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WORKING GROUP

Autocrats Within



The Greatest Threat to This Year's Elections in Turkey and Poland Is Domestic Corruption

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About the Alliance for Securing Democracy at GMF

The Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a nonpartisan initiative that develops comprehensive strategies to deter, defend against, and raise the costs on autocratic efforts to undermine and interfere in democratic institutions. ASD has staff in Washington, DC, and Brussels, bringing together experts on disinformation, malign finance, emerging technologies, elections integrity, economic coercion, and cybersecurity, as well as Russia, China, and the Middle East, to collaborate across traditional stovepipes and develop cross-cutting frameworks.

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Executive Summary

The greatest threats facing the two most consequential elections in and around Europe in 2023—Turkey in May and Poland in the fall—come from autocratic corruption within these two backsliding democracies. Both these countries are ruled by “autocrats” who consolidate and exercise power without deference to legal or democratic constraints. Their tactics are “corrupt” in that they abuse power—including both formal governing levers and informal sway over society carried out by oligarchs and cronies—to advance their personal political interest in keeping their grip on that power.

However, Turkey and Poland arrive at this crossroad from starkly divergent histories and levels of democratic development. Autocratic efforts are about twice as [severe](#) in Turkey, which is now completing a long descent into consolidated authoritarianism. Conversely, Poland only [fell](#) from the ranks of consolidated democracies in 2015. Each nation bookends the nearly 40% of countries in the world where hybrid regimes hold onto power by administering elections that are “free but not fair”, meaning that voters may cast ballots for candidates of their choice who are genuinely competing but not on anything close to a level playing field. Given how actively [“authoritarian diffusion”](#)—the spread of repressive tools and tactics from one authoritarian regime to another—appears to be coursing through anti-democratic forces around the world, and given the geopolitical importance of democratic resilience on Europe’s eastern flank, the success or failure of incumbents using autocratic corruption as a re-election strategy in this year’s Turkish and Polish elections may well reverberate globally.

Turkey: Erdoğan’s Playbook of Cronyism and Repression

After winning free and fair elections in 2002, 2007, and 2011, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began struggling to maintain majority support largely due to Turkey’s declining [economic](#) performance (he has since become president after holding a 2017 referendum to alter Turkey’s constitution). In response, he has clung to power through a system of autocratic corruption that includes conducting elections [deemed](#) by international monitors to be free but not fair.

Erdoğan [called](#) a failed coup attempt aimed at removing him from office in 2016 a “gift from God”, using it as a pretense to crack down on his critics and further consolidate autocratic power. Nine months later, after [arbitrarily imprisoning](#) tens of thousands of government and party officials—including the leaders of the pro-Kurdish party—as well as some 150 journalists and many other civic actors, Erdoğan held a constitutional referendum in which 51.4% of voters approved his plan [to centralize power](#) in the new executive presidency, at the expense of the parliament and judiciary. Another year after that, in the 2018 election, Erdoğan won 52.6% of the vote and stepped into the newly empowered presidency. Both the 2017 and 2018 contests were marred by autocratic subversions that afforded Erdoğan enormous advantages:

- **Perpetual state of emergency:** The 2017 referendum and 2018 election were held under a post-coup [state of emergency](#) that allowed the government to rule by decree with little oversight. The government [used](#) these powers to hold 77,000 people in pretrial detention for alleged links to terrorists, close roughly 200 media outlets, pressure the media that remained open into biased coverage, restrict people's movements and assembly rights, and otherwise curtail essential freedoms and chill civic participation needed for a competitive election. A month after the 2018 election, the state of emergency lapsed, but eight days later, many of its powers were codified into a [new counterterrorism law](#).
- **Government control over public media:** The government [uses](#) regulatory bodies like the Directorate of Communications and the Radio and Television Supreme Council to pressure broadcasters to toe the party line. In recent years, state-run media groups like the Anadolu Agency and the [Turkish Radio and Television Corporation](#) have become political instruments of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). Government [control](#) over editorial decisions became more direct and severe after thousands of staff were purged from public news agencies amid the crackdown that followed the 2016 attempted coup.
- **Crony ownership of most private media:** Private media in Turkey is increasingly consolidated into the hands of a small number of pro-regime elites. A culminating point in this process came in 2018, when Aydın Doğan, a mogul critical of Erdoğan, [sold](#) the country's largest newspaper, Hurriyet, along with other TV and radio outlets, to a family allied with Erdoğan. Furthermore, private media groups that criticize the regime have long faced regulatory pressure ranging from invasive tax audits to withdrawal of public advertising funds.
- **Grand corruption funded by public procurement:** In its first decade in power, the AKP loosened competitive bidding rules and oversight through 191 amendments to public procurement law, allowing Erdoğan's government to privatize \$62 billion in state assets and cultivate a loyal network of [oligarchs and cronies](#) that relies upon the AKP for public contracts, leniency from law enforcement, and access to cheap capital. In turn, these AKP-friendly business elites steer the proceeds of this grand corruption back into Erdoğan's re-election campaigns by buying media companies, coercing employees to vote for the AKP, and donating to the AKP's charities, schools, and NGOs.
- **Politicized reshuffling and securitization of polling stations:** In the 2017 constitutional referendum and 2018 election, AKP officials made unilateral changes to voting procedures and ballot box chain of custody over the objections of opposition parties, often [empowering](#) hand-picked civil servants over political party representatives. Polling places were consolidated and relocated in areas of heavy opposition support, requiring voters to face longer journeys and lines. In the heavily Kurdish southeast, new security protocols at polling places required voters to pass through security checkpoints where armed guards were instructed to check voters' identification and find those wanted for arrest—an intimidating deterrent from entering.

- **Repression of online discourse:** For more than 15 years, the Turkish government has [blocked](#) access to sites that it accuses of insulting the government or the nation, including YouTube and Twitter. In recent years, though, the regime has taken a much more direct approach to online censorship and the criminalization of speech, introducing a broad [social media law](#) in 2022 imposing penalties for spreading disinformation or engaging in hate speech and [blocking](#) access to Twitter in the wake of the 2023 earthquake over criticisms of the government response.

At a minimum, Erdoğan can be expected to rerun this playbook of repression and cronyism that he has perfected over two decades in power to ensure that the May 2023 election is unfair. But with Erdoğan [polling](#) ten points behind his opponent, he may decide that his only path to political survival involves even more draconian restrictions against free campaigning, discourse, and voting. Such steps could cause this to be the first modern Turkish election that is not only unfair but also unfree, establishing Turkey as a consolidated authoritarian state.

Three threats build upon the sharpest tactics Erdoğan has used since 2016 and, thus, pose the greatest danger to a free election this year. First, Erdoğan could exploit the state of emergency imposed after the February earthquakes to curtail the freedoms of assembly, association, expression, and the press throughout the campaign period, as he did in 2017 and 2018. Second, Erdoğan and his loyalists in the judiciary could continue banning some of his leading political opponents from participating in politics, like the pro-Kurdish party leaders who remain in prison, the potential presidential candidate who was polling the strongest against Erdoğan when he [was sentenced](#) to prison and banned from politics, and the pro-Kurdish party that faces a pending court case that could force it to shut down. Finally, Erdoğan could resist the peaceful transfer of power, either by calling his supporters into the streets—like former US President Donald Trump did when falsely [calling](#) his 2020 election loss a “coup” and like Erdoğan himself did in 2016 [to thwart](#) a real attempted coup—or by getting his apparatchiks in the security services to back him.

Poland: Kaczyński’s Playbook of Unconstitutional Party Takeover

Whereas Erdoğan built his corrupt autocracy behind the scenes for a decade before fully undermining the fairness of elections, the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS), led by Jarosław Kaczyński, launched a full-frontal assault on constitutional governance in the immediate weeks and months after coming to power in 2015—in what official observers [assessed](#) to have been Poland’s last fair election. PiS rapidly laid the groundwork for autocratic backsliding by pumping out vitriolic propaganda and illegally [packing](#) Poland’s Constitutional Tribunal. PiS compromised the rule of law and blurred the lines between party, state, and church, which allowed the party to roll out the following autocratic efforts that helped it win unfair national elections in 2019 and 2020:

- **Government control over public media:** Two months after PiS’s narrow upset victory in the October 2015 parliamentary election, PiS [introduced](#) a law undermining the constitutionally empowered media regulator, shifting its powers to a new council controlled by PiS lawmakers. A PiS lawmaker [known](#) for unscrupulous propaganda was installed to run Polish public television, and he promptly replaced hundreds of journalists with fringe right-

wing media personalities. The public broadcaster turned into an unabashed mouthpiece to [promote](#) PiS narratives, candidates, and campaign messaging. Days before elections, the broadcaster runs “documentaries” meant to scare voters about how opposition control would lead to an “invasion” of LGBT people, Islamic terrorists, and German overlords. In 2019, it ran smear campaigns based on candidates’ text messages that were [stolen](#) using Pegasus spyware.

- **Corruption of campaign finance:** PiS lawmakers and state executives engineered a heavily lopsided system of political financing. The ruling party has [used](#) publicly funded events for campaign messaging, [enacted](#) last-minute changes to campaign finance laws that allowed PiS to spend almost three times as much as its opposition, and [raised](#) as much as three-quarters of its campaign war chest from 27 executives that work at state-owned enterprises. The opposition [alleges](#) that the latter is a case of PiS secretly directing a state-funded straw donor scheme. Under PiS, law enforcement has declined to investigate that case or other [reports](#) of high-level corruption.
- **Politicized control over electoral administration:** In the lead up to the 2019 parliamentary election, PiS [enacted](#) a law taking the power to manage elections away from apolitical judges and handing it over to PiS lawmakers and appointees, among other reforms empowering PiS officials to determine the validity of election results. When PiS lost its majority in the upper house in 2019, it [tried](#) and failed to get the Supreme Court to recount and overturn the six races it lost. When the 2020 election coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and PiS was polling strongly, Kaczyński tried to hastily stand up a [mail-only](#) voting system before [canceling](#) the election two days before the vote, all without following constitutional authorities or statutory procedures.
- **Instrumentalization of the Catholic Church:** International election observers have [noted](#) with concern that the campaigning role of the Catholic Church—with PiS events and materials located inside churches—undermines its separation from the Polish state. Church officials sometimes [encourage](#) congregants to vote for specific PiS candidates or discourage Poles from electing candidates from other parties. They regularly echo PiS’s campaign messages and anti-LGBT rhetoric, like when the archbishop of Kraków gave a [sermon](#) in the heat of the 2019 election season warning that the “red plague” of communism had been replaced by a “neo-Marxist ... rainbow plague”. Entities associated with a large Catholic-nationalist media [empire](#) have [received](#) at least PLN 325 million in public funds since 2015.

Since rising to power in 2015, PiS has attempted to erode the basic foundations of democracy, including by undermining the rule of law, taking over public media, and manipulating election administration. These actions tilted the electoral playing field in PiS’s favor in 2019 and 2020. Despite a surge in sanctions against Poland by the EU for its anti-democratic trajectory, PiS has continued its autocratic efforts to retain power ahead of the 2023 vote, including by [enacting](#) unconstitutional legislation aimed at bolstering turnout asymmetrically in PiS strongholds. Poland’s increasing geopolitical importance during the war in Ukraine means Poland’s democratic future is more important than ever, and the fall election will serve as a new challenge to the country’s—and Europe’s—stability.

Conclusion: Domestic Corruption Is the Leading Threat to Sovereign Democracy

Turkey and Poland have very different histories of democratization and have experienced backsliding to differing degrees. But their ruling regimes have perpetrated many similarly corrupt autocratic subversions to stay in power through unfair elections: They have compromised the rule of law through court packing and states of emergency, taken over the media through regulatory capture and cronyism, abused power in campaign finance and election administration, and politicized other power centers like the church and security services.

A further decline into corrupt autocracy for either or both countries would imperil NATO's strategic position with respect to both Russia and Iran, and threaten the rule of law across Europe, potentially encouraging other would-be authoritarians to step up efforts to undermine democratic institutions in their own countries. At a moment when threats to European sovereignty and integrity are as aggressive as they have ever been in the post-Cold War era, it is essential for the international community to stand with the people of Turkey and Poland as they prepare to defend their democracies from the threats within.

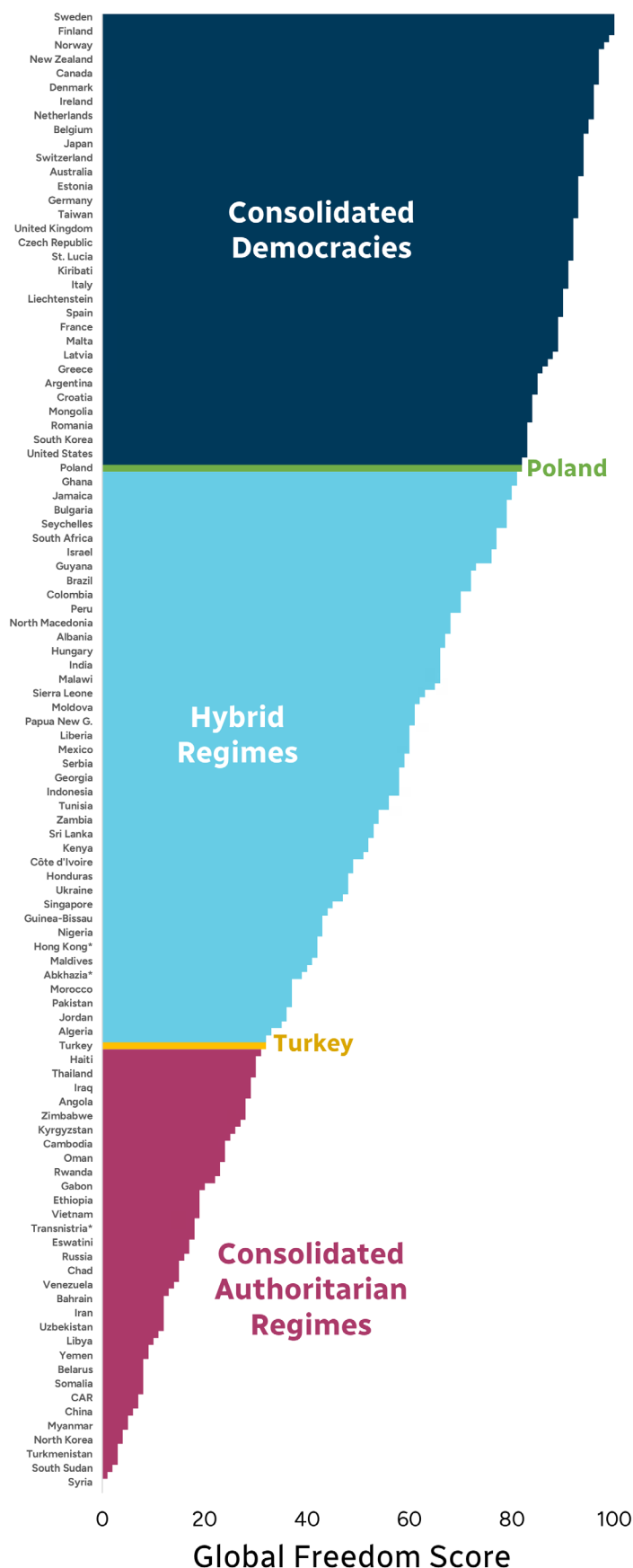
Introduction

In the 13 months between Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the March 2023 Summit for Democracy, several analysts and officials [agreed](#) that this was the best year in decades for democracies world-wide. In addition to Ukraine impressing the world with how powerfully it is defending its democracy, pro-democracy forces boldly took to the streets of Iran and China and to the ballot box in the United States. Columnists at the [Financial Times](#) and [New York Times](#) called it "the year liberal democracy fought back". Freedom House declared, "The struggle for democracy may be approaching a turning point", evidenced by the annual changes in its [Freedom in the World assessments](#) coming within one country of ending 17 consecutive years of democratic recession.

On March 30, 2023, at the second Summit for Democracy, US President Joe Biden [noted](#) the years of consecutive decline and pronounced, "But this year, we can say there's a different story to tell ... This is a turning point for our world toward greater freedom, greater dignity, and greater democracy ... And today we can say with pride that the democracies of the world are getting stronger, not weaker. Autocracies of the world are getting weaker, not stronger."

These are all reasonable views based on momentous new facts on the ground, notwithstanding countervailing developments in Hungary, the Philippines, Israel, and elsewhere. But this sunny optimism also risks being naïve to the fact that the two most important elections in the world this year—Turkey in May and Poland in the fall—will be administered by severely [backsliding regimes](#) that will almost surely subvert any chance of a fair contest and, in Turkey, may even descend into unfree authoritarianism. This internal autocratic threat is even more glaring than interference by foreign authoritarian regimes;

Poland and Turkey Bookend the Hybrids



Note: The source of the global freedom scores is the Freedom in the World 2023 report by Freedom House. The classification into the three types of regimes—democracies, hybrids, and authoritarians—is an estimation made by ASD at GMF, which differs from Freedom House's free, partly free, and not free classifications.

although, that risk persists as strongly as ever. The integrity of the process and the results of these two contests will shape the future of the rule of law in the European Union, the security architecture of Europe, and, most importantly, the strength of democracy on Europe's frontiers.

The extent to which the current ruling regimes have dismantled their countries' democratic traditions and institutions is very different in Turkey and Poland. Based on those [assessments](#) by Freedom House, autocratic assaults on democracy have been about twice as severe in Turkey as they have been in Poland. On the global spectrum of democratic freedoms, Turkey and Poland are roughly positioned as bookends around the nearly 40% of countries in the middle that exist as hybrids between consolidated democracies and authoritarian regimes (see chart). Each of these two countries has a modern history as a democracy that appeared solid until the current ruling regime started using similar corrupt subversions to tilt the electoral playing field to their advantage. Their autocratic playbooks—packing the courts, appointing loyalists to control public media, using cronies to buy private media, exploiting state companies to bankroll re-election campaigns, abusing states of emergency and election administration to suppress opposition voting and campaigning, etc.—illustrate the full range of tactics used by hybrid regimes to undermine democracy and consolidate single-party rule.

Given the rise of autocratic governments in other backsliding European democracies, like Hungary, and the relative strength of illiberal parties in consolidated European democracies, like France and Italy, the robustness of democracy on Europe's frontiers is vitally important to the future of the European project, as well as the future of the liberal world order at large. Poland is especially important because of its status as an EU member state, its role as a stalwart opponent of Russian expansionism, and its heated nationalism (which derives in no small part from its history of abuse and subjugation at the hands both Czarist and Soviet Russia, as well as Nazi Germany). Turkey is critical due to its role as major player in both Middle East and Black Sea power politics, its history as a pillar of secular democracy in the Muslim world, and its location straddling Europe and Asia. Both countries are active and important members of NATO, with Turkey possessing the second largest armed forces in NATO after the United States. In both countries, the geo-strategic considerations that make the functionality of their democracies so vital to NATO and EU strategic planning are also the subjects of vibrant domestic foreign policy debates, making Poland and Turkey potentially appetizing targets for foreign interference, especially by Russia. But while the Kremlin unambiguously [favors](#) Erdoğan, Russia will not be inclined to support the ruling regime in Poland, even though its rule-of-law backsliding hurts Europe, simply because of how strongly Poland is helping Ukraine.

What makes Turkey and Poland distinct from many other shaky democracies around the world is the strength of their democratic traditions and the high value placed on democracy by their national cultures and voters. They also both suffer histories of dismemberment by greater powers—painful legacies that contribute to the depth of their democratic traditions but also fuel an enduring sense of lost glory and need for national strength to stand up to foreign powers—making voters susceptible to manipulation by populist autocrats.

At the end of World War I, European states dissolved the Ottoman Empire through the [Treaty of Sèvres](#), which forced Turkey to renounce all rights over Arab Asia and North Africa. The founder of the Turkish Republic, Kemal Atatürk, [believed](#) the Ottomans failed because they were insufficiently

secular and European (Erdoğan, on the other hand, seeks national power as a Middle Eastern nation that competes with and balances great powers). Though periodically marred by its military's involvement in politics, Turkey has functioned as a multiparty democracy throughout the post-war era, with many liberal features, including an independent secular judiciary and full women's suffrage, dating back to the 1920s and 1930s. Erdoğan is only the [latest](#) postwar Turkish leader—from Adnan Menderes in the 1950s to Turgut Ozal in the 1980s—that has struggled to sustain one-man rule. Atatürk and early democratic leaders like İsmet İnönü remain national heroes of immense esteem.

As for Poland's history of partition and subjugation by its neighbors, after its trisection by Russia, Prussia, and Austria at the end of the 18th century, Poland ceased to exist until the end of World War I, when the [Treaty of Versailles](#) established the Second Polish Republic. This turbulent but functional democracy indelibly linked Polish nationalism and Polish democracy in ways that endured long after Poland's bisection by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, and which survived through decades of Poland's subjugation by the latter. Polish nationalist unrest in the 1980s, [embodied](#) by the trade union Solidarity, led directly to the reestablishment of Polish democracy, and indirectly to the end of communism in the Eastern Bloc. The sacrifices made by successive generations of Polish liberals and nationalists have ensured that Poles today place tremendous value on both their democracy and their sovereignty. These democratic legacies make today's threats to Turkey and Poland's democracies fundamentally different in character than similar threats in states with short or minimal democratic histories.

Essential to understanding the different threats to democratic institutions that various democracies face is the concept of "[competitive authoritarianism](#)", regimes in which elections are both meaningful and free but not fair, due to the tendency of incumbent parties to use the tools and resources of the state to advantage their own side in public discourse, and eventually at the ballot box. Since the end of the Cold War, nearly all regimes around the world have come to rely on elections as the basis for their legitimacy. This is true of highly functional democracies, like Canada or Japan, but also of highly repressive authoritarian or totalitarian states, like Syria or North Korea, in which regimes "win" sham elections with greater than 95% of the purported vote. When Russia and China dissented against the first Summit for Democracy, these two regimes—under which people are not free to choose their leaders—dubiously [argued](#) that they too are forms of democracy. This reflects a global consensus around democratic legitimacy with which even anti-democratic regimes must engage. Historical materialism, monarchism, explicit fascism, and other anti-democratic ideologies no longer confer enough legitimacy to be relied upon by even totalitarian regimes, so such states must adopt the trappings of democratic institutions, even if only as a veneer over the institutions of state violence upon which they truly stand.

Relatively few states, though, rely on entirely fake elections to produce the outcomes desired by their leadership. Far more common are hybrid regimes [characterized](#) by competitive authoritarianism. Historically, most countries that came to a place of competitive authoritarianism were fully authoritarian states that saw partial or incomplete democratic reforms. This was the path of several of Poland and Turkey's post-communist neighbors, including Armenia, Georgia, Serbia, and Moldova, all of which have democratic institutions and processes, as well as genuine political competition, but none of which have ever sustained the development of truly free and fair democracy. This puts them far ahead of post-communist states like Russia, Belarus, and the Central Asian countries that have

remained fully authoritarian, but well behind post-communist EU member states like Estonia, Lithuania, or the Czech Republic that have matured into full democracies. In the years immediately following the breakup of the Soviet Union, many hoped that “[democratic diffusion](#)” was a one-way process that might be faster for some states than for others, but that was always unidirectional toward the “end of [history](#)”.

Over the past two decades, though, the world has been forced to acknowledge a process of “[authoritarian diffusion](#)” and a different sort of competitive authoritarianism, one that takes hold in states that have previously been robustly democratic. Hungary represents such an example, and its backsliding on essential democratic indicators has created major worries for the democracy-based international institutions of which it is a member, most of all NATO and the EU. The subversion of democratic institutions in Turkey and Poland would constitute an enormous threat to the future security and solvency of NATO (of which both are members) and the EU (of which Poland is a member and Turkey is a key partner and aspiring member).

Framework

Charting democratic decline requires distinguishing between ways incumbents improve their prospects of re-election through illegitimate autocratic attacks that fundamentally undermine democratic norms and institutions to subvert the people’s will versus legitimate “hardball” politics that are far from democratic ideals but nevertheless enjoy broad and well-established consent of the governed across most of the population. This can be a fine and subjective line, but an important one to define as a basis for assessing the legitimacy of political tactics. Activities can be considered illegitimate by failing on any one of three dimensions.

One consideration, especially in states that are facing democratic backsliding (rather than an imperfect process of democratization), is whether the activity is part of a:

- longstanding and static status quo that is broadly accepted as “business as usual” (could be legitimate), versus a
- new and deleterious direction for the state’s democratic institutions and culture (illegitimate).

No country exists as a “perfect democracy”, and even vibrant democracies like those of South Korea or the United States have elements that arguably run counter to the spirit of democracy (for example, channels of US campaign finance used to buy influence or funnel non-transparent support), or that provide some degree of structural advantage to the incumbent party or a powerful sector or constituency. So another consideration is whether the tool involves:

- policy instruments that arguably serve public interests, such as impartially distributed welfare payments or popular foreign policy posturing (could be legitimate), versus
- more directly and exclusively self-serving corruptions of democratic processes, such as manipulations of the press or election administration (illegitimate).

Yet another question is the degree to which bad activities are:

- one-off gambits to achieve short-term gains, with little long-term structural impact, besides the disrespect for norms, fairness, or the common good that they reflect (could be legitimate), versus
- components of a broader campaign to dismantle key pillars of democracy, possibly perpetrated by a regime that sees authoritarianism as its only path to hold power because it is not supported by a majority of the population (illegitimate).

Assessing autocratic threats to democratic institutions requires a nuanced understanding of the informal power structures that dominate corrupt political-economic systems. One valuable source for tracking threats to the freedom and fairness of elections is the reporting of monitoring missions of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Their preliminary and final reports flag important threats such as biased media environments or improper election administration. Excerpts from the summaries of the OSCE final reports on two decades of elections in Poland and Turkey reveal the decline of democratic standards and procedures over the past decade, as well as the deteriorating atmosphere in which these contests took place (see table). However, as with most assessments undertaken by technocrats from countries with solid rule of law and reliance on formal power structures, they tend to mirror their own system by organizing the analysis around the legal-institutional framework, with chapters on the legal underpinnings of elections, administrative bodies, voter and candidate registration processes, campaign finance regulations, etc. While forms of corruption are sometimes woven into these chapters, this approach tends to underappreciate the extent to which incumbent regimes illegitimately tilt the playing field to their advantage through manipulations such as the enrichment of cronies and oligarchs who in turn bankroll the re-election campaigns of the ruling regime.

It is also worth remembering that while the most consequential erosion of democracy comes from the incumbent party (which stands to benefit from “locking in” a new status quo), opposition parties and groups can also undermine democratic institutions, whether by polluting the information ecosystem or delegitimizing fair election processes or outcomes that they disfavor, both of which can contribute to democratic decline in real and consequential ways.

Finally, it is essential to analyze and appreciate the ways in which foreign interference can contribute to democratic backsliding in both mature and struggling democracies. This sort of authoritarian diffusion of harmful trends and norms from authoritarian states to partial democracies is a major goal of authoritarian states because it helps them legitimize their own approaches to social control while delegitimizing liberalism and democracy globally. This diffusion can take place with the approval of either incumbent or opposition political figures within the target state (as in 2016 when then-candidate Donald Trump urged Russia to interfere in the US presidential election) or without any known internal approval or support (as in Russian support for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 primary elections).

Final Reports by OSCE ODIHR Election Monitoring Missions

Turkey

2002 Parliamentary Elections

"The 3 November elections for the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) demonstrated the vibrancy of Turkey's democracy. A large number of parties campaigned actively throughout the country, offering the electorate a broad and varied choice. The sweeping victory of opposition parties showed the power of the Turkish electorate to institute governmental change. The elections were held under election laws that establish a framework for democratic elections in line with international standards. Significant constitutional and legal reforms instituted over the past two years have further improved the overall legal framework under which the elections were carried out."

2007 Early Parliamentary Elections

"The overall conduct of the elections represents a notable achievement against a background of political tensions which arose in the spring of 2007, following the failure by parliament to elect a new president. The elections demonstrated the resilience of the election process in Turkey, characterized by pluralism and a high level of public confidence. The registration of political parties and independent candidates was generally inclusive, offering voters a wide and genuine choice. Parties had sufficient ability to convey their messages to the voters, although the campaign took place in a polarised atmosphere. Turkey's diverse and vibrant media provided broadly balanced coverage of electoral issues, enabling voters to make informed choices."

2011 Parliamentary Elections

"The parliamentary elections demonstrated a broad commitment to hold democratic elections in Turkey. The level of participation from the side of the electorate was impressive both during the campaign and on election day. The existence of a solid framework and of experience in the conduct of democratic elections is clear. Certain issues, however, could stand to be further addressed. The Constitution and implementing legislation continue to unduly limit freedom of expression, freedom of association and electoral rights. There is also the need to ensure the equality of vote weight among constituencies, lifting certain existing restrictions on suffrage rights, and enhancing transparency in the complaints and appeals process."

2014 Presidential Election

"The 10 August presidential election presented Turkish voters with an important opportunity to directly choose their president for the first time. Three party-nominated candidates, including the Prime Minister, representing different political positions, were generally able to campaign freely. Freedoms of assembly and association were respected. However, the use of official position by the Prime Minister as well as biased media coverage gave him a distinct advantage over the other candidates. Direct debates among candidates would have brought more balance and been an opportunity to further engage in a dialogue on key issues facing Turkey."

July 2015 Parliamentary Elections

"The 7 June parliamentary elections were characterized by active and high citizen participation during the campaign and on election day, which demonstrated a broad commitment to holding democratic elections. Voters could choose from a wide range of political parties, but the 10 per cent parliamentary threshold limits political pluralism. Media freedom is an area of serious concern; media and journalists critical of the ruling party were subject to pressure and intimidation during the campaign. The elections were organized professionally, in general. Greater transparency of the election administration and legal provisions for observers, both citizen and international, would serve to increase trust in the electoral process. During the campaign, fundamental freedoms were generally respected. Unfortunately, there were numerous serious incidents, some resulting in fatalities."

Final Reports by OSCE ODIHR Election Monitoring Missions

Turkey Continued

November 2015 Early Parliamentary Elections

"The 1 November 2015 early parliamentary elections offered voters a variety of choices. The challenging security environment, in particular in the southeast of the country, coupled with a high number of violent incidents, including attacks against party members and on party premises, hindered contestants' ability to campaign freely in all parts of the country. Media freedom remained an area of serious concern and the number of criminal investigations of journalists and the closure of some media outlets reduced voters' access to a plurality of views and information. The 10 per cent parliamentary threshold continued to limit political pluralism. The election administration organized the elections professionally."

2017 Constitutional Referendum

"[T]he 16 April constitutional referendum 'took place on an unlevel playing field and the two sides of the campaign did not have equal opportunities. Voters were not provided with impartial information about key aspects of the reform, and civil society organizations were not able to participate. Under the state of emergency put in place after the July 2016 failed coup attempt, fundamental freedoms essential to a genuinely democratic process were curtailed. The dismissal or detention of thousands of citizens negatively affected the political environment. One side's dominance in the coverage and restrictions on the media reduced voters' access to a plurality of views. While the technical aspects of the referendum were generally well administered and referendum day proceeded in an orderly manner, late changes in counting procedures removed an important safeguard and were contested by the opposition."

2018 Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

"The elections were held under a state of emergency put in place after the July 2016 failed coup attempt. The elections were the first to be held after the April 2017 constitutional referendum and marked the transformation of political system in Turkey into one with extensive presidential powers, limited parliamentary oversight and reduced independence of the judiciary. The Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions stated that 'the elections offered voters a genuine choice despite the lack of conditions for contestants to compete on an equal basis. The incumbent president and his party enjoyed a notable advantage in the campaign, which was also reflected in excessive coverage by public and government-affiliated private media. The restrictive legal framework and powers granted under the state of emergency limited fundamental freedoms of assembly and expression essential to a genuine democratic process. Still, citizens demonstrated their commitment to democracy by participating in large numbers in campaign rallies and also on election day."

Final Reports by OSCE ODIHR Election Monitoring Missions

Poland

2007 Early Parliamentary Elections

"The 21 October elections were called as a consequence of the end of the governing coalition between Law and Justice (PiS), Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (Samoobrona) and the League of Polish Families (LPR) and the self-dissolution of the Sejm. They demonstrated a democratic and pluralistic electoral process, founded on a high level of public confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the electoral administration."

2011 Parliamentary Elections

"The 9 October 2011 elections were pluralistic and democratic, with a broad choice available to the voters and a high degree of public confidence in all stages of the election process. Poland's comprehensive legal framework generally provides a good basis for democratic elections and has been strengthened with the adoption of a unified Election Code, which introduced mechanisms to facilitate participation by disabled voters... The Polish media environment is diverse, and coverage of the election campaign provided voters with a range of viewpoints."

2015 Parliamentary Elections

"The elections were competitive and pluralistic, conducted with respect of fundamental principles for democratic elections in an atmosphere of freedom to campaign and on the basis of equal and fair treatment of contestants. With a few exceptions, the comprehensive legal framework generally provides a good basis for conducting democratic elections in line with OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards... The campaign took place in an open and peaceful environment and fundamental freedoms were respected. The campaign environment remained free and pluralistic despite polarization between the two leading parties."

2019 Parliamentary Elections

"The 13 October parliamentary elections were prepared well, but media bias and intolerant rhetoric in the campaign were of significant concern. While all candidates were able to campaign freely, senior state officials used publicly funded events for campaign messaging. The dominance of the ruling party in public media further amplified its advantage. Election day was orderly, although secrecy of the vote was not always enforced."

2020 Presidential Election

"The election was administered professionally despite the legal uncertainty during the electoral process. The constitutionally mandated election coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the decision to continue with the holding of the election necessitated legal and practical adjustments. The changes jeopardized the stability and clarity of the otherwise suitable election legislation and had practical implications for candidate registration, campaigning and campaign finance, voting methods, and resolution of election disputes. The campaign was characterized by negative and intolerant rhetoric further polarizing an already adversarial political environment. In an evidently polarized and biased media landscape, the public broadcaster failed to ensure balanced and impartial coverage, and rather served as campaign tool for the incumbent."

Why Turkey and Poland?

The stakes of these two elections in 2023 are exceptionally high. By the time of the Turkish election in May, Erdoğan's AKP will have governed for 20 years, longer than any single person or party in modern Turkish history. The length and durability of this government both reflects and enables an erosion of democratic institutions in the country that will be either perpetuated or possibly reversed by the outcome of Erdoğan's fourth election campaign. In Poland, the ruling PiS party has governed for seven years continuously, having formed the first ever single-party government in modern Polish history in 2015 and rapidly undermined this EU member state's rule of law since then.

A permanent consolidation of power by these ruling parties would have a devastating impact on the rights and freedoms of Turkish and Polish citizens, particularly those viewed with hostility and suspicion by the incumbent parties. In Turkey, this includes religious minorities, ethnic minorities (especially the Kurds), secularists, liberals, feminists, and even some Islamists, like those associated with (or suspected of sympathy towards) Fethullah Gülen. In Poland, it includes an overlapping collection of disfavored groups, such as immigrants, leftists, feminists, Europhiles, and members of the LGBT community. Many of these groups have seen their civil rights and political liberties curtailed already in ways that are grimly portentous for what permanent rule by these regimes might look like.

But the stakes are also high for those consolidated democracies that have long viewed Turkey and Poland as friends and partners. The NATO alliance, which is based on shared values and democratic principles, relies heavily on Turkey and Poland as key members on its Eastern flank, particularly in this second year of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine when NATO unity has never been more vital. The supremacy of the EU and the integrity of its democratic institutions and rule of law could [hinge upon](#) the process and outcome of the Polish election. Moreover, NATO and the EU have no straightforward process for expelling consolidated authoritarian regimes that no longer meet the fundamental criteria for membership.

Turkey and Poland's elections are also both possible targets of foreign interference by a number of authoritarian states, chief among them Russia and China, but potentially also Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran. Such interference could be aimed at achieving specific, short-term policy goals, like Russia manipulating Poland into reducing its support for Ukraine or pressuring Erdoğan to accede to Russian strategic objectives in Syria or with regards to NATO [expansion](#). It could also be aimed at achieving longer term goals, like the general erosion of democracy in these countries or the proliferation of state [surveillance](#) that China favors worldwide. In some cases, the specter of foreign interference can itself be a tool that regimes use to encourage voters to "rally around the flag", as Polish President Andrzej Duda has done with [thin allegations](#) of German interference in the 2020 election and President Erdoğan has done with allegations of foreign [plots](#) aimed at weakening the lira.

A collapse or decay of democracy in Turkey or Poland would also be a grave threat for democratic institutions elsewhere. The [diffusion of authoritarianism](#) among hybrid regimes is a well-documented phenomenon, and malign actors around the world would look to the decline of democracy in Turkey and Poland as a playbook for how to undermine democracy within their own states—and

they would likely receive help from authoritarian states to accomplish that. In this context, the fight for democracy that many individuals and organizations in Turkey and Poland are currently undertaking—often at great personal risk—is a critical theater in a greater contest between the community of democracies and the forces of autocracy that has been intensifying over the past two decades.

Turkey

Erdoğan's First 15 Years: To Fair Elections and Back Again While Cronyism Builds

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power in Turkey in a landslide election in 2002; although, he did not assume the prime ministership until his allies [had vacated](#) a political ban imposed on him by the prior regime. The 2002 parliamentary election was the first in Turkey to be observed by the OSCE amid “a general consensus that the situation had improved markedly compared with previous elections”. The OSCE [concluded](#) that while the conduct of the election was fundamentally free and its outcomes meaningful, “the broader legal framework and its implementation establish strict limits on the scope of political debate in Turkey”, and “several parties faced action aimed at closing them down during the current elections, notably the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the winner of the elections”. This highlights one of the ironies of modern Turkey: Erdoğan's AKP, which today uses the tools of the state to interfere with the integrity and fairness of the electoral process, was once the insurgent political force that overcame autocratic abuses perpetrated by previous governments.

Despite systemic biases against the AKP (which it, of course, overcame) and inappropriate bans on peaceful political expression, the first decade of the 21st century represents a positive period in Turkish political freedom, with a peaceful transition of power in 2002 and relatively free and fair elections in 2007 and 2011. Even the opposition generally [regarded](#) the three consecutive elections won by the AKP to have been clean contests. OSCE reports from those years [are optimistic](#) in tone, noting that “there is a high level of public confidence in the integrity of the election process and particularly in the Supreme Board of Elections. The election administration includes political parties at the polling station, county and provincial levels, further increasing public confidence”. This optimism is only tempered by a passing acknowledgement that the limitations on political speech imposed by prior governments remain in force, including the portentous [observation](#) that “political campaigning, and in a broader context freedom of expression, are constrained by a number of restrictions”.

In 2010, Erdoğan and the AKP pushed for a constitutional referendum that would fundamentally alter the trajectory of Turkish politics. Aimed at bringing the Turkish constitution in line with requirements for future EU membership, the [changes](#) to the constitution also brought the military and the judiciary—the two institutions most skeptical of Erdoğan's rule—under the more direct control of civilian authorities loyal to the AKP. Influential Islamist preacher Fethullah Gülen, at the time a close ally of Erdoğan, strongly encouraged his followers to support the referendum, [declaring](#), “I wish we had a chance to raise the dead from their graves and urge them to cast yes votes.” At the time, many European and US observers, as well as some liberals within Turkey, praised the constitutional changes, which not only seemed to put limitations on one possible threat to Turkish democracy (the military), but also codified greater rights for women, children, workers, and civil servants. Opponents warned that these progressive elements would go unimplemented, and some voters found certain parts confusing, lamenting their inability to vote on individual amendments (voters were only offered a single “yes” or “no” choice on all 26 amendments). Unfortunately, the enduring legacy of the referendum was the end of judicial independence in Turkey. That trend was already underway; the

referendum came at the tail end of a series of high-profile, highly politicized investigations by prosecutors aligned with Gulen, first into an alleged “deep state” cabal within the military dubbed “Ergenekon”, and then, after a falling out between Erdoğan and Gulen, into corruption within the AKP. Erdoğan then purged Gulenists from the judiciary and replaced them with AKP partisans, spelling the end of meaningful judicial oversight in Turkey.

By 2011, other anti-democratic trends in Turkish politics were becoming inescapably clear. That is the year when Erdoğan started talking about [reforming](#) the constitution to empower the presidency, his bodyguards [got in a fight](#) with UN security personnel, international watchdogs called on Turkey [to release](#) imprisoned journalists, and close global observers like Gideon Rachman [started warning](#) that Erdoğan is becoming more autocratic and could become “Turkey’s answer to [Russian President] Vladimir Putin”. Underpinning all this was a tectonic shift in Turkish power structures. In July 2011, the commanders of Turkish ground, naval, and air forces resigned in protest of the investigations into alleged conspiracies within the military—a departure from the history of struggles between civilian authorities and top generals ending in resignations by the former, not the latter. The [leading biographer](#) of Erdoğan, Soner Cagaptay, says that this turning point was when Erdoğan founded a “republic of fear”. The military had been the ultimate power behind a chain of courts, media, business communities, and secularist NGOs that checked Erdoğan’s power; after the commanders resigned, he had free rein to repress this civil society. The Ergenekon show trials and similar prosecutions had demonstrated that anyone standing in Erdoğan’s way could easily be jailed, have their private communications leaked, and be linked to coup plotters by the pro-Erdoğan press. Thus it was in 2011 that the OSCE first chose to note in the executive summary of its [report](#) the degenerating media environment under which Turkish elections had begun to take place, [acknowledging](#) “concerns...with regard to the legislative limitations on freedom of expression, a high number of arrested and convicted journalists, and the alleged control by the government over some influential media”. Turkish courts also [banned](#) YouTube [periodically](#) starting in 2007, in some cases in response to videos showing violence against Turkish officials or soldiers, in others in response to allegations of “insulting Turkishness”. The OSCE report from the 2011 election also noted that “ongoing operations by Turkish security forces in certain parts of the country were seen by some stakeholders as having had a restraining effect on campaigning by pro-Kurdish candidates and political parties”.

In short, from 2002–2011, positive trends, including administrative rigor, high participation, and the diversity of political parties, constituted the foreground of international observation of Turkish elections, wherein observers placed less emphasis on autocratic trends such as lingering restrictions on political expression, a biased media environment, and security protocols imposed on the Kurdish regions. Since 2011—the time when Turkey watchers started warning about Erdoğan’s growing dictatorial style—OSCE reports [have largely reversed](#) their previously optimistic framing, briefly acknowledging the fundamental integrity of the outcomes of voting, while mostly emphasizing the worsening unfairness of the electoral and media environments, as well as the structural biases increasingly built into the administration of elections.

With the benefit of hindsight and a clear understanding of informal power structures, it is possible to look back even to Erdoğan’s early years in power and see him building the foundations of corrupt autocracy beneath the surface in a system of economic control. In its first decade, the AKP-led government [privatized](#) an unprecedented \$62 billion in state assets and passed 191 amendments to

Turkey's public procurement law, allowing the AKP to negotiate government spending contracts secretly without being subject to public bids or judicial and legislative oversight. This system of grand corporate favoritism created what opposition leaders have dubbed the "gang of five"—major Turkish conglomerates run by Erdoğan-friendly oligarchs who depend upon AKP brass for public contracts, leniency from law enforcement (which, in the case of non-enforcement of building [codes](#), likely contributed to the death and destruction the Turkish people experienced during February's catastrophic earthquake), and access to cheap capital. Erdoğan's corrupt autocracy also includes [control](#) over the central bank; he has forced it to slash interest rates, which has fueled rampant inflation. When interest rates are nearly 40% lower than inflation rates, even inefficient businesses owned by Erdoğan's loyalists [can turn a profit](#) with special access to credit—reportedly positioning palace officials in Ankara to mediate between favored companies and state banks. In exchange for Erdoğan's autocratic largess, his vast network of oligarchs and cronies [supports](#) his re-election bids through control over media companies, requirements that employees vote for the AKP (sometimes even asking workers to present photos of their ballots marked for AKP), and donations to the AKP's charities, schools, or NGOs.

These longstanding autocratic trends in Erdoğan's political economy also started to show up in election administration as soon as support for the AKP started declining in national elections. In 2015, after the AKP lost its majority in parliament, Erdoğan effectively managed to force what he openly [described](#) as a "re-run election" by deliberately failing to form a coalition, so he could call a new round of voting. But it was not until after a failed attempt at a military coup against Erdoğan in 2016 that he rolled out his modern playbook of autocratic control over election processes.

The 2016 Coup Attempt

With trendlines having already turned in an alarming direction since at least 2011, the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey likely increased Erdoğan's autocratic paranoia, while creating a pretext for purges of his perceived enemies at every level of society. The coup attempt, carried out by disgruntled elements within the Turkish government and armed forces, was correctly recognized and condemned by both the government and the opposition as anti-democratic, but Erdoğan used the broad latitude that this consensus provided to crack down on political expression and target his opponents and critics more broadly.

From 2002–2011, Erdoğan viewed the [Kemalists](#)—adherents of Turkey's unique brand of laicist republican nationalism—and secularists who had tried to keep him out of power as his primary enemies within the government and the military. Erdoğan and Gülen worked together to pass the 2010 constitutional referendum and then to purge and [prosecute](#) their perceived enemies from Turkish institutions. Starting in 2011, however, Erdoğan and Gülen came to see each other as adversaries, and Erdoğan became concerned that Gülenists within the government and military were working against him. Tensions escalated as Erdoğan worked to push Gülen's strongest allies out of the AKP, and Gülenist prosecutors initiated a massive graft probe against Erdoğan's top ministers and business allies in December 2013, which Erdoğan dubbed a "judicial coup". Erdoğan dubbed a "judicial coup".

When military officers attempted to seize control of the government on July 15, 2016, Turks across the political spectrum condemned the attack on Turkish democracy, and the coup failed. But Erdoğan was quick to blame the coup on Gülenist elements in positions of power in both military and civilian institutions, and to use the event to advance his political agenda. On the night of the coup, as pro-government forces were still securing the country in the wake of the failed putsch, Erdoğan [openly described](#) the attempt as “a gift from God”, and in the proceeding days he used every tool of the state to seek out and remove or arrest individuals [accused](#) of involvement with or sympathy towards the Gülen movement. A state of emergency authorized the government to rule by decree, which it used to detain tens of thousands of government, political party, and civil society figures without due process by simply alleging links to terrorism. Those arrested [included](#) the co-leaders of the pro-Kurdish political party and thousands of party officials. The government also restricted people’s ability to move or gather and [closed](#) roughly 200 media organizations, including newspapers, periodicals, radio stations, and television channels.

The 2017 Constitutional Referendum

In December 2016, less than six months after the failed coup, the ruling coalition introduced a package of constitutional changes, which were voted on in a constitutional referendum held in April 2017. That referendum itself was viewed at the time by many observers both within and outside of Turkey as a threat to Turkey’s democratic institutions because it reduced the independence of both the legislature and the judiciary by giving the president greater direct control over the cabinet and judicial appointments. It took place under the chilling effect of the state of emergency that had been in place since the failed coup. The referendum passed with only 51.4% of the national vote. A statement by the OSCE, which had monitored the election, [concluded](#):

The 16 April constitutional referendum took place on an unlevel playing field and the two sides of the campaign did not have equal opportunities. Voters were not provided with impartial information about key aspects of the reform, and civil society organizations were not able to participate. Under the state of emergency put in place after the July 2016 failed coup attempt, fundamental freedoms essential to a genuinely democratic process were curtailed.

Specifically, while the observers granted that “the technical aspects of the referendum were well administered and referendum day proceeded in an orderly manner”, they identified at least four areas in which the contest was unfair.

First, by dismissing or detaining tens of thousands of citizens accused of involvement in or sympathy towards the 2016 coup attempt, the government [created](#) an atmosphere of fear and suspicion that was inherently hostile to the conduct of a free and fair referendum—a referendum that was intended to indefinitely reshape the rules of Turkish democracy. At a time when anyone could be thrown in jail on spurious allegations of associating with the wrong people or causes, speaking out against Erdoğan’s “yes” campaign felt like a dangerous proposition. The pro-Kurdish politicians who would have been leading voices in the “no” campaign remained behind bars. A Kurdish-language song advocating for “no” votes was banned. Professors who signed a petition calling for peace talks

with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) lost their jobs and faced investigations. And on it went. The European Commission for Democracy through Law, also known as the Venice Commission, [concluded](#) in March 2017 that "the current state of emergency does not provide for the due democratic setting for a constitutional referendum".

Secondly, the [media environment](#) was highly unbalanced, both due to the concentration of news media in the hands of a small number of regime supporters and to media regulations limiting opposition voices and perspectives. The government used the state of emergency to eliminate regulators' ability to fine TV stations for giving one side of the campaign more time than the other. A study of campaign coverage on 17 television channels [showed](#) that "yes" supporters got 90% of airtime. Erdoğan and government officials held twice-daily campaign speeches that were aired live in their entirety by all television channels. They [argued](#) that a "yes" vote was essential to defending Turkey against Islamic State jihadists and Kurdish separatist members of the government while mischaracterizing "no" campaigners as sympathetic with these threat actors. By contrast, Turkish media generally ignored campaign rallies by the "no" camp, whose events sometimes had to go on in the dark or not at all because the electricity would be cut or violent attackers would knock over the podium as soon as the main speakers went on stage. The head of the OSCE observation mission [explained](#), "Our monitoring showed the 'Yes' campaign dominated the media coverage and this, along with restrictions on the media, the arrests of journalists and the closure of media outlets, reduced voters' access to a plurality of views."

Thirdly, the securitized atmosphere in Kurdish-dominated parts of the country in the wake of violence between the outlawed PKK and the Turkish army may have suppressed turnout in some of the regions most skeptical of Erdoğan's constitutional changes. The ODIHR mission [found](#) that "police stationed near polling stations were instructed to check voters' identification documents to identify those wanted for arrest", which naturally would deter many voters, even law-abiding citizens, especially from minority groups, from entering the polling station or handing in a ballot.

Lastly, [changes](#) to the rules of the election, and especially to the counting procedures, were not implemented fairly, removed key safeguards, and were imposed over the objections of opposition groups. Included among these changes were the removal of members of provincial election boards, district election boards, and ballot box committees as a result of the post-coup emergency decrees or on the basis of alleged "bad reputation". Most prominently, the OSCE [expressed concern](#) about a decision late on election day by the electoral commission (run entirely by AKP appointees who analysts [assess](#) to be unlikely to defy Erdoğan) to accept ballots without official stamps, contravening a law meant to protect against "ballot stuffing". An observer from a separate mission from the Council of Europe [warned](#) that this could have led 2.5 million votes (5% of all votes) to have been manipulated. There was no evidence of election fraud on such a grand scale, but this underscores the threat that lax adherence to procedures presents, and the distrust that it creates. Claims of vote-rigging were particularly [common](#) in the Kurdish southeast. Unfortunately, most of the failures identified by the OSCE in 2017 would similarly mar the parliamentary and presidential elections that took place the following year.

The 2018 Turkish Election

The June 2018 general election in Turkey offers a deeper look into many of the elements of structural bias identified by the OSCE in their observation of the 2017 referendum. These include the culture of political persecution that has pervaded the country in the post-2016 era, the continuation of the state of emergency (until the month after the 2018 election, when it was allowed to expire but most of its powers were codified into a [new counterterrorism law](#)), the consolidation of mainstream media into a fount of pro-regime content (Erdoğan once again [receiving](#) ten times as much airtime as his opponents combined), the harassment and political persecution of journalists, new restrictions on internet speech and association, the militarization of public spaces (including electoral infrastructure) that has taken place across much of southeastern Turkey, and the procedural and staffing changes that have reduced the transparency of electoral administration and at times excluded representatives of the opposition. Each of these features contributes to the structural advantages enjoyed by Erdoğan's AKP, and all can be expected to remain obstacles to fairness or potentially even freedom in the 2023 contest.

The consolidation of Turkish media ownership into the hands of Erdoğan-friendly owners has been a relentless trend throughout the two decades of AKP rule. In 2002, only a quarter of Turkish media was owned by pro-government businesses. By 2011, that proportion was up to half. And most of the second half has suffered the same fate during Erdoğan's second decade in power, becoming victims and then mouthpieces of his "[republic of fear](#)". Major independent or anti-government newspapers like Sabah, Aksam, Star, Milliyet, and Vatan, along with their popular affiliated television networks, were seized by pro-government watchdogs that installed new owners and managers approved by Erdoğan. A culminating case of this consolidation was the 2018 [takeover](#) of the Doğan Media Group by the AKP-allied Demirören Group. Doğan owned four newspapers (including Turkey's largest, Hurriyet), three radio stations, and seven TV stations (including CNN Türk). Erdoğan's campaign against Doğan began in 2009, when a blistering and politically motivated tax audit resulted in a fine of \$2.5 billion, which almost equated to the media company's entire net worth. Doğan resisted until the post-2016 repression, when it became clear that his continued refusal to sell his media assets could mean spending the rest of his days in prison—alongside some 150 newly detained journalists. The Turkish conglomerate that acquired Doğan's media company is owned by the Demirören family, which is so close to Erdoğan that when patriarch Erdoğan Demirören died in 2021, President Erdoğan [visited](#) the family personally to express his condolences. The family also [relies on](#) the favor of Erdoğan's government for the success of their other businesses, which are in sectors heavily reliant upon regulatory policy and public tenders, such as energy, mining, and construction. By owning a large share of Turkey's private media, including both print and TV news media, Demirören can shape coverage both in favor of its own commercial and industrial activity, as well as in favor of the regime that has helped enable these enterprises. After its acquisition of Doğan in 2018, prior to the general election that summer, several news and commentary programs hosted on the acquired channels were cancelled, with at least 50 journalists [losing](#) their positions.

Their jobs are not the only thing for which journalists in Turkey have been made to fear. In the two years leading up to the 2018 election, the International Press Institute [identified](#) 950 instances of Turkish journalists being stalked or harassed online in response to their reporting. In some cases, this

harassment is endorsed and encouraged by government-linked actors. Devlet Bahçeli, who is the head of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and a hardline nationalist ally of Erdoğan, [accused](#) dozens of Turkish journalists, as well as several academics, of slander related to their reporting. One of his more extremist allies, Alaattin Çakıcı, an ultra-nationalist mafioso currently serving a 36-year sentence in prison, threatened six journalists and a newspaper owner with death, accusing them of being agents of the United States and of Gülen. Journalists have reason to take such threats seriously: One of the many crimes for which Çakıcı is in prison was attempting to hire an assassin [to kill](#) a prominent Turkish journalist who had written about Çakıcı's imminent divorce.

Faced with a media environment that is highly consolidated and overwhelmingly supportive of the ruling party and its leadership, many Turkish voters get their news from internet sources, including from both journalistic sources, like news blogs, and from social media. In a 2018 poll, 70% of Turks [reported](#) that they consider traditional media to be "biased and untrustworthy". In response to this pivot by many citizens towards internet-based news sources, the government increased internet surveillance and censorship. In the days leading up to the 2018 election, some 3,375 social media users [were investigated](#) for their online activity, often for loosely defined infractions related to "supporting terrorism", "insulting the president", or engaging in "hate speech". More than 1,400 individuals ultimately faced criminal [charges](#), with social media posts often providing the bulk of the government's evidence. Turkish authorities used the country's [Anti-Terror Law of 1991 to prosecute](#) some users and implemented changes in 2018 to its regulatory regime to give the Radio and Television Supreme Council authority to regulate not only the airwaves, but the internet as well. The regime also routinely uses broad laws against defamation to prosecute journalists and ban online content. Both the trend of growing reliance on the internet for less biased news and the trend of greater internet censorship, surveillance, and criminalization have continued in the years since 2018, [culminating](#) in a 2022 law that makes "disseminating false information" a criminal offense with prison sentences of up to three years.

In addition to its tightening of media regulations in the months leading up to the 2018 election, Erdoğan's government also implemented changes to voting and ballot counting procedures. Many of these changes were [imposed](#) over the objections of opposition and civil society groups, and some changes did not adhere to the relevant laws or regulations. This occurred mostly at the local level, where ballot box committees are the relevant administrative bodies. The updated law required for the first time that ballot box committees be chaired by civil servants selected by lottery, rather than a political party nominee. But OSCE observers [found](#) that, contrary to the law, a lottery was not always conducted, and instead the district election boards or provincial governors appointed the ballot box committee chairs directly. Even more troublingly, the Supreme Board of Elections consolidated polling stations across 16 provinces, meaning that many voters had to vote in unfamiliar places farther from their homes than expected. These mergers and relocations took place until only days before the election with little or no communication from election authorities to the press or to voters. The consolidation overwhelmingly affected communities in the southeast of the country, where support for opposition parties, especially the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), is strongest, leading to complaints that the intent had been to suppress the opposition vote.

The purported reason for these changes was the unstable security situation in some eastern provinces. Conflict between the Kurdish population in these areas and Turkish security forces has waxed

and waned throughout the years, and Turkey maintains a large military presence in the southeast to combat militant Kurdish nationalist groups like the PKK. Critics [argue](#) that the securitized environment is also used to suppress the political voice of the Kurdish population and depress election turnout in these areas. This can be done through administrative hurdles, like the consolidation of polling locations, but also through intimidation, such as when heavily armed security forces are deployed around polling places, purportedly to protect them from violence, but with the potential added effect of intimidating opposition voters, especially where voters may be forced to turn in their ballots to heavily armed policemen or soldiers who may view them as the enemy.

Another tactic the regime has used since 2016 to suppress the Kurdish vote is removing Kurdish mayors and other local officials and [replacing](#) them with compliant, government-appointed “trustees” (*kayyum*s). This undermines local authority and sends a clear message to Kurdish and opposition voters that their votes will not matter, even when they triumph at the ballot box. This naturally has the effect of suppressing turnout in all elections. Turkey has also used security concerns as an excuse to ignore usual procedures around the chain of custody for ballot boxes, with ballot boxes in the southeast sometimes remanded to the custody of security officials, thus denying opposition parties the supervision of the ballot boxes that they are required by law.

Looking Ahead to May 2023: Will Erdoğan Step off the Tram?

Unfortunately, nearly all the anti-democratic activity witnessed in the 2017 referendum and 2018 general election can be expected to continue in 2023. For many of these vectors of authoritarian interference into Turkish democracy, the trendlines since 2011 and particularly after 2016 have been deeply worrisome. Presidential control over all areas of economic policy—monetary policy, bank regulation, infrastructure projects, foreign assistance, etc.—has produced bountiful opportunities for Erdoğan to enrich his cronies. Turkish public media has grown increasingly fawning in its coverage of the government. Turkish private media has become even more consolidated into the hands of a small number of oligarchs, nearly all of whom are close Erdoğan allies. As social media and internet journalism have become increasingly relied upon by Turkish citizens, especially those skeptical of AKP rule, the government not only routinely bans and restricts access to online platforms, but has also passed [laws](#) to severely punish users for even “liking” or sharing material that the regime deems disinformation or even just insulting to Turkish authorities. The [securitization](#) of southeast Turkey has increased, and the regime has continued to remove and replace local officials in that area, both to exert more direct control over local issues and to undermine faith in the electoral process in opposition areas.

Since stepping into the newly empowered executive presidency in 2018, Erdoğan has been able to more directly control formerly independent institutions like the treasury and central bank. This has provided him with the opportunity to advance his unorthodox economic policies, like maintaining very low interest rates, which has led to rolling economic crises of slowing growth, soaring inflation, and runs on the currency. These poor economic [results](#) have caused Erdoğan to lose political support, as evidenced by the AKP losing several municipalities—including Ankara and Istanbul—to the opposition in the 2019 local elections, which in turn has motivated Erdoğan to maintain his political survival through autocratic tactics meant to subvert the will of the majority. In order to respond

to the economic problems without running afoul of Erdoğan, the central bank [introduced](#) financial regulations that have caused banks to ration lending, which has created opportunities for Erdoğan [to divert](#) credit toward his cronies and oligarchs. Similarly, Erdoğan's "gang of five"—as the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) calls them—continue [to be awarded](#) lucrative government contracts, such as those to build new highways and relocate a Black Sea town (which was itself needed to accommodate a dam constructed by the "gang of five"). Erdoğan has also been bringing his favored tycoons with him on trips abroad to secure special investment deals from corrupt regimes Turkey is turning to for capital, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. As such, Erdoğan's cronies have both the resources and the motive to spend money helping him win re-election. Of course, corruption is also a double-edged sword in the election campaign, as Erdoğan's opposition runs on a platform that blames graft and autocracy for rising prices. This political issue of grand corruption has also been elevated since 2021, when Turkey's notorious crime boss Sedat Peker fled to the United Arab Emirates and started posting online videos [detailing](#) corrupt ties between senior AKP politicians, government officials, and organized crime.

Whereas secretly funneling the proceeds of grand corruption into political activity crosses the line into illegitimate subversion of the democratic process, Erdoğan's patronage of the urban poor generally does not. Going back to his time as mayor of Istanbul, Erdoğan has built his political base by redirecting city resources toward poor, religiously conservative neighborhoods. When the AKP lost control over Istanbul following electoral defeat in 2019, it was viewed as cutting off the party's access to a \$7.5 billion budget that had been used for 25 years [to bankroll](#) patronage networks. To be sure, this clientelism is not an ideal conception of democratic governance. But it has long been generally accepted by the Turkish population, and its legitimacy is difficult to challenge when the largesse comes not in the form of lavish bribes but rather basic access to welfare programs involving food, fuel, housing, public services, and sometimes jobs. Dubious pledges of future fiscal windfalls promised weeks before an election are commonplace not only in Turkey but also consolidated Western democracies, whether it's Erdoğan announcing new housing projects in 2022, Trump promising tax cuts in 2020, or Biden approving student debt relief and the release of oil reserves in 2022.

Foreign policy is another instrument that ideally should not be geared toward near-term domestic political objectives, but it is widely viewed in Turkey as being used in that way. As a general matter, Erdoğan has used conflicts with neighboring countries to engineer a geopolitical balancing act between Washington and Moscow, a departure from Turkey's history as a reliable NATO partner through the Cold War; stoke nationalism at home; and draw attention to himself as a major player on the world stage. His politically calculated showmanship is not unlike Trump's, whose former national security advisor [criticized](#) him for making re-election the guiding motive behind every foreign policy decision as he seemingly focused on the photo opportunities, Twitter engagements, and press coverage each decision would yield. While that approach to foreign policy is shameful, it generally does not meet our standard of an illegitimate attack on the democratic process, partly because presidents are legitimately endowed with broad latitude in how they pursue national security. But presidents sometimes cross the line into illegitimate corruption, like Trump [pressuring](#) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to manufacture dirt on Biden or [begging](#) Chinese President Xi Jinping to help him win re-election by buying farm products in swing states, or Putin using the FSB, Russia's security service, [to secretly bomb](#) Russian apartments in 1999 as a pretense for a wag-the-dog war in Chechnya that helped him get elected president a few months later.

While it is likely that Erdoğan will continue to make himself the center of attention in negotiations over situations like the war in Ukraine, a much greater threat and abuse of his position would be if he chose to launch a [wag-the-dog](#) war in Syria. He could use such a conflict as a pretense to rally his nationalist base against so-called Kurdish terrorists and their supposed US backers, to justify ever more emergency powers to control the electoral process (further restricting opposition media or even postponing or canceling the election if he is poised to lose), to close the pro-Kurdish HDP party, or to further securitize Kurdish areas of Turkey to suppress voter turnout. This concern was front-of-mind for Turkey watchers late last year, when Erdoğan blamed a bombing in Istanbul on the PKK—which denied responsibility for the attack—and then Turkish forces [conducted](#) a retaliatory bombing campaign against Kurdish positions in northern Syria. Recent bellicosity by Erdoğan towards Greece may be part of the same tactic: manufacturing a crisis to gain nationalist votes ahead of elections.

But one of the gravest concerns is the criminalization of politics that has always threatened Turkish democracy, and which has reached a crisis point with the [sentencing](#) of popular Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. İmamoğlu's election in 2019 was viewed as both a threat and a humiliation to Erdoğan, a native Istanbulite who previously served as mayor himself and views the city as his political backyard. İmamoğlu's victory as a CHP candidate (overcoming a biased media environment and heavy spending by the AKP on behalf of their preferred candidate, Binali Yıldırım) was viewed as a rebuke of Erdoğan's rule and prompted the Supreme Election Council (YSK) to vacate the result and order new elections. İmamoğlu [called](#) the AKP "sore losers" and allegedly called the YSK "fools", but he participated in the re-run election, which he won by a much greater margin than the first contest, allowing him to assume office. But in 2022, İmamoğlu was sentenced to more than two years in prison and banned from politics over charges of "insulting electoral officials" stemming from the comments he made after the YSK vacated his first victory. This is a dire, though not unprecedented, threat to Turkish democracy; ironically Erdoğan himself, while serving as mayor of Istanbul, [was sent to prison](#) for reading a poem deemed subversive by the previous regime. Public outcry helped propel him to the prime minister's office only a few years later. This should serve as an encouraging reminder of the jealousy with which many Turks guard their democracy, though this is not the lesson that Erdoğan himself appears to have taken from his own career.

This is not the first time Erdoğan's politicized courts have detained and banned his political opponents, and there are other examples in the current election, as well. His usual target is the pro-Kurdish HDP party, whose co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, has been imprisoned since 2016. More recently, the government [has been prosecuting](#) the HDP in an effort to shut it down entirely. It has also [frozen](#) the HDP's funds. Many observers [fear](#) that the HDP will be forced to close in the weeks before the election in an effort to demoralize Kurdish voters and dissuade them from turning out on election day.

Meanwhile, the devastating earthquakes that struck southeastern Turkey and northern Syria have caused unspeakable tragedy across the entire region. They also present new uncertainties with respect to the election. In the past, earthquakes have caused serious political harm to Turkish governments, as in 1999 when the government's widely criticized response to the earthquake [contributed](#) to its defeat in the 2002 elections. The current government could seek to avoid this fate by using the earthquakes as a pretense to postpone the election on the basis that it would interfere with re-

covery efforts or be logistically impossible to administer. The constitution requires the government to hold an election by June, and changing the constitution would require the assent of opposition members of parliament, who have so far opposed any such plan. Still, the government could simply ignore the law and postpone elections anyway, potentially indefinitely.

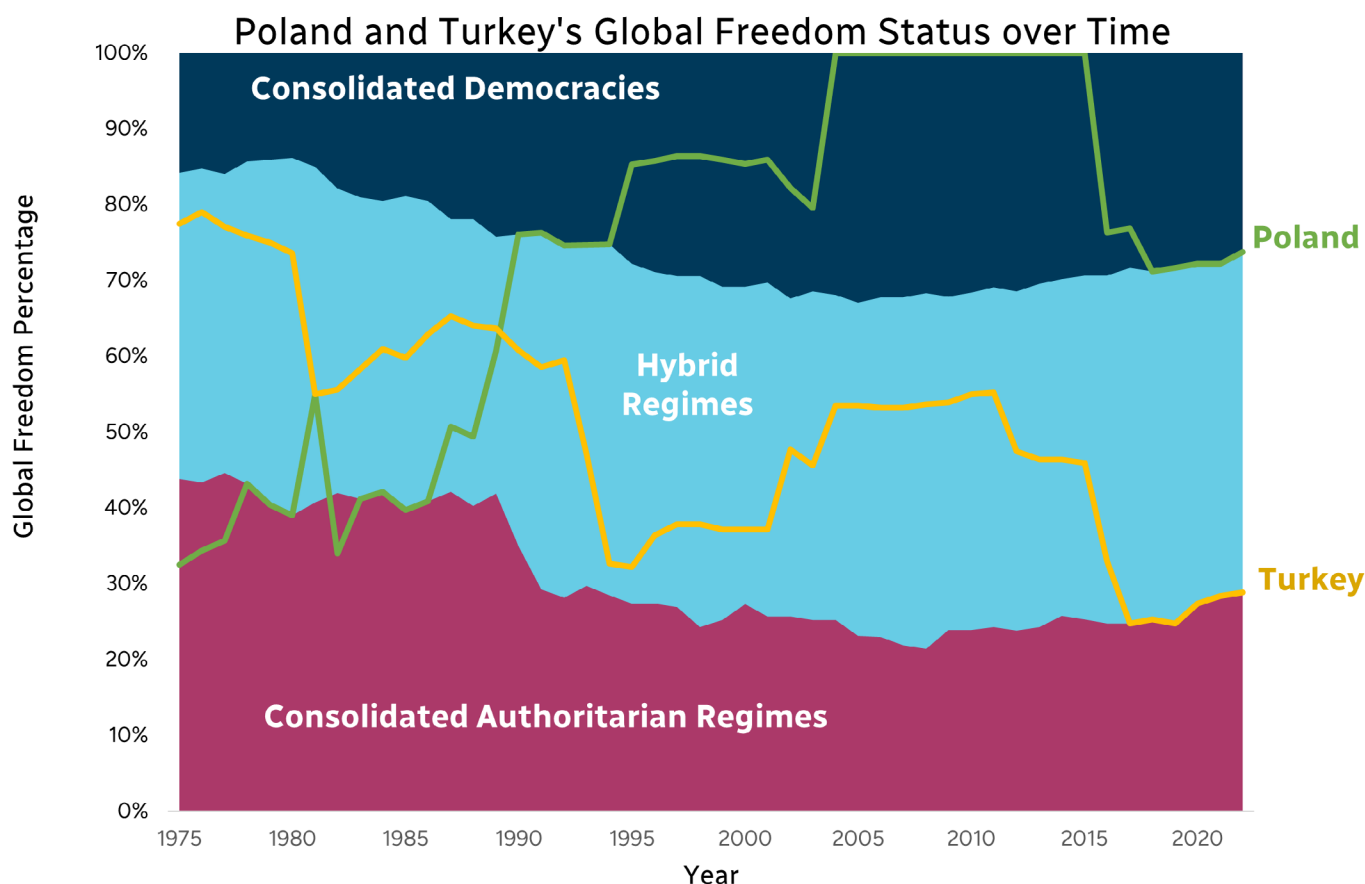
Erdoğan has imposed a state of emergency in the earthquake-affected areas that could be used as the basis for changes to voting (like the [consolidation](#) of polling places leading to longer trips for voters in opposition areas) or tallying procedures (including the chain of [custody](#) and standards of integrity for ballots) imposed unilaterally to benefit the government, under the pretense that they are necessitated by recovery-related logistics. It could also be used as the post-2016 state of emergency was, to curtail freedoms of assembly, association, expression, and the media that are essential to competitive election campaigning. Since the earthquakes, the regime [has already suspended](#) access to Twitter in response to criticism of its handling of the disaster on the platform. It is entirely plausible that similar suspensions could come on election night as Erdoğan clears the information space for a victory narrative to be driven by his pliant television and print media outlets. This state of emergency now constitutes a major vector of potential threats to a free election in Turkey.

Even if Erdoğan does not go fully authoritarian in those ways before election day, he may do so afterward by refusing to step down. Erdoğan has repeatedly shown his willingness to cast doubt on the integrity of elections he loses, as he did when his favored candidate lost the election for mayor of Istanbul in 2019. In 2016, when facing a real military coup, he survived partly by calling on his supporters to take to the streets—a tactic he could repurpose to resist an election loss the way Trump did when fomenting an insurrection on January 6, 2021. Any of these fateful endings to Turkish democracy under Erdoğan would be consistent with his approach to politics going back to his time as mayor of Istanbul in 1996, when he [said](#), “Democracy is like a tram. You ride it until you arrive at your destination, then you step off.” If Erdoğan feels that democracy has taken him, and Turkey, as close as possible to his desired destination, he may decide to step off the tram as a new sultan.

Poland

Constitutional Backsliding under PiS: Dismantling A Liberal Democracy

Autocratic efforts to undermine democracy in Poland are not as far along as in Turkey. Between 1989 and 2015, Poland was widely regarded as the epitome of a successful transition from one-party authoritarianism to liberal democracy. After decades under Moscow's thumb, Poland [sought](#) to "return to Europe", not only as an orientation of foreign policy but also as a "choice of civilization". The prospect of EU accession, which Poland achieved in 2004, anchored consistent commitment to constitutional democracy, rule of law, human rights, and the broader ideals of an open society. Whereas Erdoğan spent more than two decades replacing a prior hybrid regime with an authoritarian system more to his liking, the institutions of Polish democracy have only been succumbing to autocratic assault since 2015. With its democratic institutions under attack for a much shorter period of time, Poland is still on the [upper end](#) of the world's hybrid regimes (having fallen from the ranks of consolidated democracies), whereas Turkey teeters on the lower end of hybrids (poised to descend into consolidated authoritarianism)—essentially a role reversal compared to the Cold War era (see chart).



Note: The global freedom percentage is calculated based on historic Freedom in the World statuses assessed by Freedom House. From 2004 to 2015, Poland was assessed as "free" with the best rating possible of 1.0, along with 47 other countries. The classification into the three types of regimes—democracies, hybrids, and authoritarians—is an estimation made by ASD, which differs from Freedom House's free, partly free, and not free classifications.

A third salient case of autocratic backsliding—Viktor Orbán’s Hungary—provides a useful point of reference, as it lies in between the Turkish and Polish bookends, both in terms of when the assault began (2010) and the level to which democratic progress has been unwound. Just as Erdoğan’s autocratic tendencies became increasingly apparent after his electoral prospects diminished, when PiS lost elections in 2011, party leader Jarosław Kaczyński [promised](#) that “the day will come when we will have Budapest in Warsaw”. This suggests a similar aspiration to win at the ballot box and then dismantle democratic institutions in order to stay in power through elections that are free but not fair, as Orbán did.

PiS learned from its brief and unimpactful first government from 2005–2007 that radical change requires swift action from day one. So, upon returning to power after winning slim majorities in the 2015 presidential and parliamentary election, PiS wasted no time cementing autocratic rule. This story of rapid backsliding is best told by Wojciech Sadurski in [Poland’s Constitutional Breakdown](#). Sadurski explains how Kaczyński followed the Orbán model of transforming a previously moderate political party into a nakedly populist battering ram deployed to enact sweeping legislation aimed at packing the constitutional court, undermining the freedom of media and NGOs, allowing public corruption to proliferate with impunity, and castigating perceived enemies—including EU bureaucrats, LGBT people, immigrants, and other groups—as decadent liberals who threaten national sovereignty. In addition to entrenching reactionary policies, this autocratic agenda also laid the groundwork for PiS to remain in power by subverting the integrity of future elections.

As soon as PiS regained control of parliament in 2015, it plunged Poland into a protracted constitutional crisis through its [hostile takeover](#) of the Constitutional Tribunal, Poland’s highest court that resolves disputes about the constitutionality of actions taken by state bodies, using autocratic maneuvers that cast [doubt](#) upon the legitimacy of PiS-appointed “judges” and their “judgements”. It started with President Andrzej Duda refusing to administer oaths of office for three tribunal judges that had been duly appointed by the outgoing regime. Instead, PiS hastily elected new replacement “judges”, whom Duda then swore in later that same night, just hours before the tribunal ruled that the charade was unconstitutional. The following morning, security officers escorted the new PiS-loyal “judges” into the tribunal building, where they were immediately assigned offices and put on payroll. It took more than a year before natural attrition (through the terms of office expiring for old judges) meant that PiS’s new “judges” could rule. But as soon as they could, in February 2017, their first “judgment” overturned the previous judges’ decision that their appointment had been unconstitutional.

While PiS was waiting for its “judges” to seize majority control over tribunal rulings, it enacted a barrage of legislation blocking the constitutional court from overruling the government. A half dozen laws enacted in late 2015 and 2016 exempted recent PiS legislation from judicial review, imposed long procedural delays or supermajority requirements to paralyze decision-making at the tribunal, and enhanced the powers of the executive and legislative branches over those of the tribunal. Meanwhile, the government abused its power over the official printing press by refusing to publish tribunal judgments it disagreed with in an attempt to block them from coming into force. Although the Constitutional Tribunal threw out many of these power grabs in 2016 for being unconstitutional, they still achieved their objective of paralyzing the court by making it spend time defending its own constitutional powers rather than scrutinizing new policies enacted by PiS.

As soon as the party controlled a majority of the judges—thanks to the combination of illegal packing and natural attrition—PiS pivoted from attacking the tribunal to weaponizing it for its own autocratic ends. The tribunal paved the way for new statutes subordinating judicial selection and discipline to parliament, [signed off](#) on controversial pardons of Kaczyński’s closest collaborators, and [restricted freedoms to protest](#), including by effectively banning counter demonstrations in central Warsaw against pro-government rallies. But even more important than the rulings issued by the court were the cases it did not hear; the tribunal’s failure to overrule plainly unconstitutional laws enabled PiS to functionally alter the Polish constitution through legislative fiat. PiS exploited the court’s reticence to [lower](#) the retirement ages of judges—including those of the Supreme Court—across the country, enabling the party to force out some 100 judges and appoint party loyalists.

The Constitutional Tribunal’s failure to fulfill its purpose also allowed PiS to pass legislation that directly undermined the integrity of Poland’s elections. In January 2018, the year before the parliamentary election, Poland [enacted](#) a law that targeted the impartial administration of its elections by giving PiS power centers greater weight in appointing members of the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the body that manages elections and oversees party finances. While previously all nine members of the NEC were judges appointed by the leaders of Poland’s top three courts, under the amended law, seven members are appointed by parliament in proportion to party representation. As the largest parliamentary group, PiS can nominate three NEC members, and it can also influence the member selected by the Constitutional Tribunal since it is now led by PiS-installed judges. Beyond allowing PiS to purge the impartial judges that had previously administered Polish elections and replace them with partisan loyalists, the law also empowered government officials to redraw electoral boundaries and allowed for ballots with crossed out markings to be considered valid, introducing a risk of electoral fraud. Finally, the authority to validate or reject election and referendum results was [given](#) to a newly created chamber of the Supreme Court whose members are appointed by the now-politicized National Council of the Judiciary. The law was [characterized](#) by many ODIHR interlocutors as “indicative of the government’s steps to erode the political independence of institutions that are essential for safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process”.

After its takeover of the judiciary, PiS’s most visible and consequential step toward authoritarianism has been its brazen [transformation](#) of public media into an unapologetic propaganda machine that promotes PiS’s partisan interests and nationalist narratives, sometimes crossing into disinformation and incitement to political violence. Immediately after coming to power, PiS [passed](#) a law that disempowered the constitutionally mandated regulator that oversees all Polish TV and radio by transferring its public media appointment powers to a new council whose members are mostly PiS lawmakers who have been shown to take instructions from Kaczyński. This law and its successor statutes flagrantly violate the Polish constitution, which requires state television to be politically neutral. PiS [appointed](#) Jacek Kurski, a lawmaker known for disseminating disinformation to discredit political opponents, chairman of the state television broadcaster Telewizja Polska (TVP). Kurski—profiled in [Twilight of Democracy](#) by Anne Applebaum—subsequently purged some 225 journalists from the network, including many of the best-known reporters and presenters, and replaced them with fringe right-wing media personalities coming mostly from the media empire of the PiS ally Father Tadeusz Rydzyk. TVP programs look like a continuous stream of campaign ads touting the accomplishments of PiS, maligning immigrants and the LGBT community, and warning of Poland’s subjugation by Brussels and Berlin if any party other than PiS comes into power. These programs are

also used to carry out vendettas against PiS enemies, such as the [smear campaign](#) the liberal mayor of Gdansk Paweł Adamowicz, which culminated in his assassination in January 2019 by a recently released convict who had been watching TVP in prison. It is difficult to overstate the political value of state media capture to a political project built on populist demagoguery, especially in a country that relies heavily on state television and suffers from a traumatic history of repressive foreign subjugation.

Another tactic by which PiS has sought to entrench its power has been to undermine the rule of law, thus ensuring impunity for cronies loyal to PiS. Rather than serving in executive office, Kaczyński—who is never mentioned in OHDIR reports—rules as the [most powerful man in Poland](#) by leading the PiS party and pulling the strings of informal power structures. His blurring of the lines between the party, the state, and the church means institutions that previously exercised independent roles in society with professional integrity now often act in accordance with the personal and political designs of PiS leaders, who draw no distinction between their own interests and those of Polish sovereignty. For example, in direct contravention of the constitution, a January 2016 law [ended](#) the independence of public prosecution by merging the job of public prosecutor into the role of justice minister, while also greatly enhancing the discretionary powers of the new PiS-controlled position. This has allowed the party to intervene in decisions about specific cases and to appoint, promote, demote, transfer, or dismiss prosecutors based on their level of obedience—autocratic powers which are [unparalleled](#) in any other democratic state. As a result, hundreds of prosecutors who appear unwilling to subjugate their independent judgment to political orders have been sidelined or purged. Thanks to the independence that most private Polish media outlets have managed to maintain despite the PiS's colonization efforts, the public is aware of several [high-level corruption scandals](#) in recent years among Kaczyński's long-time loyalists. These include the [speaker of parliament](#) and his family taking more than 100 government flights, exuberant pay for the [aides of the central bank president](#), and the unexplained wealth and links to organized crime of the [former finance minister and head of the Supreme Audit Office](#). Kaczyński himself has been implicated by [leaked recordings](#) of him attempting to help a relative recover €1.5 million from a botched construction project by encouraging him to take legal action and falsely accuse Warsaw's opposition city council for the project's failure. And the resources of state-owned enterprises allegedly went not only into the personal bank accounts of PiS officials, but also into the [campaign coffers](#) of PiS electoral candidates. None of these cases or any other major corruption scandals have come under official investigation.

PiS built this autocratic system after the party came to power in the free and fair elections of 2015. The OSCE [found](#) that the 2015 "elections were competitive and pluralistic, conducted with respect of fundamental principles for democratic elections in an atmosphere of freedom to campaign and on the basis of equal and fair treatment of contestants". However, after four years of constitutional backsliding, the OSCE [deemed](#) the 2019 elections to have been free but not fair.

2019 Polish Parliamentary Election

The OSCE mission [concluded](#) that the 2019 parliamentary election was "prepared well, but media bias and intolerant rhetoric in the campaign were of significant concern. While all candidates were able to campaign freely, senior state officials used publicly funded events for campaign messaging. The dominance of the ruling party in public media further amplified its advantage". The OSCE's top

concerns emphasized how Kaczyński's party-state system bestows upon PiS several corrupt advantages in national elections.

First, the OSCE raised significant concern about the [unbalanced and biased](#) media environment that largely favored PiS. The ODIHR mission's media monitoring report of the election [indicated](#) that TVP displayed a clear bias against opposition candidates, contrary to their legal obligations and public mandates. Three nights before the election, TVP [ran a documentary](#) called *Invasion*, which purported to reveal "the inside story, aims, methods, and money behind the LGBT invasion" of Poland. It was preceded by TVP programs lambasting a pro-democracy protest as a "street revolt to bring Islamic immigrants to Poland" and caricaturing non-PiS candidates as "defenders of pedophiles and alimony-dodgers". Such language was typical of how TVP presenters sought to discredit non-PiS candidates; they characterized them as "pathetic" and "incompetent" throughout the election cycle. In the staid language of OSCE [reporting](#), "The distinct editorial bias of the media, especially the public broadcaster, and the absence of active oversight adversely impacted the opportunity of voters to make an informed choice."

Secondly, the OSCE mission [raised](#) concern related to the regulation of campaign activities. While all candidates were able to campaign freely during the campaign cycle, senior state officials who were also candidates used publicly funded events—including high-level forums and the inauguration of infrastructure projects—for campaign messaging. During such events, some of these public officials [promised to distribute](#) public funds locally, including a deputy minister of internal affairs and administration who announced that the Lublin region would receive PLN 473 million for road construction and improvements. The OSCE noted that the frequency and publicity of such activities and statements often blurred the line between state and party and arguably created an undue advantage for incumbent candidates. After the 2019 election resulted in opposition parties winning a majority in the Senate, PiS [asked](#) the Supreme Court chamber created by the controversial 2018 reforms for recounts in the six Senate seats it lost; however, none of the results were overturned.

Thirdly, the campaigns of prominent PiS candidates appear to have been largely bankrolled by donations made in the names of executives from state-owned enterprises. The candidate for whom PiS [spent the most money](#) campaigning in the 2019 election was Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. According to an [independent media investigation](#), three-quarters of to Morawiecki's campaign came from 27 executives who work at state-owned entities. PiS's political opponents [claimed](#) that PiS planned these payments, diverting the income of state companies into "an organized illegal pumping station" that [equates](#) to "massive state company funding of their campaign". The opposition [called](#) for the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau to monitor this alleged straw donor scheme and promised that, upon returning to power, they would thoroughly examine the correlation between these donations and special bonuses paid to the donors by state-owned enterprises.

Lastly, observers questioned the active role of the Catholic Church during the campaign cycle, which they said undermined the separation of church and state. ODIHR noted that several PiS campaign events were organized inside religious institutions and the party's campaign materials were often observed on the premises of places of worship. Likewise, church officials regularly echoed PiS's messages and, in some cases, specified PiS candidates to vote for or explicitly discouraged electing candidates from other parties. A prime example is the powerful priest and PiS ally Father Rydzyk.

Rydzik owns and operates a Catholic-nationalist media empire—comprised of the popular outlets Radio Maryja, TV Trwam, and the daily newspaper Nasz Dziennik—that he uses to regularly promote PiS politicians and amplify homophobic sentiment to millions across Poland. Entities associated with Rydzik have reportedly [received](#) at least PLN 325 million in public funds since 2015, which they have used to support his media empire and other lucrative projects, including a controversial PLN 40 million [geothermal plant](#) in 2019. Meanwhile, the archbishop of Kraków gave a sermon in the heat of the 2019 election season [warning](#) that the “red plague” of communism had been replaced by a “neo-Marxist ... rainbow plague”, which echoed anti-LGBT campaign messaging promoted by PiS. OSCE observers [raised concern](#) about the partnership between PiS and the Catholic Church, which could be considered an unfair advantage in a country where the overwhelming majority of people identify as Catholic.

The fairness of the 2019 parliamentary elections was once more called into question in 2021 after researchers from the internet and human rights watchdog Citizen Lab discovered that the mobile phones of several opposition figures [were hacked](#) with military-grade Pegasus spyware in the period leading up to the vote. One of the main targets was Senator Krzysztof Brejza, who at the time was running the campaign for the main opposition party, Civic Platform. Text messages stolen from Brejza’s phone—which was hacked 33 times—were doctored in a smear campaign and broadcasted on PiS-controlled TVP. In addition to Brejza, the phones of an opposition-linked lawyer and a prosecutor critical of PiS’s judicial reforms were also hacked. Opposition figures claimed the hacking gave PiS an unfair advantage at the polls, which Civic Platform subsequently lost by a slim margin. The government initially denied acquiring the spyware but later [admitted](#) to its purchase while still denying that it used it for political purposes. In a November 2022 report, the European Parliament [warned](#) that use of spyware may have impacted both the national and parliamentary elections.

2020 Polish Presidential Election

The 2020 presidential election brought about new concerns and repeated previous issues of fairness and integrity identified in the OSCE’s assessment of the 2019 parliamentary election. The presidential election coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened polarization, and harsh criticism of PiS from the EU for its continued efforts to subvert rule of law. While PiS employed many of the same autocratic tactics it had used in 2019, the pandemic also created new opportunities for abuses of power.

Amid political disagreement over whether to hold the election during the public health crisis, the government decided to move ahead with the election as originally scheduled for May 10, rather than postponing it. To that end, the government [issued](#) a “state of epidemic”, instead of a “state of emergency”, as the latter would have triggered a minimum 90-day postponement of the elections. Then, on April 6, less than five weeks before the scheduled vote, the government [introduced draft legislation](#) that would suddenly create a system of voting entirely by mail. In doing so, it would transfer the responsibility of election administration from the constitutionally appropriate National Electoral Commission to the postal service. As an alternative to the legislation, PiS parliamentarians also [submitted a bill](#) seeking to extend Duda’s term from five years to seven, in effect canceling the May election; although, it did not pass because the party did not have the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution.

The draft legislation was harshly [criticized](#) by democracy watchdogs for being unconstitutional and violating both Polish and European electoral laws, which forbid any changes to the electoral law less than six months before an election. Many characterized this as a “[power grab](#)” by the ruling party and an attempt to capitalize on incumbent PiS President Duda’s firm lead in the polls during a period when the pandemic had forced opposition parties to suspend campaigning.

Two days before the scheduled vote, the government backtracked on these plans, and the election was “abandoned”. A new election was called for June 28, with a runoff on July 12, in which incumbent Duda narrowly beat Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski with 51% of the vote. The decision to delay the election [did not follow](#) a statutory framework and was implemented unilaterally by Kaczyński and another leader of PiS’s coalition, Jarosław Gowin. The OSCE [concluded](#) that the June election and runoff were “administered professionally”, but that the government had failed to meet its constitutional obligations by abandoning the May vote without any formal procedure. Concerns regarding the legality of PiS’s moves during the 2020 election were reiterated by the NEC, which [claimed](#) it was deprived of constitutional powers to manage elections. Likewise, in 2021, the Supreme Audit Office [asked](#) prosecutors to launch a criminal investigation against Prime Minister Morawiecki and other high-ranking officials for seeking to organize the mail-in vote without a legal basis and at considerable cost. Supporters of the opposition also challenged the election results with the Supreme Court, claiming that the election suffered from irregularities and fraud, most notably uncounted votes from the diaspora community. Their case included [concerns](#) that diaspora votes were not counted, reports of irregular results in some nursing homes, which reported Duda winning 100% of the vote, and worries about extra ballots going to polling stations without proper documentation.

In addition to PiS’s attempted opportunism related to the pandemic, the OSCE [reiterated concerns](#) identified in 2019 in its assessment of the 2020 election. Like in 2019, the campaign cycle was negatively affected by biased coverage, particularly by TVP, which failed to ensure balanced and impartial coverage and effectively served as a mouthpiece for the incumbent. Hostile and inflammatory rhetoric against the LGBT community was further amplified in 2020, with Duda running largely on an [anti-LGBT platform](#). Throughout his campaign, Duda attacked the LGBT community in outlandish terms—[calling](#) the promotion of LGBT rights more destructive than communism—and [promised to](#) enact a charter that would prohibit LGBT couples from adopting children and “ban the propagation of LGBT ideology” in schools and public institutions if elected. Influential members of the Catholic Church—including Rydzyk and the archbishop of Kraków—echoed Duda’s anti-LGBT rhetoric and openly supported Duda’s re-election and intolerant campaign promises. Duda’s homophobic campaign coincided with an escalation in PiS-driven policy targeting the LGBT community, such as the [declaration](#) of “LGBT-free zones” across over 90 regional and municipal authorities.

Moreover, last-minute changes to [campaign finance laws](#) favored Duda’s campaign. The uncertainty ahead of the election meant that campaigning and campaign finance were in legal limbo between May 10 and the passage of legislation on June 2. That legislation formalized rules for the new election dates and amended the campaign finance legal framework in various ways, including by allowing electoral committees to use funds accumulated during the first part of the campaign, duplicating the limits on donations by natural persons, and increasing the expenditure limit. Importantly, these changes allowed Duda’s campaign to spend almost three times as much (PLN 28.6 million) as his primary competitor, Trzaskowski (PLN 9.6 million). Trzaskowski’s electoral committee raised

repeated objections in the media that the disparity in provisions was to its disadvantage and did not provide for an equal level playing field.

Looking Ahead to Fall 2023: Will PiS Subvert Its Own Democracy While Saving A Neighboring Democracy?

Unfortunately, many of the same illiberal tactics PiS has used to retain power since 2015 are likely to be reused in this year's parliamentary election. For many, Poland's democratic trajectory has been deeply worrisome. The ruling party's ongoing attacks on rule of law finally prompted a long-running legal standoff between Poland and the EU. Over the past two years, the EU has ramped up sanctions against Warsaw for not upholding the EU's democratic standards, including [withholding](#) €36 billion in COVID-19 recovery funds and [fining](#) Warsaw a record €1 million-per-day for failing to dismantle its controversial disciplinary chamber for judges. Although PiS has taken steps to reverse some judicial reforms to appease the EU and unlock recovery funds, these legislative changes [do little](#) to remove the core threats to Poland's judiciary, arguably highlighting PiS's reluctance to surrender power. This historic struggle over Polish democracy and rule of law is still being written, and the process and result of the 2023 election could be pivotal to the future of not only Poland but also the EU.

Public frustration in Poland with PiS and its attacks on democracy, rule of law, and human rights could motivate PiS to double down on these autocratic efforts. PiS's 2020 near total ban on abortion [sparked](#) the largest anti-government demonstrations the country had seen since the [Solidarity movement](#) that brought down the communist regime; more than 430,000 people gathered in the streets to protest the abortion law. Approval ratings for the ruling government [fell](#) to 26% in October 2022—its lowest since it rose to power in 2015. And while its support has since increased, most opinion polls [do not project](#) PiS winning enough seats to retain its parliamentary majority. And in an effort to prevent PiS candidates from winning, Poland's four main opposition parties—Civic Platform, The Left, Poland 2050, and the Polish People's Party—[have agreed](#) not to stand candidates against one another in the Senate election. A similar pact helped the opposition win back control of the chamber from PiS in 2019. Therefore, despite its persistent attempts to consolidate power since 2015, PiS finds itself in a difficult situation ahead of the fall election, which could motivate the party to expand its anti-democratic maneuvers in a desperate attempt to retain power.

As in previous elections, efforts to control the media environment and clamp down on government criticism will most likely continue in the fall election. Since the 2020 election, PiS [stepped up](#) its campaign to control and censor media, notably by [targeting](#) foreign ownership of private media. In December 2020, the state-run oil giant PKN Orlen [bought](#) the popular German-owned media giant Polska Press. Despite promises to safeguard editorial independence, more than a dozen editors-in-chief quit or were dismissed less than six months after the acquisition. Shortly after, Poland's parliament [introduced a bill](#) that would block companies from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) from having majority ownership of Polish media companies. Many viewed the bill as an attempt to silence Poland's largest independent television broadcaster and a prominent critic of PiS, TVN, which is owned by the US-based company Discovery. Although Duda subsequently vetoed the bill under pressure from the United States, PiS has since found more subtle ways to influence media, including by [directing](#) an extra PLN 700 million of additional funding to public media in 2023.

PiS has also been building upon its record since 2015 of using its parliamentary majority to time and manipulate the administration of elections for political purposes and to skew voter turnout in its favor. First, in November 2022, over the objections of the opposition-controlled upper house of parliament, the more powerful PiS-controlled lower house passed legislation—which Duda signed into law—[postponing](#) local elections that were due to take place in 2023 (six weeks before the national parliamentary election) to 2024. Constitutional scholars [doubt](#) the constitutionality of the delay given that it puts “politics above the law”. Other analysts [note](#) that PiS typically fares poorly in local elections—and may perform even worse this time—so the delay removes the threat of a negative result that could depress the morale of PiS voters ahead of the parliamentary election. Second, in January, the Polish parliament [amended](#) the electoral code to authorize the creation of more polling stations in rural villages (lowering the required number of eligible voters per constituency from 500 to 200), while also requiring local authorities to provide people over 60 or with disabilities with free buses to voting centers if no public transportation is available. Kaczyński admitted a desire to create several thousand more voting stations “so that people leaving church (on Sunday) can vote”. While increasing voting accessibility appears positive, the reform package has been criticized for attempting to asymmetrically bolster voter turnout in PiS strongholds. A political scientist at Warsaw University, for example, [warned](#) that “if it were an honest idea, [the law] would mostly increase the number of voting stations in places with high population density, in cities”. As with the delay of local elections, the constitutionality has been called into question given that a Constitutional Tribunal ruling [declared](#) that no significant amendments to election law may be introduced six months before an election date is established. While it is difficult to call expansions to ballot access “illegitimate”, that argument could reasonably be made if this partisan and unconstitutional election-year legislation is implemented in an unprecedentedly politicized manner meant only to tilt the playing field in favor of the regime that controls the administration of elections.

It is also possible that PiS will run the Trump playbook of calling on supporters to present an intimidating presence at polling stations, accept lies about the integrity of a lost election, and maybe even use violence to impede the transfer of power. In January of this year, Kaczyński [called on](#) faithful party members to station themselves at every polling location to prevent ballot “manipulation and forgery”. To counter PiS’s partisan election observers, the opposition also proposed mobilizing 54,000 volunteers to monitor the vote and keep tabs on any irregularities. Election fraud narratives have the potential to gain significant traction, with polls [showing](#) that 47% of Poles already fear that the 2023 parliamentary election may be rigged. If PiS leaders were to adopt false claims about the conduct or results of the election, it would not be the first time they used unfounded conspiracy theories for political gain. Following death of PiS President Lech Kaczyński in a 2010 plane crash, prominent party leaders [professed](#) foul play despite no evidence, claiming Russia or an opposition-orchestrated operation was behind the tragedy. Such narratives helped mobilize the PiS base leading up to its 2015 win.

Poland’s role in Ukraine has added other challenges to consider that might impact the country’s democratic stability ahead of the election. Since the start of the war, Poland has been a staunch advocate for Ukraine—[providing](#) vital military equipment to the frontline and [taking in](#) nearly 1.5 million refugees. Although there is strong support for Ukraine, both within the government and across society, as the war heads into its second year and the country faces growing financial strain, public sympathy could wane. This sentiment could be exploited by Russian state actors in the lead-up to

the election to punish Poland for its role in the war and complicate the sustainability of this assistance going forward. For instance, months after the invasion, analysts at Recorded Future [found](#) that Russian influence networks targeted several European countries, including Poland, in an effort to divide society on Ukraine and bolster pro-Russian sentiment. Russia's history of using information operations to influence elections makes it likely that it will attempt to amplify anti-Ukraine narratives and pro-Russian talking points ahead of the parliamentary election to further polarize the country.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, many Western countries have turned a blind eye to Poland's democracy crisis. While Poland's unparalleled humanitarian and military support is commendable, saving a neighboring democracy does not give Poland a bye for dismantling its own. Rather, since the NATO alliance is built on a foundation of shared values and principles, Poland's increased geopolitical importance as a fortress on the eastern front of the free world should make its rule of law and democratic future even more important.

Conclusion

That two hybrid regimes with such starkly different histories and levels of democratization should find themselves perpetrating so many of the same autocratic subversions of free and fair elections suggests that other exogenous factors may be shaping the decline of democracy in Turkey and Poland. These factors may include authoritarian diffusion, in which anti-democratic forces learn from events in other countries how best to undermine democratic institutions that stand in the way of their own domestic objectives. They may also include changes around media consumption, including the proliferation of conspiracy theories, that permit greater narrative manipulation by incumbent parties. But if one common structural feature exists that has driven the convergence of democratic backsliding in Poland and Turkey, it is the collaboration of the incumbent political regimes with networks of corrupt elites.

This political and economic cronyism is not a new phenomenon, and it plagues not only hybrid regimes but also consolidated democracies and authoritarian regimes. But in Turkey and Poland, cooperation between political leaders and the allies they fund—in and out of government, blurring formal lines of party, media, civilian state, military, church, etc.—has reached such an epidemic scale that it threatens the solvency of their democracies. In Turkey, macroeconomic policy is used to enrich oligarchs at the expense of the economy and to install loyal cronies as owners of all major private media assets. In both countries, state resources are funneled into the hands of the elite, both to ensure loyalty and to fund party activities. Meanwhile, partisan control of nominally independent judiciaries has made prosecuting, and in some cases even publicizing, such collusion nearly impossible through the traditional avenues of legal investigation.

Now both countries head into critical elections with very little media oversight—a result of regulatory capture in the case of public media and elite collusion in the case of Turkish private media—and almost no judicial oversight, thanks to the ruling parties' undue influence over the courts. This lack of oversight, which has impaired the fairness of elections in both countries in the past, now threatens even their "freeness" by blocking voters from freely choosing candidates of their choice, particularly in Turkey, where the prosecution of opposition politicians and abuse of emergency powers to restrict opposition campaigning has become commonplace.

Communities of liberal democracies, including NATO and the EU, must not look away from the decline of democracy taking place in Turkey and Poland. The deleterious trends we see in both states is a cause for alarm both in terms of what it means for those countries' participation in international institutions and alliances, and what it means for the future of democracy in other states facing similar challenges. Accountability—so sorely lacking now within Turkish and Polish domestic institutions—must at least be present on the international level, and Poland and Turkey must expect to face real consequences in economic, diplomatic, and strategic terms if they abandon their commitments to democracy and civil rights. The incompatibility between repressive authoritarianism and membership in the institutions of free democracies may come to a head in Turkey, which [is using its veto power](#) over Sweden's NATO membership bid to demand the political persecution and transnational repression of Erdoğan's political opponents who have fled to that country. And if PiS stays in power, it will probably continue to challenge the supremacy of the EU and its legal protections.

Ultimately, however, foreign countries and international institutions are unlikely to play a deciding role in the future of democracy in Turkey and Poland. Instead, the future trajectory of these countries will be decided by their people. Despite their disparate histories of democratization, Poles and Turks both guard their sovereignty proudly, and their commitment to democracy, whether demonstrated at the ballot box or in the street, remains the best hope for the political freedom of their countries.

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