Paths to Democratic Resilience in an Era of Backsliding

A Roadmap for the Democracy Support Community

NOVEMBER 2023

Paths to Democratic Resilience in an Era of Backsliding

A Roadmap for the Democracy Support Community

Authors

Erica Shein

Managing Director, Center for Applied Research and Learning

Dr. Cassandra Emmons

Senior Democracy Data Analyst

Contributors

Kyle Lemargie

Senior Global Advisor, Democratic Resilience and Innovation

Dr. Fernanda Buril

Deputy Director, Center for Applied Research and Learning

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

About IFES

IFES advances democracy for a better future. We collaborate with civil society, public institutions and the private sector to build resilient democracies that deliver for everyone. As a global leader in the promotion and protection of democracy, our technical assistance and applied research develops trusted electoral bodies capable of conducting credible elections; effective and accountable governing institutions; civic and political processes in which all people can safely and equally participate; and innovative ways in which technology and data can positively serve elections and democracy. Since 1987, IFES has worked in more than 145 countries, from developing to mature democracies. IFES is a global, nonpartisan organization based in Arlington, Virginia, USA, and registered as a non-profit organization [501(c)(3)] under the United States tax code.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction

This paper lays out a detailed approach to building democratic resilience in countries facing democratic erosion, democratic breakdown, and autocratic deepening. We define "democratic resilience" as the ability to maintain democratic governance functions and principles despite attempts by illiberal actors to damage or diminish the vertical, horizontal, or diagonal accountability mechanisms that are core to democracy. Investments in resilience may take different forms: In some cases, we may be able to help a democracy "bounce back" from episodes of backsliding; at other times, we may need to support democracy to enable it to persist in diminished form, reinforce what remains of the democratic architecture, or simply preserve the normative foundation and public demand for democracy for a future opening.

Investing in democratic resilience is increasingly essential, as autocrats — who governed 72 percent of the global population at the close of 2022[1] — go to ever greater lengths to preserve and expand their power. Scholarly and practitioner research continues to accumulate on the positive impacts of democracy support in a variety of contexts, including in backsliding environments.[2] It is imperative that the international democracy community provide targeted, evidence-based, and coordinated long-term support to build the resilience of democratic institutions and actors.

Understanding Today's Authoritarian Challenge

Unlike in eras past, contemporary autocrats seek not to replace democracy with a competing ideology but to *manipulate* the democratic system to achieve their own ends.[3] While some autocrats continue to draw on traditional tools and heavy-handed oppression tactics, many also co-opt democratic rhetoric, values, procedures, and institutions in their undemocratic pursuits.[4] They frequently come to power through legitimate elections.[5] Once in power, they amend, reinterpret, or simply breach the law; co-opt judiciaries, election management bodies (EMBs), and other independent institutions; dissolve opposition political parties and imprison dissenters; silence the media; and incite, abet, or commit violence against women and minority groups. These actions undermine deliberation and hollow out democratic rights and processes.

In many cases, autocrats benefit from and take advantage of dysfunctional opposition: weak, undemocratic political parties and sparse or uncoordinated civil society. Facing few constraints, these leaders mine grievances, manufacture offense, and supply distorted information to their publics to further weaken calls for democracy. In lieu of crafting

---

[1] Papada, E., et al. (2023). "Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization." University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute).

[2] Studies are also beginning to show that democracy support can have meaningful benefits in autocratic or closing spaces — even if the pathways for creating or demanding accountability are less traditional. On the need for international support, see Papada, E., et al. *op. cit.*; and Gamboa, L. (2023). "How Oppositions Fight Back." *Journal of Democracy* 34(3): 90–104. See also Hyde, S. D., Lamb, E., & Samet, O. (2023). "Promoting Democracy Under Electoral Authoritarianism: Evidence From Cambodia." *Comparative Political Studies*, 56(7), 1029–1071; Niño-Zarazúa, M., Horigoshi, A., & Gisselquist, R. M. (2022). "Aid's Impact on Democracy." UNU-WIDER Working Paper Series 2022/15.

[3] Naím, M. (2022). "The Dictator's New Playbook: Why Democracy is Losing the Fight." *Foreign Affairs* (March/April).

[4] Emmons, C., & Pavone, T. (2021). "The Rhetoric of Inaction: Failing to Fail Forward in the EU's Rule of Law Crisis." *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(10): 1611–1629.

[5] Scheppele, K. (2018). "Autocratic Legalism" *University of Chicago Law Review*, 85(2): 545–584.

people-centered policies, or to distract from their own governance failures or corruption, autocratic leaders demonize vulnerable groups and fuel and spread fears that result in civic and political inaction.[6] Autocrats are increasingly capable of manufacturing or exploiting growing public discontent with democracy. Global dissatisfaction with democracy has been increasing steadily since 2008,[7] and the gap between expectations of democracy's promise and the reality of what it delivers has been deepening for decades.

Autocrats also receive outside help in their pursuits. Legitimate or contrived crises, pandemics, natural disasters, inter- or intrastate conflict, and displacement or migration flows resulting from such events all offer opportunities for autocrats to gain and use emergency powers to curtail political rights and expand control over the levers of the state.[8] Their efforts are further bolstered by increasing support from other powerful autocracies, such as China[9] and Russia,[10] which provide large investments, make highly publicized state visits, and report back favorably in state-controlled media. This autocratic cooperation — mimicking democratic cooperation, albeit to much different ends — dilutes the political pressure that the community of democracies can exert.

To meet this challenge, the democracy support community requires a practical method for identifying and classifying the many tactics of autocratization. With that common understanding, we can design interventions to foster greater resilience against affronts to democracy. Interventions in pursuit of democratic resilience — as emphasized in examples provided in this paper — should identify, center, enable, and support local democracy champions to pursue their own democratic vision and goals.

Defining Key Concepts

This section presents a practical typology for defining and understanding two core concepts: *democratic backsliding* and *democratic resilience*.

Democratic Backsliding

"Democratic backsliding" has been broadly defined as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy."[11] This hollowing out of democratic institutions, processes, practices, and/or norms can take distinct paths across time and place. Labelling *any* deterioration "backsliding" with no further elaboration risks likening scenarios that are very dissimilar in style, origins, and intent. This paper takes a more nuanced approach to understanding backsliding as one of three types: *democratic erosion*, *democratic breakdown*,

[6] Buril, F., Shein, E., & Vickery, C. (2023). "The Summit for Democracy Needs to Target Democracy's Primary Adversary–And It's Not Authoritarianism."

[7] Foa, R. S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A., & Collins, R. (2020). "Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020." *Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge*.

[8] See "COVID-19 and States of Emergency" Symposium in *Verfassungsblog*. On recommendations specific to pandemic crises, see IFES, COVID-19 Briefing Series: Preserving Independent and Accountable Institutions.

[9] Hackenesch, C., & Bader, J. (2020). "The Struggle for Minds and Influence: The Chinese Communist Party's Global Outreach." *International Studies Quarterly*, 64(3): 723–733.

[10] Droin, M., & Dolbaia, T. (2023). "Russia is Still Progressing in Africa. What is the Limit?" *Center for Strategic & International Studies*.

[11] Bermeo, N. (2016). "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1): 5–19.

and *autocratic deepening*.[12] Understanding the distinctions between these forms of backsliding can inform program design based on evidence of effectiveness in similar contexts. It is important to underscore that a country's backsliding status is not static; countries can and do move between them — either in the direction of further autocratization as antidemocratic practices become entrenched or by "bouncing back" on the democratization path, for example, following a pivotal election.

In *democratic erosion* contexts, established democratic practices that ensure orderly transfers of power, accountability to the public, and related democratic values are targeted in a *slow,* often *piecemeal,* fashion. Tactics of erosion can include changes to judicial appointment procedures that ultimately weaken judicial autonomy, exerting undue pressure on civil society organizations (CSOs), or spreading misinformation about political opponents. This style of democratic backsliding is often the most difficult to identify as a true threat because it can be veiled as routine adjustments to the status quo that reflect the "will of the electorate" or other such (notably democratic) justifications. However, when not heeded, these signs of trouble can give way to entrenched antidemocratic norms — and possibly pave the way for a broader democratic breakdown. Such losses have been observed, for example, in Hungary (2010–2018),[13] Ghana (since 2017),[14] Brazil (2018–2022),[15] and Israel (since 2022).[16]

Democratic breakdowns differ from erosion in several important respects. Because breakdowns tend to be rapid, multidimensional, and brazen, they are often more obvious to the casual observer. Similar tactics may be used as observed in democratic erosion but with a broader scope and/or swifter implementation, such as shutting down independent media outlets, banning the activities of CSOs or cutting off their funding streams, or deregistering opposition political parties. There may also be more severe, sudden changes, such as dissolving an entire branch of government or purging sitting officials. Breakdowns of this magnitude have been observed in Tanzania (since 2015),[17] Poland (since 2016),[18] Turkey (since 2017),[19] Hungary (since 2018),[20] El Salvador (since 2021),[21] and Tunisia (since 2021).[22]

Finally, *autocratic deepening* may be observed either following long-term democratic erosion that has transformed a once-democratic regime into an autocratic one or after an acute democratic breakdown. Unlike the two previous contexts, autocratic deepening is specific to settings that would already be considered autocratic, as incumbents develop their own strategies to stay in power while further narrowing options for democratic resurgence. Such efforts may include, for example, the use of military courts to try civilians, large-scale imprisonment of journalists, or repression of the opposition in the diaspora. Drastic cases of deepening have taken place in Venezuela (especially

---

[12] This assessment builds upon extensive debates in academic and practitioner literature on the conceptualization and measurement of backsliding. For a thorough overview of the concept, see Lust, E. & Waldner, D. (2015) "Unwelcome Change: Understanding, Evaluating, and Extending Theories of Democratic Backsliding." USAID.

[13] Bankuti, M., Scheppele, K. L., & Halmai, G. (2012). "Hungary's Illiberal Turn: Disabling the Constitution." *Journal of Democracy* 23(3): 138–46.

[14] Ogúnmódede, C. O. (2021). "Ghana's Recent Democratic Erosion Belies its Sterling Reputation." *World Politics Review* (August 5).

[15] Bradlow, B. H., & Kadivar, M. A. (2023). "How Brazil Can Prevent an Authoritarian Resurgence." *Foreign Affairs* (January 12).

[16] Goren, N. (2023). "Israelis' Evolving Pushback to Democratic Erosion under Netanyahu." *Middle East Institute* (January 19).

[17] Paget, D. (2017). "Tanzania: Shrinking Space and Opposition Protest." *Journal of Democracy* 28(3).

[18] Sadurski, W. (2019) *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown.* Oxford University Press; Pech, L. (2023) "7 Years Later: Poland as a Legal Black Hole." *Verfassungsblog* (January 17).

[19] Chulov, M. (2017). "Erdogan gets backing to strengthen his autocratic grip on Turkey." *The Guardian* (April 16); Freedom House "Freedom in the World 2018: Turkey."

[20] Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Amnesty International, and the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union. (2019). "Hungary Moving Beyond Red Lines: Developments Related to the Rule of Law September 2018-January 2019." (January 29). Freedom House "Freedom in the World 2019: Democracy in Retreat."

[21] Meléndez-Sánchez, M. (2021). "Latin America Erupts: Millennial Authoritarianism in El Salvador." *Journal of Democracy* 32(3): 19–32.

[22] Freedom House "Freedom in the World 2023: Tunisia."

since 2013),[23] Cambodia (since 2018),[24] Nicaragua (especially since 2018),[25] Belarus (since 2020),[26] Myanmar (since 2021),[27] and Sudan (since 2021).[28]

In each of these cases, autocratic or would-be-autocratic leaders take specific actions that target the *pillars of accountability* central to a democratic system. Accountability, as used here, implies that bearers of political power assume an affirmative responsibility for their actions and must justify or answer for them — or risk being sanctioned.[29] Political accountability centers on relationships between holders of power and other democratic actors, including other branches of government (horizontal accountability); citizens, often represented by political parties (vertical accountability); and media and civil society (diagonal accountability).[30]

Table 1 presents a non-exhaustive list of actions that are characteristic of each type of backsliding, based on the accountability pillars they often target.[31] These examples are non-exclusive; some actions that undemocratic leaders take could be indicative of democratic erosion *or* breakdown, for example, or democratic breakdown *or* autocratic deepening. *Context* and *local expertise* can help donors and practitioners evaluate a situation, identify the threat level, and guide program design and decision-making.

---

[23] Corrales, J. (2023) "Venezuela's Autocratization, 1999–2021: Variations in Temporalities, Party Systems, and Institutional Controls" in A. Fung, D. Moss, & O. A. Westad (eds.) *When Democracy Breaks: Studies in Democratic Erosion and Collapse, from Ancient Athens to the Present Day.* Forthcoming. Oxford University Press.

[24] Morgenbesser, L. (2019). "Cambodia's Transition to Hegemonic Authoritarianism" *Journal of Democracy 30*(1), 158–171; Bennett, C. (2022). "Cambodia 2018-2021: From Democracy to Autocracy." *Asia Maior* XXXII/2021.

[25] Muggah, R. (2023). "With Russian Support, Nicaragua Smothers Dissent." *Foreign Policy* (March 9).

[26] Freedom House "Nations in Transit 2022: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression."

[27] Maizland, L. (2022). "Myanmar's Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict." *Council on Foreign Relations* (updated January 31).

[28] Soliman, A. (2021). "Reversing the Military Coup in Sudan." Chatham House (November 11).

[29] While accountability structures are not the only component of a democracy, they are essential checks on power that broadly ensure government is responsive to the people's will, maintaining a democratic society.

[30] For more on mechanisms of democratic accountability, see Lührmann, A., Marquardt, K. L., & Mechkova, V. (2020). "Constraining Governments: New Indices of Vertical, Horizontal, and Diagonal Accountability." *American Political Science Review* 114(3): 811–820.

[31] The types of threats against horizontal and vertical accountability are derived from the Democratic Erosion Event Dataset, amended by the authors to also account for *diagonal* accountability.

TABLE 1: Illustrative Examples of Democratic Backsliding and Associated Threats to Accountability

Democratic Erosion *Piecemeal, prolonged undermining of democratic norms, processes, or institutions*	Democratic Breakdown *Wholesale, acute decline in democratic decision-making, institutions, and civic spaces*	Autocratic Deepening *Elimination of democratic space, qualities of governance, or institutions in autocratic environments*
Horizontal Accountability		
• Weakening the independence of the judiciary or legislature through changes to appointment procedures or arbitrary removals • Manipulating the civil service, such as through corrupt practices or intimidation • Centralizing powers originally reserved for subnational government into the national government • Officials abusing state resources or enabling corrupt practices for private gain • Executive misuse of law enforcement (e.g., threat of prosecution to influence the actions of other branches) • Leveraging crises to curtail rights to judicial review	• Executive cooptation of government via decree or abusive declaration of states of emergency • Extending national emergencies to pursue policy goals unfettered • Dismissing the entire legislature or judiciary outside of normal procedures (self-coups) • Establishing parallel courts or systems to bypass checks on executive or legislative actions • Capturing state funds through improper public procurement	• Guaranteeing future executive or legislative control by establishing pathways for dynastic succession • Purging judges or elected legislators from an already captured institution • Installing a military junta
Vertical Accountability		
• Spreading misinformation about political opponents • Offering bribes for votes, in the form of campaign promises or direct payouts • Intimidating voters or poll workers on Election Day • Malapportionment or gerrymandering in pivotal districts • Undermining confidence in election outcomes through verbal or legal attacks on poll workers and procedures • Using public health or other crises as cover to limit the freedom of assembly or speech	• Deregistering opposition parties without evidence of wrongdoing • Improperly annulling an election • Suing political opponents to make them ineligible for office • Carrying out a coup d'état that unseats a democratically elected government • Engaging in large-scale or widespread efforts to disenfranchise voters by violence or threats of violence • Making sweeping changes to district sizes or boundaries • Applying last-minute, significant changes to the electoral system	• Imprisoning rising opposition voices • Prohibiting once-tolerated parties in the legislature • Engaging in or fomenting widespread political party-led violence • Further entrenching autocratic power through a coup d'état • Amending the constitutional and legal framework for elections to eliminate opportunities for competition or to disenfranchise groups of voters

Diagonal Accountability		
- Restricting the use of major internet platforms under the guise of mis- or disinformation concerns - Selectively spying on political opponents (e.g., the Pegasus software scandal) - Slowly silencing critical media outlets by use or threats of fines, raids, or strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) - Targeting minority groups and CSOs that focus on minority rights through changes to policies that make it more difficult to operate - Using nationalist rhetoric that demonizes minority groups in public communications campaigns to create enemies of the state	- Mandating internet blackouts during times of public unrest - Changing national laws to enable the collection of data to target and prosecute journalists - Prohibiting media from reporting on certain topics or locations - Introducing legal bans on CSO activities or passing laws that enable state control of CSO registration, permissible activities, and funding	- Nationalizing internet infrastructure or requiring internet providers to allow government broad access to user records - Conducting multi-modal surveillance of targeted minorities and political groups (e.g., video and telecommunication monitoring, limitations on movement) - Instituting state control of all media and disseminating and continually reinforcing false narratives that discredit any remaining opposition - Imprisoning journalists - Enforcing broad prohibitions on free movement, assembly, or association - Engaging in transnational targeting or repression of opposition

Conceptualizing Democratic Resilience

Governance is an intricate, multifaceted system with integral (and sometimes mutually reinforcing) components. Drawing insights from the study of other complex systems, such as environmental ecosystems and information technology infrastructure, a system is considered resilient "if it continues to carry out its mission in the face of adversity."[32] Taking this definition as our starting point, we define "democratic resilience" as the *ability to maintain democratic governance functions and principles, despite attempts by illiberal actors to damage or diminish vertical, horizontal, or diagonal accountability mechanisms that are core to democracy*. Democracy's stress tests can include those listed in Table 1, but they are not limited to those examples.

Figure 1: Three-Part Democratic Resilience Cycle

Democracy itself is a system that requires continuous care and maintenance; it is not an endpoint. Fostering democratic resilience is, thus, an ongoing process. It requires democratic systems and actors to build and sustain

---

[32] Firesmith, D. (2019). "System Resilience: What Exactly is it?" Carnegie Mellon University Software Engineering Institute Blog (November 25).

capacities to *respond* to and *recover* from crises, possibly by *transforming* themselves or innovating in permanent ways. Appropriate *preparation*, combined with learning, reduces the need for ad hoc interventions by democracy actors. Similar resilience cycles are used in other sectors but have been underutilized for the democracy and governance space. IFES applies these three parts of the resilience cycle depicted in Figure 1 to democracy support as follows:

Preparation. A resilient system is equipped to lessen the impact of a democratic backsliding episode by anticipating that such threats will inevitably materialize, and defenses will be tested. With appropriate long-term thinking, a democratic system can be designed to weather such shocks and enable resilience among the individuals who work within it. For instance, many democracies have built checks and balances across branches of government or chains of command into their constitutions to prevent system weaknesses. In other contexts, this is akin to avoiding single points of failure; if one defensive mechanism fails, another safety net is in place. An important element of preparation is identifying new and emerging threats. Even in non-crisis times, democratic actors should stay vigilant to detect attacks against accountability mechanisms, such as the proposal of anti-democratic laws, significant cuts in the budgets of independent agencies, changes in nomination procedures that might undermine the autonomy of independent institutions, or government deployment of surveillance against opposition actors without judicial review.

Response. When built-in checkpoints fail, it is imperative to respond to present threats. Resilient responses can take several forms: armoring against or withstanding the shock; absorbing fallout by activating relevant procedures; or adapting flexibly to the situation. To *withstand* attacks on an independent institution, for example, trusted democratic champions can sensitize their communities to the threat with information campaigns, rallying collective pushback against antidemocratic efforts to capture or control those bodies. Democratic systems can also *absorb* shocks such as corruption by applying a range of available sanctions — whether disciplinary, administrative, civil, or criminal. Where those options are unavailable or unsuccessful, democratic actors can find innovative ways to respond by *adapting* protocols, such as by establishing new information-sharing mechanisms to understand, monitor, uncover, and expose evolving cybersecurity threats.

Recovery and transformation. Sometimes, crises have clear endpoints; in other cases, democratic backsliding is prolonged but there are opportunities to win back some of the democratic ground that has been lost. During this phase, democratic systems should reflect on weaknesses exposed by the backslide to *recover* and, where necessary, innovate to *transform* points of failure for future resilience. Weaknesses in autonomy and accountability structures exploited during the backslide need to be addressed — even when they might also advantage the governing position of ascendant pro-democracy actors. Even mechanisms that functioned as envisioned may need adjustment considering recent experience. Legal and procedural reforms should include new rules, norms, or practices that reflect the lessons learned from the response phase. These newly transformed institutions become the intentional design in preparation for future shocks.

Designing Resilience Interventions

Building and maintaining democratic resilience is an ongoing process, but there are specific interventions that can be more influential before, during, and after moments of adversity.

Because the *preparation* phase, by definition, does not involve an active threat, resilience efforts during this phase should identify and address vulnerabilities in the accountability architecture, prioritizing weaknesses that are more likely to be exploited. Continuous investments in building strong demand for democracy among the public and supporting the resilience of independent government agencies, CSOs, and the media can prepare countries and their citizens to avert serious threats to their democratic government. Table 2 lists examples of activities in the preparation phase.

TABLE 2: Selected Interventions During the Preparation Phase

Prepare Horizontal Accountability Mechanisms	Prepare Vertical Accountability Mechanisms	Prepare Diagonal Accountability Mechanisms
- Support parliamentary capacity to engage in robust policy dialogue and debate - Encourage development of nomination processes and other procedures that preserve the autonomy of judicial bodies and independent agencies - Sharpen the institutional reflexes of government agencies through scenario planning, crisis management, and strategic communications - Formalize relationships (e.g., via memoranda of understanding) among independent agencies to enable collective resistance to political pressure - Build relationships among public institutions and technology companies to help protect public institutions from attacks and optimize performance and service delivery - Provide leadership skills training to sensitize public officials to their roles and responsibilities and help them identify, resist, and expose cooptation attempts	- Build the capacity of EMBs to hold credible elections that lead to peaceful transfers of power - Develop a legal framework conducive to holding competitive elections, including campaign finance regulations and robust guarantees of freedom of association - Support local government officials to understand their roles and responsibilities, connect with their constituents, and deliver public services - Increase representation by supporting the inclusion of diverse groups, including frequently marginalized communities, in political processes - Support the development of issue-based political party platforms that reflect constituents' interests	- Support legal reform to reduce ambiguity and prevent governments from attacking or limiting the ability of media and civil society to provide oversight - Engage in educational and outreach efforts to build and cement a democratic culture and demand for democracy among the public - Support the organization and professionalization of civil society groups that can help hold the government accountable - Support the professionalization of independent media outlets committed to unbiased reporting - Create space for active civil society engagement and media competition - Build skills in grant writing, data analytics, and writing among civil society actors to better advocate for their causes

Prepare Horizontal Accountability Mechanisms	Prepare Vertical Accountability Mechanisms	Prepare Diagonal Accountability Mechanisms
- Support reforms to emergency powers laws to align with international standards, including sunset clauses and reporting mandates - Support judges to engage with peers in global or regional networks to share good practices and bolster support for their independence - Train election officials to conduct audits of core electoral systems (e.g., results management systems)	- Enable the professionalization of political parties to create a healthy, competitive political environment - Institutionalize inclusive post-election reviews to build resilience into the electoral process - Build the capacity of citizen election observation groups to oversee election processes impartially and accurately using systematic, tested methodologies	

Once a threat against specific accountability mechanisms is recognized as signaling democratic erosion, democratic breakdown, or autocratic deepening, appropriate **responses** can be chosen (see Table 3). That is, by identifying the *context* of a democratic backslide, the democracy, rights, and governance community can determine the *types* of resilience that are lacking and better target their interventions to support democratic champions. In so doing, we move away from the question of "what works generally?" in favor of asking "what works under these real-world conditions?"[33] The most appropriate responses should be chosen and designed *in collaboration with local actors*, as they are best situated to understand the threats and articulate their specific priorities.

TABLE 3: Selected Interventions During the Response Phase

Respond to Democratic Erosion	Respond to Democratic Breakdown	Respond to Autocratic Deepening
Horizontal Accountability		
- Support judiciaries to defend their independence against attacks from the executive, including through improved strategic communications and integrity training - Defend the mandates of independent institutions in the face of proposed checks on their power, including through public campaigns, legal advocacy and court challenges, and activation of established relationships with other constitutionally independent institutions - Support consistent application of existing laws and timely sanctions against perpetrators of anti-democratic actions in public offices, including corruption and manipulation of the civil service	- Activate transnational judicial networks to support national responses to attacks on the judicial branch - Seek to deploy full international election observation missions to the next scheduled national or key local election - Provide ongoing technical assistance to EMBs to overcome operational challenges and threats that could jeopardize the integrity of elections - Call for the activation of intergovernmental organizations' suspension and other sanctioning mechanisms, particularly when there are high levels of malign foreign interference	- Identify potential champions in remaining institutions to build inter-institutional and possibly international coalitions that might foster democratic reforms - Produce and disseminate compelling information campaigns to counter regime narratives that normalize unconstrained executive power

---

[33] Buril, F. (2022). "Why We Should Stop Asking 'What Works in Democracy Assistance'." IFES Blog (March 9).

Respond to Democratic Erosion	Respond to Democratic Breakdown	Respond to Autocratic Deepening
Vertical Accountability		
• Support political parties to develop strong, inclusive, issue-based platforms that reflect people's needs and interests, increasing pluralism and reducing the appeal of populist narratives • Provide leadership skills training for pro-democracy political leaders (e.g., in ethics, risk management, consensus building, dialogue and negotiations, mediation, inclusion, and crisis management)	• Directly aid pro-democracy movements, engaging marginalized voices in particular • Support advocacy against laws and other measures designed to repress political opposition • Support initiatives that reduce tensions between political parties and that could lead to violence (e.g., codes of conduct, dialogue, mediation teams or committees) • Enable the continuity of government service provision, including through direct aid • Provide guidance for domestic observers in planning missions and crafting public statements that support accountability and transparency without exacerbating tensions	• Support networks of individuals in the diaspora ("drained brains") to stay engaged in their home countries' political futures • Ensure the availability of independent analysis on how elections are being subverted as a counterpoint to non-critical regime narratives and the reports of "zombie" observer missions • Create opportunities for individuals in the diaspora to gain professional experience in election administration, building leadership capacity to support future transitions and maintain relevance and credibility with citizens still inside the country
Diagonal Accountability		
• Sponsor innovations in communication platforms, tools, and strategies to help civil society and the media share threat intelligence and monitor, uncover, and expose threats to democracy • Provide legal defense resources for journalists and civil society targeted by SLAPPS to engage in strategic litigation • Offer media training to build public understanding of the role and value of an independent court system	• Support CSOs to coordinate and build regional networks to foster peer-to-peer exchange, elevate their voices, increase their mobilization strength, and build solidarity • Provide digital security and/or cyber-hygiene training for civil society advocates and independent journalists • Support the enfranchisement of out-of-country voters (including refugees and exiles) to maintain political engagement	• Provide media literacy trainings and support to advocates in using digital techniques to counter disinformation and protect civil society, media, and the broader public from disinformation and manipulative narratives • Collaborate with academic institutions that may be granted wider space for debate, dialogue, and research to impart information on democracy and critical thinking skills to youth • Consult the diaspora community to identify immediate needs and raise awareness of and advocacy for international responses

When there is a window of opportunity for democratic renewal or building back better — whether in autocratic countries *or* in democracies experiencing erosion or breakdown — the democracy, rights, and governance community should also be prepared to support and capitalize on those opportunities. ***Recovery*** need not mean a full return to the status quo; it can require standing up new or ***transformed*** resilience measures in addition to restoring elements that have been lost. This phase relies on innovation as well as reflection. Table 4 provides examples.

Table 4: Selected Interventions During the Recovery and Transformation Phase

Recover from Democratic Erosion or Transform	Recover from Democratic Breakdown or Transform	Recover from Autocratic Deepening or Transform
Horizontal Accountability		
- Support the creation of new institutions to fill oversight gaps, and reforms that bolster the autonomy and accountability of existing institutions - Develop clear regulations, laws, and sanctions against corruption in public offices - Equip civil servants, including judicial officers, to understand and implement legal, regulatory, and sanction measures to ensure consistency and avoid perceptions of bias - Adopt new parliamentary structures, rules, and procedures that protect effective debate, enable passage of legislation, and secure oversight functions - Revise politically compromised selection processes for independent institutions - Establish internal mechanisms to improve judicial administration and address corruption in the judiciary (codes of conduct, training, and independent budgets)	- Socialize governing institutions to their requirements, rights, and avenues for action under international law commitments, and support their efforts to realign domestic laws and the constitution with such agreements - Develop the capacities of sub-national tiers of institutions such as EMBs to safeguard electoral integrity throughout the institutional hierarchy	- Gather lessons learned and, through strategic planning and institutional support, build on them to support stronger local detection and response mechanisms - As appropriate, support the restoration of institutional mandates and autonomous functions of independent agencies - Provide technical assistance for (special) elections to replace appointed seats in legislatures with elected seats, and for convening broader electoral system reform discussions - Support courts to facilitate transitional justice and/or dismantle undemocratic legal structures put in place by the previous autocratic regime

Recover from Democratic Erosion or Transform	Recover from Democratic Breakdown or Transform	Recover from Autocratic Deepening or Transform
Vertical Accountability		
• Support advocacy to repeal repressive laws and other measures designed to censor or limit civil liberties • Address needed institutional reform and rebuild institutional credibility for EMBs • Collaborate with political parties to draft election codes of conduct to ensure buy-in at all levels	• Support an inclusive legal reform process to unwind legal and extra-legal measures that damaged the party system and hindered competitive elections • Encourage legislative reform to expand voting opportunities and enable broad participation • Identify key service provision gaps during breakdown episodes and devise alternative delivery protocols for future crises	• Support broad-based, inclusive consultations on drafting or amending the constitution • Sponsor initiatives to support youth to be positioned as political leaders in future democratic openings • Provide guidance for redrawing and reapportioning electoral districts according to international best practices • Convene stakeholders to address unusual party registration or dissolution articles in the electoral legal framework
Diagonal Accountability		
• Support new research, civil society monitoring, and reporting initiatives in areas exploited by illiberal actors to heighten future detection capabilities • Support civil society and media to identify and counter misinformation, including in ways that align with institutional communications strategies	• Support civil society and the media to build capacity to gather information, investigate and document abuses, and safely expose wrongdoing by anti-democratic actors to build demand for accountability • Establish formal dialogues with civil society actors and government institutions in the building back process • Mediate conversations with fragmented segments of society to find common ground	• Support the reintegration of the diaspora to build back a strong civil sector • Promote new and re-emerging independent or opposition voices in local media • Establish academic opportunities through international networks that introduce students to alternative worldviews • Partner with new or re-emerging CSOs for new on-the-ground activities

Moving Forward

This paper set out to refocus the international democracy support community's efforts in the present era of backsliding. It articulates the ways that illiberal actors work cooperatively and creatively to dismantle the accountability architecture that is core to democracy systems. The paper offers a practical definition of democratic resilience and a straightforward framework that distinguishes among democratic erosion, democratic breakdown, and autocratic deepening and the specific threats posed to accountability structures in each of these contexts. This nuanced look at backsliding lends itself to matching appropriate resilience-enhancing interventions to the threats at hand.

This framework offers a starting point for choosing interventions that are most likely to succeed based on the backsliding context and the impending or ongoing threat to accountability mechanisms. With this framework, we seek to shift the question from *whether* support is feasible or desirable in a backsliding context to *how* the international community can best support a democracy that is encountering any form of backsliding. For example, *how* can we more effectively enhance the resilience of a democracy's horizontal accountability structures — its inter-institutional checks and balances — when there are signs that judicial independence is eroding? *How* can we build the resilience of vertical accountability structures, such as by (re)establishing a viable, competent opposition, in the face of autocratic deepening?

Our key takeaway is that an effective approach to supporting local democracy champions should employ resilient design principles appropriate to the relevant stage of the resilience cycle: *preparing* the democratic system for shocks and stresses; *responding* to crises while maintaining government's core functions; and — when opportunities arise — *recovering* and *transforming* to be more resistant to similar incidents in the future.

Despite some bright spots, the antidemocratic challenges of the day are not fading. Defenders of democracy stand the greatest chance of success if we work simultaneously to bolster the democratic accountability architecture that is targeted by autocrats *and* to disrupt and diminish the impact of autocratic agendas. This paper suggests more than any one actor in the international democracy community can implement. Successful democratic resilience building will require the international donor and diplomatic community, intergovernmental institutions, and technical assistance providers to *coordinate* interventions to best support local democracy champions.

This publication was produced with the financial support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).