on neighbourhood effects shows that regional trends impact on individual states because countries tend to move in the direction of the average level of democracy in their neighbourhood.²² This means that the growing number of authoritarian neighbourhoods is likely to increase the challenge of sustaining democracy in countries that have been stable so far.

Just as worryingly, there is clear evidence of authoritarian learning and diffusion on the international scene.²³ An expanding authoritarian playbook is being promoted across borders. This has put new resources and strategies at the disposal of regimes that choose to opt out of democracy. As political scientists Stephen Hall and Thomas Ambrosio have observed, "there is increasing evidence that the renewed resilience of authoritarian regimes is due, in part, to authoritarian learning".²⁴

Global and regional institutions have also become spaces of authoritarian diffusion. A range of authoritarian actors is challenging democratic principles in major international forums, such as the United Nations (UN), supporting a charge led predominantly by China.²⁵ The collateral effects have been the dilution of democratic and human rights norms in these institutions and the promotion of ersatz approaches, such as the right to development or civilisational plurality.

Meanwhile, a growing number of authoritarian regional organisations and networks, such as minilaterals, have become vectors for containing democratic norms and expanding authoritarian governments' access to direct forms of support, like aid and political recognition. More ominously, these authoritarian regional organisations serve to coordinate repression of political opponents. According to one 2023 study, "members of more deeply authoritarian [regional organisations] are not only less likely to liberalise their politics. They are actually more likely to move in the opposite direction by further restricting civil and political liberties."²⁶

There may be pragmatic reasons for overlooking these issues. International patterns and their effects on states' domestic contexts can be diffuse and indirect, which makes developing concrete responses a challenge. Ignoring them, however, is a mistake: they are part of a context that is making the defence of democracy increasingly challenging. The type of relations that a state maintains abroad, including with its neighbours, international institutions, and donors, inherently impacts its ability to bounce back.²⁷ Moreover, while some international actors and processes, such as authoritarian regional organisations, are hard to change, others, such as patterns of donor-partner relations and the internal politics of bodies like the UN, are within the reach of the world's remaining democratic states.

Lesson three:

There is no silver bullet

Building on decades of experience of democracy support, democratic stakeholders have a good sense of some of the main factors that contribute to democratic resilience. These fall into five categories:

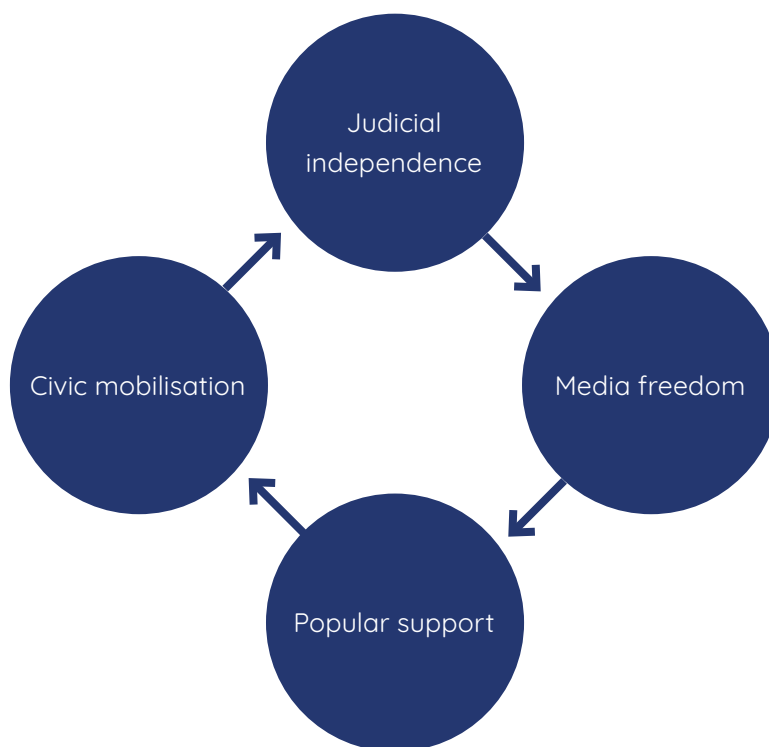
1. structural factors, such as economic and developmental issues, including the significance of national wealth and advanced industrialised economies for democratic stability;²⁸
2. social factors, like the presence of greater vertical and horizontal equality²⁹ and limited political polarisation;³⁰
3. normative factors, such as support for democratic values and practices;³¹
4. institutional factors,³² including the degree of state capacity and the design of democratic institutions;³³ and
5. actor-centric factors, including the ability of specific groups to act as a bulwark against autocratisation.³⁴

All of these factors are significant, but most approaches suffer from a common problem: they tend to focus on one particular factor or type of factor rather than on how different sets of factors interact in different contexts. Put another way, studies of democratic resilience have centred on a menu of factors that at best is incomplete and at worst creates the misleading impression that the same solution can be expected to work everywhere. Yet, devising impactful and durable strategies to enhance resilience requires a focus not on individual factors but on their relations and, as a result, on the often long-term and gradual nature of the processes involved in undermining or strengthening resilience. It is vital to think in terms of constellations of factors and their reinforcing effects (see figure 2).

Figure 2: The importance of joined-up thinking

Key factors do not operate in isolation. Instead, their impacts can be magnified or undermined depending on the context in which they operate. Effectively strengthening democratic resilience means identifying – and helping create – the conditions for effective institutions and players, and supporting the virtuous circles they can generate in combination. For example, a programme designed to strengthen checks and balances through the judiciary could have the following aims:

- **Judicial independence:** Supporting training and capacity-building programmes to boost the confidence and ability of judges to prevent the law from being abused.
- **Media freedom:** Fostering investigative journalism while protecting the independence of the media, so that citizens receive impartial news coverage.
- **Popular support:** Strengthening the public's backing of democratic institutions, such as independent judiciaries, by showing they can protect citizens and reduce corruption.
- **Civic mobilisation:** Investing in social movements and civic groups so they can organise citizens when institutions such as the media and the judiciary are threatened.



No single factor explains democratic resilience alone: to be effective, a given solution requires a range of other conditions to already be in place. The significance of public support for democracy, for example, is likely to be shaped by other factors, such as the strength of civil society, the extent of media freedom, and the quality of elections. Public commitment is not enough to sustain democracy in countries such as Uganda and Zimbabwe, where civil society has been co-opted, the media have been muzzled, elections are rigged, and democratic institutions systematically disadvantage some social groups. Thinking about constellations of factors is therefore important because they tend to reinforce and amplify – or, alternatively, undermine and dilute – one another.³⁵

This point is of academic and real-world importance. Donor and civil society initiatives to bolster citizens' support for democracy are likely to have little effect if work is not undertaken to also strengthen the variables that empower public opinion. Similarly, work to shore up constitutions against democratic reversals is likely to prove ineffective if it does not go hand in hand with efforts to reinforce judicial and legislative independence. This is clear from the failure of presidential term limits to prevent presidents for life from emerging when strong executives come up against weak judiciaries and legislatures in countries such as Russia and Rwanda.

Thinking in terms of constellations of factors is also valuable because it can help analysts and policymakers to understand how to ensure that democratic gains are sustained. For example, election victories for pro-democracy parties and the formation of a broad anti-authoritarian coalition in civil society are important developments; but locking in democratic gains for the longer term is also likely to require institutionalising them, for instance by giving constitutional protection to independent electoral commissions and media bodies.³⁶

Lesson four:

Context matters

With the world in a prolonged democratic recession, there is a risk of assuming that this global trend is the result of a single process. This can give rise to what can be called the temporal fallacy: the belief that all processes of undemocratic change are the same because they are happening at the same time. This, in turn, can lead to the mistake of assuming that similar solutions will work across radically different contexts.³⁷ This is not the case. Context matters. In particular, it is essential to understand and account for the type of autocratisation pathway on which a state finds itself, so that the responses can be matched accordingly.

A systematic mapping has yet to be done, even though there is broad and growing agreement that undemocratic change takes qualitatively different forms.³⁸ Part of the issue is that too much attention has gone to headline-grabbing examples of illiberal or outright authoritarian incumbents who have subverted previously democratic states, such as Hungary and India. Or, attention has gone to types of autocratisation for which there are already established responses because they are more rapid and ostentatious, such as coups.

Yet, processes of autocratisation have been observed across regime types, and some of the harshest and most dramatic regressions have taken place in already authoritarian regimes. Even in democratic states that have experienced decay, the process has been far from uniform. In some cases, the challenge has come in the form of relatively fast-moving episodes of autocratisation by authoritarian populists with socially exclusionary agendas. In many others, undemocratic change has taken the form of a slower and broader process. For example, democracy can degrade at a societal level when increasing discord undermines the bases for democratic debate and deliberation. Similarly, it can come as the accumulation of authoritarian practices by both states and non-state actors that weaken democratic accountability without outright institutional or visible social change.³⁹

When differentiating between experiences and seeking to develop durable responses, it is more useful to look at these pathways than at levels of democracy. Pathways reveal the direction of travel and the key actors while highlighting what the most significant risks are likely to be. Although these pathways are not mutually exclusive – different kinds of authoritarian process may unfold at the same time – carefully assessing which one (or ones) a country is on can provide valuable information about the kinds of resilience that are most necessary.

Four pathways are particularly prominent at present.⁴⁰ The first is **executive aggrandisement**, in which the sitting president or prime minister attempts to enhance their power or water down checks and balances, as with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary. A critical risk in this case is the repression and co-optation of civil society groups and a gradual slide towards dictatorship.

This is different from the second pathway, **polarisation**, which has been described by Levitsky and political scientist Daniel Ziblatt in the United States.⁴¹ Here, falling tolerance leads to greater violence and conflict, with particularly significant implications for women's rights and ethnic and sexual minorities.

The third pathway is **state capture**, in which a combination of elected and unelected actors subverts state institutions and uses them for private ends, as in South Africa. Key risks in this case include rampant corruption and the emboldening of actors and groups, including private business and the military, that have vested interests in preventing reform.

The fourth pathway is the **violent overthrow** of a civilian regime by the military, as in Burkina Faso, Gabon, Mali, Niger, and Sudan, or by a rebel force, as in Afghanistan. The main risks here are the consolidation of new juntas, the escalation of conflict into broader civil strife, and widespread human rights abuses.

Taking context into account requires recognising not only the political situation in a given country but also the significant variation in terms of state capacity and fragility. Autocratisation does not occur in a vacuum but in a specific environment, especially from the standpoint of what a state is capable of doing and the challenges it faces in performing its functions. Low-capacity states often face endemic fragility, which generates distinctive challenges that are hard to escape without significant resources. These challenges range from armed insurgencies or criminal organisations that undermine incumbents' ability to control their territory to political systems that are so weakly embedded that they do not effectively connect citizens to political parties and the state, leading to a lack of popular buy-in.

The prospects for democracy and democratic resilience are fundamentally tied to a state's capacity and willingness to perform. This relationship is clear in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, where instability relating to endemic capacity gaps and long-running insurgencies was a critical factor in the overthrows of civilian governments by military figures. Moreover, low state capacity and high fragility can also shape international involvement in ways that may have negative consequences for resilience. For example, these factors can encourage high levels of military aid and support as well as an emphasis on stability and security over the strengthening of democratic institutions.

Yet, despite the importance of state capacity and fragility for the trajectory of regimes, these factors have been absent from discussions of democratic resilience. One reason for this may be that the relationship between capacity, fragility, and democracy is not always straightforward. Capacity and democracy cannot be assumed to be in lockstep over time.⁴² Even in relatively open

societies with competitive electoral politics, state structures have varying capacity to control non-state violence, implement decisions effectively across the whole territory, and govern without external interference. Moreover, although autocracy is often associated with poorly performing institutions, some authoritarian regimes have been hailed as champions of state performance and effectiveness.⁴³

This relationship is therefore not always mutually reinforcing. While low state capacity is a hindrance to democratisation – and to redemocratisation – high state capacity is not by itself a safeguard against autocratisation. Indeed, specific types of capacity, such as coercion, can be tools to entrench authoritarianism. This is clear from the way that leaders in some authoritarian regimes have used the capacity of their states to surveil and control their populations. China is an excellent example that leverages high state capacity to construct what researcher Xiao Qiang has called a “surveillance state”.⁴⁴ Any effort to understand democratic resilience should therefore include an assessment of a state’s ability to ground a project of sustainable democratisation. Externally supported resilience, without attention to the right investments in state capacity, is bound to fail in time.

Lesson five:

Redemocratisation is different from democratisation

A pressing question facing those who work on democratic resilience is how best to revive democratic politics in countries that have experienced autocratisation. Such opportunities are more common than many realise, despite the consistent democratic decline globally. The main reason for this is that governments that erode democratic institutions are often unstable as a result of defections and mass protests; meanwhile, new autocratic leaders often fail to establish a strong power base, and military juntas are pressured by regional and international actors to transition back to civilian rule.⁴⁵ These windows of opportunity can be leveraged.⁴⁶ But the challenges they represent and the specific resources required to meet them need to be more carefully understood.

The process of reversing a recent autocratising or authoritarian episode is often very different from some – though not all – of the democratic transitions of previous decades. During the third wave of democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, broad coalitions came together to remove one-party states, military regimes, and personal dictators from power. These struggles often took decades to effect political change and, in some cases, were heavily influenced by international events and foreign donors, especially in the early 1990s. Because the transitions took place from closed authoritarian contexts, they often involved the negotiation or imposition of new constitutions and the creation of new political institutions, such as electoral management bodies.

The process of redemocratisation, especially when it occurs within just a few years of autocratisation, is bound to be very different. Redemocratisation may take the form of a pro-democracy opposition party winning an election, as recently happened in Brazil, Guatemala, and Poland, or of a military-led government handing over power to a genuinely civilian-led administration. Such processes may result from a shift in the balance of power within the ruling party after a change in leader or in the composition of the dominant coalition. This occurred in Ecuador, where Lenín Moreno succeeded Rafael Correa as president and reversed some of the backsliding that had occurred under his predecessor, for example by re-establishing presidential term limits.⁴⁷ In such cases of redemocratisation, the challenge facing pro-democracy reformers is less to establish new institutions to protect checks and balances and more to reclaim control of existing institutions that have been captured or subverted.

The governments and leaders that undermine democracy often do so by manipulating laws and employing strategies to expand executive power, politicising and undermining the impartiality of state administrations. These processes are particularly damaging because they weaken the credibility of democratic institutions and their ability to legitimate the exercise of power – even after democratic rule has been re-established.

This means that efforts to reinstate democracy after a short but intense period of autocratisation may raise two distinctive challenges that require special attention:

1. **Instability:** When authoritarian forces take power through elections and still have political-party representation, they may continue to exert a strong influence on policy through the legislature and sub-national governments. Moreover, defeated authoritarian leaders may be able to win future elections, leading to a period of yo-yoing between democratic and authoritarian leadership.
2. **The democratic removal of authoritarian actors:** New democratic leaders will naturally want to remove as quickly as possible authoritarian judges, media, and security chiefs who were put in place by the previous regime. But failing to follow due process may further undermine fragile institutions.

As a result, the strategies that redemocratisation requires cannot simply be copied from democratisation but instead need to be adapted in response to three key questions. First, what is the most effective way to strengthen political institutions and reassert their independence after they have been subverted? Second, how can this be done in ways that do not further weaken the existing political system? And third, how can the conditions that made the system vulnerable to autocratisation in the first place be addressed?

The second question is particularly significant in contexts of electoral reversal. That is because new governments often feel a strong compulsion – and come under intense public pressure – to use informal or extra-legal means to purge institutions of individuals seen as complicit in former authoritarian abuses. This has recently been a major issue in Poland, where Tusk’s new government has moved to purge the state media on the basis that they had served as propaganda outlets for the previous authoritarian administration.

Although they may be intuitively appealing, informal and personalised interventions by new leaders to remove individuals they disapprove of may do more harm than good. In research on the fight against corruption, for example, some authors have argued that “following due process is important, because extra-legal measures to effect political change often have the unintended consequence of weakening the norm of rule following”.⁴⁸ These problems may be amplified if such strategies generate fresh legal controversy, as in Poland, where one of the country’s top courts ruled that Tusk’s attempt to wipe the slate clean regarding the state media was illegal.

These kinds of institutional blockage may, in turn, further complicate the task of strengthening resilience by encouraging democratic leaders to resort to undemocratic means to secure their reforms. Faced with entrenched politicised and nepotistic rivals in state institutions, new leaders may feel compelled to co-opt support through informal channels or find underhand ways to replace personnel appointed by the previous government to the civil service, courts, or electoral commission with their own allies. This temptation is exacerbated by the fact that new leaders face the twin challenge of undoing authoritarian damage to the political system and competing electorally against undemocratic parties, which may still command significant support among sections of the population. Moreover, new governments have to meet this double challenge in an era in which the value of democracy is increasingly questioned and international support for democracy promotion has weakened considerably.

Redemocratisation processes are therefore likely to be volatile political moments at which two sets of logics and practices co-exist and electoral considerations and expedient short-term solutions risk undermining longer-term resilience.

Conclusion:

Democratic innovation is vital

The preceding discussion demonstrates just how great the challenge facing citizens, civil society groups, and policymakers seeking to defend democracy really is. A further challenge is that processes of authoritarian learning and innovation mean that many traditional approaches to strengthening democracy and counteracting autocratisation are less effective than they used to be. This point is shown here through the examples of democracy aid and development aid, and through the way in which donors have typically sought to respond to evidence of democratic erosion by channelling a greater proportion of aid funds away from the state and into non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Both examples demonstrate that democrats will need to be more innovative moving forwards.

Over the last 20 years, pro-democracy international donors have sought to strengthen and entrench democratic institutions and norms by providing democracy aid – that is, aid targeted at areas such as participation, media and the flow of information, elections, political parties, and women’s rights. This aid has often gone hand in hand with the idea – sometimes unspoken and untested – that by supporting areas such as education and poverty alleviation, general development aid will help foster more democratic individuals and societies. Too often, however, authoritarian leaders have proved adept at manipulating aid flows for their own ends, and so, these hoped-for gains have not materialised.

The good news is that democracy aid has been shown to have a positive, if modest, effect on the quality of democracy.⁴⁹ The bad news is that this aid is generally more effective when invested in countries that are stable or slowly moving towards democracy than in those that are autocratising at pace.⁵⁰ There is also evidence that democracy aid works better in poor-quality, multiparty systems than in fully authoritarian ones and that among authoritarian systems, it is more effective in one-party states than in military regimes. In turn, this finding suggests that democracy aid is likely to have the greatest effects in countries with more inclusive, more accountable governments that feature political elites who are not violently opposed to civil liberties and political rights. In other words, aid is least effective where it is most needed.

The evidence is even more worrying when it comes to development aid, which has generally been shown to have a mixed effect at best. This is because while development aid can support democratic building blocks, such as education, it also enables governments to better meet the demands of their citizens and so helps stabilise whichever government is in power. Savvy authoritarian leaders have also become adept at accepting aid for projects that do not threaten their hold on power

and rejecting or subverting those that could.⁵¹ Partly as a result, the general consensus among researchers is that development aid works to entrench whatever political system is in place, be it democratic or authoritarian. One consequence of this trend is that especially in cases where donors do not actively take care to do no harm,⁵² international aid in authoritarian states props up dictators.⁵³

There is also a pressing need to rethink how donors respond to evidence of democratic erosion. One of the classic strategies in the past has been to remove budget support and shift aid modalities by moving funds out of government ministries and into civil society groups. The basic intuition behind this approach is compelling. Shifting aid to NGOs promises to insulate donor funds from corruption and misuse while strengthening the barriers to further autocratisation. The problem is that for over 20 years, authoritarian leaders have learned from one another about how to exert control over civil society groups when this happens.

This control has included two main strategies. The first is the adoption of anti-NGO legislation that restricts the amount of funds civil society groups can secure from abroad and, in some cases, enables governments to appoint board members and stipulate what organisations can and cannot do. In the three years after the trend started with Russia's introduction of the notorious foreign agents law in 2012, more than 120 laws were proposed or passed around the world to restrict the operation of civil society organisations.⁵⁴ Second, several authoritarian leaders have set about either sponsoring the emergence of a more pliant set of organisations or co-opting existing civil society groups through a combination of intimidation and patronage.

These processes of authoritarian adaptation have significantly constrained the options available to both international donors and civic actors. In countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Nicaragua, for example, donors initially responded to democratic erosion by increasingly working with and through civil society groups, until the backlash against them made this an impossible strategy to sustain. As pro-democracy civic groups have been intimidated, shut down, and starved of funds, donors have been forced to consider the risk that large increases in support for NGOs could potentially make them a target for repression.

Authoritarian learning also has profound implications for international efforts to strengthen democratic resilience going forwards. Donors should not abandon their support for civil society but do need to be more careful in the way that this support is extended. Funding a wider range of democracy, civic, and economic organisations may be one way to create a stronger civic alliance that can push back against anti-NGO legislation more effectively. It may also be worth considering supporting groups that authoritarian regimes find harder to regulate or shut down, such as less institutionalised social movements.

Changes are also required to the deployment of foreign aid. On the one hand, donors seeking to halt the global rise of autocratisation will need to invest more in democracy aid and confront the reality that development aid is not currently working to reduce the risks of backsliding. On the other hand, in the words of the 2023 review of the United Kingdom's (UK's) approach to democracy and human rights by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, "aid disbursements alone are unlikely to be sufficient to halt the current trend of democratic backsliding".⁵⁵ Instead, aid will likely need to be complemented by carefully designed diplomatic interventions, which, in turn, will require greater international cohesion and coordination.

The examples discussed here are perhaps the most prominent areas in which democratic innovation is needed, but they are not the only ones. As this report has demonstrated, it will be critical that efforts to strengthen democratic resilience operate simultaneously at the local, national, and international levels; focus on interventions that are designed to bring about virtuous cycles by supporting mutually reinforcing processes; differentiate between pathways of autocratisation; and recognise that redemocratisation brings distinctive new challenges as well as opportunities.

In rushing to undertake this task, however, researchers and democratic stakeholders should be careful not to miss the opportunity to adopt a more creative and forward-thinking approach to the question of what kind of democracy they want to strengthen. Transformation is not only ethically warranted; it is also critical to democratic sustainability.

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