



Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance

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Abstract: The relationship between democratic backsliding and security governance requires special attention for many reasons. This study explores that relationship by examining how security governance can become both a tool and a victim under authoritarian populists. The confrontation between populist leaders and bureaucrats arises when bureaucrats are forced to choose between professional objectivity and adherence to the leader's will. In the final section, the study elaborates on a model developed following empirical research conducted under the supervision of one of the authors.

Keywords: democratic backsliding, authoritarian regimes, authoritarian, civil servants, bureaucracy, security sector, security governance.

Introduction

This article examines the complex relationship between democratic backsliding—a process defined as a regression from a previous level of democracy—and security governance.¹ Democratic backsliding refers to the backward movement of a regime with some democratic features toward authoritarianism, involving the “incremental erosion of democratic institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments, typically driven by an autocratic leader.”² Security governance refers to the institutions, processes, and policies of a state that ensure the security of its citizens through organizations

¹ Fabio Wolkenstein, “What Is Democratic Backsliding?” *Constellations* 30, no. 3 (September 2023): 261-275, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12627>.

² Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108957809>.

such as the police, military, and intelligence agencies.³ By examining the interaction between these two phenomena, this article addresses a significant research gap in the fields of political regime studies, public administration, and international and security studies.

Within scholarly debates about political regimes, democratic backsliding has been studied as a failure of the democratic process that begins with the decline of democratization and intensifies with populist and authoritarian policies. The resulting institutional changes further reduce the quality of democracy and can even lead to authoritarian regimes.⁴

Democratic backsliding is associated with several factors, such as undemocratic leadership (often described as populist or authoritarian), institutional weaknesses, societal issues such as economic hardship and social polarization, and lack of trust in government.⁵ Research indicates that the impact of individual leaders, combined with ideology and reinforced by institutional power, plays a significant role in democratic backsliding and the erosion of democratic values and institutions.⁶

This study faces two challenges in examining democratic backsliding and in naming the reversion from democratic processes and ideals in a given country. The first challenge lies in the conceptual complexity of backsliding, which is also referred to by various other terms such as democratic erosion, de-democratization, democratic recession, and autocratization.⁷ The concept itself is understood differently: some scholars define it as the state-led elimination of democratic institutions, while others emphasize the incremental weakening of those institutions through legal means.⁸ Despite these differences, scholars agree that

³ Elke Krahmann, "Conceptualizing Security Governance," *Cooperation and Conflict* 38, no. 1 (2003): 5-26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836703038001001>.

⁴ Theresia Smolka, "Decline of Democracy – the European Union at a Crossroad," *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 15 (2021): 81-105, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12286-021-00481-w>; Nargiza Yusupova, "The Crisis of Democracy: the Case Study of Democratic Backsliding and the Rise of Populism in Poland," *Theses and Dissertations* 1421 (Illinois State University, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.30707/ETD2021.20210719070603185212.16>.

⁵ Gábor Scheiring, "The Social Requisites of Illiberalism," *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021): 599-615, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367260569>.

⁶ Antonio Benasaglio Berlucchi and Marisa Andrea Kellam, "Who's to Blame for Democratic Backsliding: Populists, Presidents or Dominant Executives?" *Democratization* 30, no. 5 (2023): 815-835, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2190582>.

⁷ Benjamin Rieth Schneider, "Politics During and After Democratic Backsliding," PhD Diss., *Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations* 2753 (Washington University in St. Louis, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.7936/ps61-4e98>.

⁸ Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (January 2016): 5-19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>; Daniela Huber and Barbara Pisciotto, "From Democracy to Hybrid Regime. Democratic Backsliding and Populism in Hungary and Tunisia," *Contemporary Politics* 29, no. 3 (2023): 357-378, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2022.2162210>.

backsliding is a process—not a single event—whereby a political regime takes incremental steps toward a less democratic (or nondemocratic) form of government.⁹

While the process of democratic backsliding is frequently associated with the rise of populism, the direction and intensity of nondemocratic practices can lead to other forms of undemocratic governance, such as authoritarianism, dictatorship, and hybrid regimes. Therefore, the second challenge this study faces relates to the transition from democratization to a less democratic condition and how political regime literature categorizes nondemocratic systems. Traditional categories of regime types, such as authoritarianism and totalitarianism, refer to static models. Backsliding, on the other hand, is a dynamic process. It is often linked to the rise of populism; however, the literature generally does not consider populism to be a fixed form of government. Instead, populism is regarded as a political strategy that could lead to hybrid regimes or authoritarianism.¹⁰

Additionally, backsliding represents a regression in a state's level of democracy but does not necessarily result in the full establishment of an authoritarian regime, making it difficult to classify regime type. Therefore, when discussing backsliding, the focus should be on the gray zone between democratic and non-democratic regimes, where a mix of democratic and authoritarian features co-exist.

Considering the difficulties in defining a regime switch, this study adopts the term “authoritarian populism,” as measured by the Authoritarian Populism Index, and defined as “a thin-centered branch of populism whose leaders actively pursue authoritarian policies in office.”¹¹ This type of regime change is becoming increasingly important in the field of international relations, and addressing the issues that arise with “authoritarian populism” aims to fill another gap in the literature.

Authoritarian populists often rise to power by amassing support to defeat the political, social, and bureaucratic elites who are seen as out of touch with reality. Although they often come to power democratically, authoritarian populists typically employ a common strategy to “fix” the bureaucracy through more authoritarian policies. This strategy enables the consolidation of power and the removal of checks and balances, both of which go against democratic principles but are seen as necessary to achieving the authoritarian populist's political agenda. This

⁹ Natasha Wunsch and Philippe Blanchard, “Patterns of Democratic Backsliding in Third-Wave Democracies: A Sequence Analysis Perspective,” *Democratization* 30, no. 2 (2023): 278–301, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2130260>.

¹⁰ Julio F. Carrión, “Introduction: Democracy and Populism,” in *A Dynamic Theory of Populism in Power: The Andes in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Julio F. Carrión (New York: Oxford Academic, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197572290.003.0001>.

¹¹ “Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index,” API.24, Friedrich Naumann Foundation and Atlas Network, 2024, <https://populismindex.com/>; Gabriella Gricius, “Populism and Authoritarianism,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, ed. Michael Oswald (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 177–193, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80803-7_10.

gradual erosion of checks and balances, along with the democratization process in general, strengthens the authoritarian populist leader. Over time, these leaders often establish political control over the government, media, and judiciary, facing decreasing opposition at each step.

When countries start showing signs of democratic retreat, their public administration in general, and security governance structures in particular, become increasingly vulnerable to politicization and abuses of power. These institutions begin to serve the interests of leaders, helping them remain in power while abandoning the principles of the rule of law. Under populist rule, state institutions and bureaucratic structures become simultaneously tools and victims of democratic backsliding.¹² While public administration suffers under these conditions, security institutions often become the primary targets of undemocratic policies, as leaders seek either to ensure the loyalty of these institutions or, in the long term, guarantee their support to remain in power.¹³

The relationship between politics and security governance structures during democratization establishes the checks and balances mentioned above, intended to minimize the risk of abuse of power embedded in security institutions. In democratic systems—or systems transitioning toward democracy—security institutions play a vital role in maintaining stability, enforcing laws, and safeguarding citizens' rights, while also remaining accountable to democratic principles.

In a healthy democracy, security institutions are expected to maintain a neutral position in their relations with politics, and their interactions are guided by professional standards within their areas of expertise. Huntington's theory of civil-military relations concludes that military institutions should remain relatively detached from political ideologies in order to preserve their integrity.¹⁴ Although the theory operates within an ideal—whereby all members of the military operate outside the realm of politics—the idea that the military serves the citizens of the state, and must therefore conduct itself in a manner that represents the opinions of the broader population, not just one political leader, remains valid.¹⁵

¹² Michael W. Bauer, "Public Administration Under Populist Rule: Standing Up Against Democratic Backsliding," *International Journal of Public Administration* 47, no. 15 (2024): 1019-1031, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2023.2243400>.

¹³ Agime Gashaj et al., *Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance*, Alumni Scholar Group Project Summary Report, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2022, www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/clock-tower-security-series/democratic-backsliding-and-security-governance/democratic-backsliding-and-security-governance.

¹⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

¹⁵ Donald S. Travis, "Saving Samuel Huntington and the Need for Pragmatic Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 43, no. 3 (2017): 395-414, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X16667287>.

In democracies, bureaucrats and security professionals are expected to “speak the truth” to political leadership.¹⁶ Politicians have the authority to make final decisions based on legal frameworks and institutional consensus; security institutions implement those decisions with accountability to laws and constitutional checks and balances.

In backsliding democracies, conflict between populist governments and bureaucratic expertise arises when bureaucrats must choose between following their objective, nonpartisan approach or adhering to the will of the populist leader.¹⁷ In such situations, populist leaders prefer to work with experts and bureaucrats who are willing to abandon professional standards and accountability to legal norms and institutions. Gradually, the democratic system deteriorates under the will of an authoritarian populist leader and their loyalists, as the implementation of new “rules” leads to continued consolidation of power between the undemocratic leader and their political party.

In addition to political and institutional dynamics, a sociological context is needed to better understand the rise to power of authoritarian populist leaders and to provide a cultural context for democratic protections.¹⁸ Cultural context can help explain why some bureaucrats and security professionals are committed to democratic principles, which may strengthen a government’s democratic resilience.

This article hypothesizes that democratic backsliding leads to politicization and abuses of power within security organizations, which in turn accelerate the backsliding process and undermine the democratic resilience of the regime. Democratic backsliding weakens constitutional checks and balances, as well as the ability of security institutions to uphold democratic resilience and stability.

Democratic backsliding reduces the capacity of a state’s government to resist rapid, undemocratic change through established systems of checks and balances. In a healthy democracy, these mechanisms enable security institutions to uphold democratic principles through resilience measures embedded in the democratic framework. In contrast, under a backsliding regime, security professionals are less able to adhere to professional standards and legal norms, as they typically follow leaders who seek to override legal constraints, institutional consensus, and constitutional norms.

To address some of these issues, this article examines the rise of authoritarian populist leaders in both previously healthy democracies and democratizing states, and the implications of democratic backsliding for security institutions in both contexts.

¹⁶ Aaron Wildavsky, *Speaking Truth to Power: Art and Craft of Policy Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315130149>.

¹⁷ Bauer, “Public Administration Under Populist Rule.”

¹⁸ Zoltán Fleck, “Backsliding Democracy and the Slippery Slope of Conceptual Weakness,” *International Journal of Law in Context* 20, no. 2 (June 2024): 152-165, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744552324000090>.

By approaching democratic backsliding from a public administration perspective, this study analyzes the impact of the backsliding process on security institutions, the erosion of democratic principles, and the instrumental use of security institutions by populist leaders to reverse democratization. In addition, the article explores how public administration—and specifically security agencies—can respond to democratic backsliding and contribute to democratic resilience to populist challenges. This approach adds to the democratic backsliding literature by examining how populist-authoritarian regimes affect security governance and by highlighting the critical role these institutions play in democratic systems. The main contribution of this article is its focus on how security institutions become essential tools in the populist-authoritarian toolbox for consolidating and maintaining power. It offers a nuanced conceptual model of the dynamic interplay between backsliding and security governance, moving beyond traditional analyses of democratic erosion.

Democracy in Decline

Currently, there is a general consensus among scholars that the process of democratization has been losing momentum and that democracy around the globe is in decline.¹⁹ In the past, scholars assumed that democratization, economic development, and globalization would naturally lead to democracy in a linear, one-way process, where countries would inevitably become more democratic over time.²⁰ Democratization scholars claimed that economic growth, civil society, and international norms supporting democratic transitions would be crucial for a smooth process.

This argument, and the linear model it is based on, have been criticized for failing to account for the fact that the paths of democratic transitions are often shaped by unpredictable historical circumstances²¹ as well as political and economic factors.²² Critics also point out that many regimes exhibit features of both democracy and autocracy.²³ Subsequent research and real-world events have

¹⁹ Nick Sitter and Elisabeth Bakke, "Democratic Backsliding in the European Union," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, August 28, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1476>; Rodrigo Lima, "The Decline of Democracy According to Two Research Centres," *Federalist Debate* 37, no. 2 (2024), 476.

²⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 12-34, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0016>; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992); Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

²¹ Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²² Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781353>.

²³ Renske Doorenspleet, "Reassessing the Three Waves of Democratization," *World Politics* 52, no. 3 (2000): 384-406, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100016580>.

also revealed that democratization is more complex than previously theorized, and that reverse processes and democratic backsliding are possible, even likely.

Historically, third-wave democracies—states that quickly democratized in the 1970s due to pressures from international organizations—have proven most susceptible to nondemocratic pressures. In first-wave democracies, democratic governments developed more organically, as philosophers and politicians gradually introduced measures to protect civil rights and liberties, embraced concepts such as universal human rights, and worked to cement the idea of free and fair government into the fabric of state and society.²⁴ In second-wave democracies, primarily those in Latin America, democratic regimes emerged from increased political debate, a rise in inclusive politics (especially regarding the rights of women), and the ability to “experiment” with democratic practices over time.²⁵

In third-wave democracies—such as former Soviet republics and states of the former Yugoslavia—the democratization process often began “backward,” due to incomplete democratic institutions.²⁶ In many of these systems, democracy was, and still is, implemented primarily in procedural form, where political elections are seen as the main (and sometimes the only) component of democratic reform. In such cases, essential institutions needed to sustain a democratic system—such as the rule of law, accountability of leaders, and protections for individual and civil society freedoms—were deemed secondary or even ignored altogether.

Without strong institutions to hold democratic bodies accountable, third-wave democracies are more susceptible to democratic backsliding following populist manipulations. Institutional failure and weak institutional resilience against populism and the undemocratic tendencies of political leaders act as multipliers and facilitators of democratic backsliding. However, there are multiple other reasons behind the recent global rise in populism. Even in historically strong democracies, there is a declining commitment to democratic principles and institutions. Although each country has its own reasons for embracing political outsiders, some common factors in recent years include the global economic crisis, geopolitical considerations, international influences, and migration.²⁷

²⁴ Larry Diamond, “Democracy’s Third Wave Today,” *Current History* 110, no. 739 (2011): 299–307, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2011.110.739.299>.

²⁵ Nicolás Prados Ortiz de Solórzano et al., “Introduction: Revisiting the ‘Second (Short) Wave’ of Democratization in Latin America, 1943–1962,” *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 30, no. 2 (2024): 131–136, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14701847.2024.2374138>.

²⁶ Richard Rose and Doh Chull Shin, “Democratization Backwards: The Problem of Third-Wave Democracies,” *British Journal of Political Science* 31, no. 2 (2001): 331–354, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123401000138>.

²⁷ Dalibor Rohac, “Populism, Globalization, and Geopolitics,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics*, ed. Zak Cope (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 1397–1416, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47227-5_8; Giovanna Campani, “The Migration Crisis between Populism and Post-Democracy,” in *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, Volume 3: Migration, Gender and Religion, ed. Gregor Fitzl, Juergen Mackert,

The reasons why populist movements emerge in a country, the way they operate in domestic politics, and the arguments they use during elections have been widely discussed, particularly in the European context, where even well-established democracies such as Germany face significant systemic threats.²⁸

The regression of democratic principles—from a healthy democracy to one experiencing backsliding—is typically a gradual process, driven by various techniques and strategies used by political actors to undermine democratic norms.²⁹ According to a 2021 study of 16 countries experiencing democratic backsliding, the phenomenon results from complex causal chains involving polarization around policies and identities, which lead to the election of autocrats, the collapse of separation of powers, the strengthening of ruling elites and disorganization of the opposition, as well as the influence of international factors, including external actors.³⁰

The way democratic backsliding is operationalized varies by case and depends on the tactics employed by national leaders. Nevertheless, there is some consensus on the general patterns by which it occurs. In most cases, backsliding is a leader-driven process, supported by a political party and/or affiliated loyal groups. As will be explored further below, politicians often initiate backsliding through democratic mechanisms rather than military coups or hostile takeovers. Typically, leaders who later cause democratic backsliding come to power through electoral victory.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, for example, was elected in 2014 in Turkey's first direct presidential election. Prior to this, he served as Prime Minister for over a decade. Early in his career, Erdogan was regarded as a "Muslim democrat" who had been victimized by Turkey's secular, military-dominated political system.³¹ Global power shifts, economic and financial crises, regional conflicts in the Black Sea and Middle East, and the public's desire for reform and stability created opportunities for Erdogan to be repeatedly elected, with some of the highest levels of public support in modern Turkish history.³² Nonetheless, democratic backsliding occurred rapidly, with Erdogan swiftly cracking down on

and Bryan Turner (London: Routledge, 2018), 29-47, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315108056>.

²⁸ Laurent Bernhard and Hanspeter Kriesi, "Populism in Election Times: A Comparative Analysis of 11 Countries in Western Europe," in *Varieties of Populism in Europe in Times of Crises*, ed. Manuela Caiani and Paolo Graziano (London: Routledge, 2021), 48-68, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003157380>.

²⁹ Wolkenstein, "What Is Democratic Backsliding?"

³⁰ Haggard and Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*.

³¹ Ihsan Yilmaz, "Erdogan's Political Journey: From Victimized Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist," ECPS Leader Profiles, *European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS)*, February 14, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.55271/lp0007>.

³² Umut Uras, "Erdogan Wins Turkey's Presidential Election," *Al Jazeera*, August 11, 2014, www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/8/11/erdogan-wins-turkeys-presidential-election; "Recep Tayyip Erdogan Wins Turkish Presidential Election," *BBC News*, August 10, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28729234>.

political opposition and independent media, particularly after the 2016 coup attempt against his rule.³³

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has followed a similar pattern. Orban has a history of using bureaucratic measures within the Hungarian government system to his advantage by populating government positions with loyalists. By appointing individuals loyal to his agenda rather than those necessarily qualified for their positions, Orban and his government have effectively used “state bureaucracy as an instrument to advance their agenda and not as part of the problem to be abolished.”³⁴

As another example, in Poland, after the 2015 elections, the coalition government began to erode the democratic standards in the country and paved the way for deeper anti-democratic practices by politicizing public offices and bureaucratic institutions.³⁵ Similar trends have been observed in Southeast European countries. Regional experts argue that abuses of power during elections and the use of executive authority by political parties have circumvented administrative and legal checks and balances. These actions have undermined institutions by relying on informal networks and loyal individuals to implement policies that serve leaders with less democratic ambitions.³⁶

Democratic backsliding occurs through a series of incremental changes. The following section highlights some of the indicators of democratic backsliding based on current discussions. These indicators are not exhaustive and can occur in any order. After outlining the indicators, the remainder of the article will examine how they relate to public administration in general and, more specifically, to security governance.

Democratic Backsliding Indicators

As mentioned earlier, democratic backsliding is an incremental process that manifests as a gradual erosion of democratic norms and institutions. The following indicators can reveal when backsliding occurs; notably, each involves small steps toward anti-democratic policies rather than sudden regime changes.

Strongman leadership style. When examining recent cases of democratic backsliding—such as Turkey and Hungary—a common pattern among leaders emerges. Strongman leaders play a central role in preparing their parties for

³³ Alessia Tortolini, “State of Emergency and Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Turkey (2016–2018),” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241303943>.

³⁴ Bauer, “Public Administration Under Populist Rule.”

³⁵ Stanisław Mazur, “Public Administration in Poland in the Times of Populist Drift,” in *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration: How Populists in Government Transform State Bureaucracies*, ed. Michael W. Bauer et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 100–126, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009023504.006>.

³⁶ Damir Kapidžić, “The Rise of Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2020.1709701>.

power and, following elections, in driving democratic erosion. Strongman leaders are often referred to as autocrats, and their leadership style is key to understanding how backsliding unfolds in a given country. Their individual style, personalization of the regime, reliance on informal networks, and informal conduct of official business significantly influence the speed and depth of the backsliding process. These leaders construct their image as being part of the people and claim to represent the popular will – an argument often used to discredit government experts who advocate for non-populist agendas that diverge from the strongman's.³⁷

Backsliders are mostly elected leaders. In most cases, democratic backsliding is driven by populist leaders who come to power through elections, distinguishing it from other forms of regime change. These leaders use existing structures and democratic rhetoric to justify *executive aggrandizement* – a strategy to expand the power of the executive branch.³⁸ By employing populist language that frames themselves as the true representatives of the people, while portraying experts and the opposition as enemies, they weaken checks on their power and undermine institutions and norms designed to hold them accountable. Upon taking power, their first move is often to open space for future actions by criticizing legal constraints and claiming resistance from the bureaucracy, sometimes framed as a “bureaucratic oligarchy”³⁹ opposing the leader. However, such complaints are often instrumental, not genuinely related to policy choices, but intended to pave the way for executive aggrandizement.

Intentional executive aggrandizement. Attempts by strongman leaders to increase their power while in public office through executive aggrandizement are not accidental. In other words, these types of leaders do not stumble into authoritarianism due to external pressures. Instead, they come to power with strategic objectives aimed at manipulating and transforming the democratic system to concentrate power in the executive branch.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, they can adapt to circumstances and implement different tactics and strategies to consolidate power. Executive aggrandizement is strategically planned and executed using available tools. Whether appointing loyalists, capitalizing on external factors (e.g., war or political upheaval in neighboring countries) to enact temporary

³⁷ Sumit Bisarya and Madeleine Rogers, *Designing Resistance: Democratic institutions and the Threat of Backsliding* (Stockholm, Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2023.76>.

³⁸ Melis G. Laebens, “Beyond Democratic Backsliding: Executive Aggrandizement and Its Outcomes,” Users Working Paper Series 2023:54, The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, University of Gothenburg, September 2023, https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/UWP_54.pdf.

³⁹ Merve Tahiroglu, “How Turkey’s Leaders Dismantled the Rule of Law,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 67-96, www.fletcherforum.org/archives/2020/2/20/441-winter-2020.

⁴⁰ Laebens, “Beyond Democratic Backsliding: Executive Aggrandizement and Its Outcomes.”

laws, or responding oppressively to domestic social uprisings, these leaders use legal mechanisms strategically to advance their agenda.

Incremental changes to make governance structures less democratic. Democratic backsliding does not occur through dramatic changes to the state's economic, social, political, or administrative systems. Instead, populist leaders implement incremental changes – carefully designed steps to alter government structures and consolidate power.⁴¹ By gradually changing governance frameworks, leaders test the normative boundaries of acceptable behavior by observing public and institutional reactions to these small moves. Using legal mechanisms and creating ambiguity in the legal framework gives leaders a gray area to gradually fill with executive rules. This small-step approach allows leaders to implement their agenda without attracting widespread attention from the public and opposition. It also helps obscure their true intentions from external actors who might otherwise respond to overtly undemocratic changes in the country.⁴²

Beyond legal changes, these incremental shifts often affect public administration and the bureaucratic structure. Populist leaders tend to view the bureaucracy not as a neutral institution serving the constitution, but as a loyal extension of their power. As a result, they can disregard formal procedures and make direct demands on bureaucrats and government experts. This practice falls into a legal gray zone – it is not technically illegal, but deviates from established norms of democratic governance.⁴³

Polarization of society. Populist leaders and democratic backsliders benefit from a divided society. It is easier to maintain the support of their constituencies when there is an “other” side they can easily blame for anything that goes wrong. Polarization often begins by exploiting existing social divisions based on ethnicity, social background, religion, gender, and even the manipulation of historical grievances.⁴⁴ Polarization does not occur only at the social level; populists can also polarize government agencies, independent institutions, and businesses. Experts, bureaucrats, and others who do not align with populist policies may be framed as outsiders or “others” who do not represent the average, “real” members of society. In the later stages of democratic backsliding—on the path to authoritarianism—these groups may be excluded from public discourse, marginalized, or even demonized, all in service of the leader's political agenda.

Demonization of the opposition (parties, groups, and individuals). Populist and authoritarian leaders use every opportunity to convince their constituents that opposition groups are enemies of the people and therefore do not deserve to be in power. The narrative that the opposing side will destroy the nation is

⁴¹ Alexander Baturo, Paul D. Kenny, and Evren Balta, “Leaders’ Experience and the Transition from Populism to Dictatorship,” *Democratization* (August 2024): 1-24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2024.2391482>.

⁴² Haggard and Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*.

⁴³ Bauer, “Public Administration Under Populist Rule.”

⁴⁴ Huber and Pisciotta, “From Democracy to Hybrid Regime.”

used to garner support for the undemocratic leader's cause. Elections are thus framed as an us-versus-them scenario, where "they" are enemies, and the leader positions themselves as the true representative of their constituents. Any opposing party is seen as a threat to the leader's control and must be demonized in the public eye to maintain power. Ultimately, the leader claims to embody the "will of the people," which, in their view, grants them the right to remain in power uninhibited by legal or institutional constraints.⁴⁵ With this mindset, institutions are expected to help the leader suppress the opposition and other dissidents in society.

Attacks on legal constraints. Legal constraints are considered and presented as limitations on the power that leaders claim to derive from the people. Therefore, legal norms that do not align with the leader's agenda are portrayed as artificially created structures imposed on the people by those who oppose the country's progress.⁴⁶ Limitations designed to protect the rights of the people are regarded by aspiring populist authoritarian leaders as artificial barriers that work against the will of the people. Consequently, legal systems are viewed as threats by leaders leaning toward authoritarianism (or any leader aiming to challenge the democratic system) and must be eliminated, albeit gradually.

Attacks on experts and expertise. Experts are often portrayed as adversaries of the people, representing a privileged class that lacks a deep understanding of the lives of ordinary citizens.⁴⁷ Experts—particularly those in fields that challenge the legitimacy of an authoritarian leader—pose a threat because they often understand and can explain the negative consequences of authoritarian policies. As a result, authoritarian leaders seek ways to discredit experts. Experts are seen as obstacles to the populist leader's goal of establishing a direct connection with the people. By dismissing expertise as biased, inept, or even false, such leaders can manipulate the broader public.⁴⁸

Creation of alternative governance structures. Authoritarian-leaning leaders driving democratic backsliding often create alternative power structures within the government. The aim is not to reform institutions but to weaken existing

⁴⁵ Thorsten Wojczewski, "'Enemies of the People': Populism and the Politics of (In)Security," *European Journal of International Security* 5, no. 1 (February 2020): 5-24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2019.23>.

⁴⁶ Tatiana Paula da Cruz, "Trusting the Courts: Exploring the Link Between Populism, Trust in Courts, and Democracy in Brazil," *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, OnlineFirst (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X241295784>.

⁴⁷ Adam Peresman, Lars Thorup Larsen, Honorata Mazepus, and Michael Bang Petersen, "Do Populists Listen to Expertise? A Five-Country Study of Authority, Arguments, and Expert Sources," *Political Studies*, OnlineFirst (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217251323402>.

⁴⁸ Caroline Schlauffer and Tatiana Chalaya, "Expert Knowledge and Policymaking in Authoritarian Contexts: A Systematic Review," *Policy Studies* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2025.2501034>.

government structures and establish a system of control that serves their interests.⁴⁹ These leaders create overlapping responsibilities, not to ensure checks and balances, but to consolidate their own power and influence. This alternative power structure mirrors the existing government but is staffed with loyalists and has slightly differing intentions and functions.

In a healthy democracy, leaders are elected with the expectation that they will represent the interests of the citizens. To ensure accountability, democratic governments rely on a system of checks and balances—referred to as “horizontal safeguards”—that prevent a leader from drifting into authoritarian rule.⁵⁰ These horizontal safeguards work in conjunction with “vertical safeguards,” which protect free and fair elections, enabling voters to participate without coercion or manipulation, and “diagonal safeguards,” which grant citizens the freedom to criticize their government without consequences. Diagonal safeguards include protections such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom of expression. In a backsliding democracy, a leader may begin to erode these safeguards—and the broader system of checks and balances—by creating alternative governance structures and appointing loyalists who will not obstruct the leader’s authority.

Loyalty over merit-based selections. Leaders with populist and nondemocratic tendencies often prefer loyalty over merit-based selection when choosing ministers or managers they wish to work with.⁵¹ Loyalty is directed toward the leader personally, not toward the laws, regulations, or ethical principles of government. This can lead to unqualified individuals being placed in positions of power. To maintain control over the narrative that the leader represents the will of the people, appointing loyalists who echo their rhetoric—whether in the government, the press, or security institutions—is crucial.

Targeting of security institutions and judicial authorities; replacement of disloyal experts and bureaucrats. Dismantling institutions designed to function independently of political interference, such as security agencies, and those meant to remain independent, like the judiciary, can undermine the checks and balances necessary for a functioning democracy. In a healthy democracy, the bureaucratic system is (at least ideally) nonpartisan and apolitical, representing the rule of law rather than the rule of an individual leader.

⁴⁹ Abel Escribà-Folch, Tobias Böhmelt, and Ulrich Pilster, “Authoritarian Regimes and Civil-Military Relations: Explaining Counterbalancing in Autocracies,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 37, no. 5 (September 2020): 559-579, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894219836285>.

⁵⁰ Wunsch and Blanchard, “Patterns of Democratic Backsliding in Third-Wave Democracies.”

⁵¹ Ting Chen and Ji Yeon Hong, “Rivals within: Political Factions, Loyalty, and Elite Competition under Authoritarianism,” *Political Science Research and Methods* 9, no. 3 (2021): 599-614, <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2019.61>.

In systems where loyalism overrides meritocracy, individuals with connections to the ruling party may be appointed to high-level security positions regardless of their qualifications.⁵² This can compromise national security and lead to inefficiency and corruption within these crucial institutions. Additionally, when judicial authorities are replaced based on loyalty rather than competence, the rule of law is undermined, and citizens' rights may be put at risk. For instance, in 2021, Tunisian President Kais Saied dismissed many government officials, including Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, and replaced them with loyalists. He also replaced 18 of the 24 governors in the country, consolidating his power across the state. These actions are widely considered significant setbacks to the country's democratic gains.⁵³

Attacks on the constitutional court. Constitutional courts play an important role in safeguarding democracy against backsliding. Attacks on these courts are a particularly alarming sign of the erosion of democratic norms and values.⁵⁴ In countries where judges are appointed to the constitutional court based on loyalty rather than expertise, the court risks becoming a rubber stamp for government decisions instead of a check on executive power. This can result in unjust rulings that violate citizens' rights and weaken the democratic system.

Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration

Thus far, this study has presented democratic backsliding as a political process in which elected leaders enact incremental changes to the norms and institutional structures of a state. This process requires special attention to the impact of backsliding on public administration and an understanding of how populist authoritarian leaders implement their populist and often undemocratic agendas.⁵⁵ Scholars examining the influence of populist interference on public administration indicate that "street-level organizations" and "street-level bureaucrats" play a critical role in the operational side of the state apparatus.⁵⁶

⁵² Christian Gläsel, Belén González, and Adam Scharpf, "The Authoritarian Security Apparatus: Officer Careers and the Trade-offs in Command," in *Research Handbook on Authoritarianism*, ed. Natasha Lindstaedt and Jeroen J.J. Van den Bosch (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), 111-126, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802204827.00014>.

⁵³ Sarah Yerkes and Maha Alhomoud, "One Year Later, Tunisia's President Has Reversed Nearly a Decade of Democratic Gains," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 22, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/07/one-year-later-tunisias-president-has-reversed-nearly-a-decade-of-democratic-gains>.

⁵⁴ Pablo Castillo-Ortiz and Yaniv Roznai, "The Democratic Self-Defence of Constitutional Courts," *ICL Journal* 18, no. 1 (2024): 1-24, <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/207474/>.

⁵⁵ Brainard Guy Peters and Jon Pierre, "Politicisation of the Public Service during Democratic Backsliding: Alternative Perspectives," *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 81, no. 4 (2022): 629-639, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12561>; Bauer et al., eds., *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration*.

⁵⁶ Michael W. Bauer and Stefan Becker, "Democratic Backsliding, Populism, and Public Administration," *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance* 3, no. 1 (2020):

To respond to populist anti-democratic pressures, bureaucracies can develop various tactics to withstand pressure from undemocratic leaders. A group of scholars recently introduced the concept of the “Guardian State,” referring to a model of governance that actively safeguards liberal democratic principles against illiberal movements and democratic backsliding.⁵⁷ The Guardian State and its institutions demonstrate a clear commitment to liberal democratic principles and the rule of law, institutionalizing guardianship so that daily practices resist external and unlawful pressures and demands.

This proactive stance enables civil servants to defend democratic values when faced with challenges to the democratic order and establishes mechanisms to ensure resilience against nondemocratic policies. These safeguards can help combat democratic backsliding from a broader perspective by giving bureaucrats and civil servants a personal sense of responsibility and preventing the politicization of government agencies, particularly those not prioritized by the political system in countries undergoing democratization.

Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance

Under democratic governance, security institutions and public administration structures operate within a framework that emphasizes civilian oversight, accountability, legal frameworks on the use of force, transparency, and respect for human rights. For this reason, one of the key features of the democratization process has been the establishment of democratic control over security forces and placing them under democratic civilian authority to ensure effective and responsible security provision.⁵⁸ In the process of democratization, public administration and politicians are expected to establish balanced models of interaction based on democratic principles, professionalism, separation of roles, and checks and balances.⁵⁹ Over the years, international institutions have designed and implemented programs for countries undergoing democratization that emphasized

19-31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ppmgov/gvz026>; Anat Gofen, “In the Eye of the Storm: Street-Level Organizations in Circumstances of Democratic Backsliding,” *Governance* 37, no. S1 (2024): 153-169, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12890>; Barbara Piotrowska, “Street-Level Bureaucrats and Democratic Backsliding,” ECPR General Conference, University of Innsbruck, August 22–26, 2022, <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/65099>; Barbara Piotrowska, “Street-Level Bureaucracy and Democratic Backsliding. Evidence from Poland,” *Governance* 37, no. S1 (2024): 127-151, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12876>.

⁵⁷ Kutsal Yesilkagit, Michael Bauer, B. Guy Peters, and Jon Pierre, “The Guardian State: Strengthening the Public Service against Democratic Backsliding,” *Public Administration Review* 84, no. 3 (2024): 414-425, <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13808>.

⁵⁸ Thomas Bruneau and Harold Trinkunas, “Democratization as a Global Phenomenon and Its Impact on Civil-Military Relations,” *Democratization* 13, no. 5 (2006): 776-790, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340601010669>.

⁵⁹ Tamsu Demir and Ronald C. Nyhan, “The Politics-Administration Dichotomy: An Empirical Search for Correspondence between Theory and Practice,” *Public Administration Review* 68, no. 1 (2008): 81-96, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00839.x>.

restructuring security organizations to make them more accountable to elected officials.⁶⁰ This model of establishing democratic security governance addressed the needs of early democratization efforts but proved to be shortsighted; it assumed democratization was a one-way process and failed to anticipate backsliding.

Democratic backsliding requires a new understanding of the role of public administration and, more specifically, of security institutions as guardians of democratic reform, in order to prevent democratic decline. In most of the indicators listed above, security institutions are vital for a populist leader seeking to consolidate power in government. Under authoritarian populist rule, these institutions often serve as tools for implementing undemocratic agendas and, paradoxically, become victims of democratic decline themselves. This article will now examine the dichotomous relationship between security institutions and populist leaders.

Security Governance as a Tool of Authoritarian Populism

Security organizations play an important role in consolidating power for authoritarian leaders. Authoritarian populist leaders often create a climate of fear and paranoia by using security institutions to increase surveillance on individuals and impose restrictions on individual rights and freedoms. They manipulate the public into accepting the measures taken by security agencies as necessary for their security, often in response to threats the leader has fabricated.⁶¹ Perceptions of both internal and external threats matter. Internal threats lead to the targeting of dissidents, opposition groups, and political parties through the use of the police and judiciary. External threats help leaders consolidate power with public support and justify the use of military force.

Authoritarian populist leaders tend to favor security experts who support and adjust security concerns based on the leader's agenda.⁶² Loyalty from security leadership is paramount, and security agencies are often expanded to serve the populist authoritarian's goals. In many cases, security forces are expanded as the leader capitalizes on growing friction and polarization to create internal enemies. When the threat is defined as internal to society, police and intelligence agencies obtain significant powers that are directly connected to the leader. These leaders use security organizations to suppress political opposition and monitor journalists and academics, using national security discourse and claiming that, by doing so, they protect national security. Figures such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, and Vladimir Putin in Russia have developed their

⁶⁰ S. V. Melnyk and Liudmyla P. Medvid, "Theoretical Foundations and Historical Development of Democratic Civilian Control over the Security and Defense Sector," *Analytical and Comparative Jurisprudence*, no. 2 (2025): 75-81, <https://doi.org/10.24144/2788-6018.2025.02.9>. – in Ukrainian

⁶¹ Wojczewski, "'Enemies of the People': Populism and the Politics of (in)Security."

⁶² Gläsel, González, and Scharpf, "The Authoritarian Security Apparatus."

own distinct tactics—and, in some cases, learned from one another—to adapt to changing conditions.⁶³

When the threat to society is framed as external, the leader will promote narratives that the nation is under attack, leading to rising nationalism among citizens and minimal resistance to a rapidly expanding military.⁶⁴ Research indicates that populist authoritarians with right-wing tendencies are more likely to initiate militarized disputes, making them more prone to using the military in times of crisis.⁶⁵

Establishing control over the armed forces allows authoritarian populist leaders to securitize policies and act aggressively and quickly, actions that might normally be frowned upon. Law enforcement agencies also become tools in this new securitization paradigm, enabling leaders to manipulate social issues that could otherwise be addressed through non-securitized means.⁶⁶

Depending on the strength and level of institutional reliance, a populist leader may establish alternative security structures, including private military and security companies loyal to the leader. These groups can, and in some cases are encouraged to, operate outside the rule of law to suppress political opposition and social groups seen as threats. Such organizations may also operate in parallel with state security services until the leader consolidates control over them.

When populist leaders, their family members, or close allies are investigated by the judiciary, they often perceive this as an attack on their government. Even in cases where there is clear evidence of wrongdoing, leaders may portray legal

⁶³ András Bozóki, “Broken Democracy, Predatory State, and Nationalist Populism,” in *The Hungarian Patient, Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy*, ed. Péter Krasztév and Jon Van Til (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015), 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9786155225550-005>; Javier Corrales, “Democratic Backsliding through Electoral Irregularities: The Case of Venezuela,” *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, no. 109 (2020): 41–65, <https://erlacs.org/articles/10.32992/erlacs.10598>; Sofie Bedford, “The 2020 Presidential Election in Belarus: Erosion of Authoritarian Stability and Re-politicization of Society,” *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 5 (2021): 808–819, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.33>; Ihsan Yilmaz and Galib Bashirov, “The AKP after 15 Years: Emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 9 (2018): 1812–1830, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1447371>; Michael McFaul, “Russia’s Road to Autocracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 11–26, www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/russias-road-to-autocracy/.

⁶⁴ Hakkı Taş, “Populism and Civil–Military Relations,” *Democratization* 31, no. 1 (2024): 70–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2255976>.

⁶⁵ Minnie M. Joo et al., “Right-Wing Populist Leaders, Nationalist Rhetoric, and Dispute Initiation in International Politics,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 69, no. 2–3 (2025): 321–351, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027241247>.

⁶⁶ Marc Schuilenburg, “The Securitization of Society: On the Rise of Quasi-Criminal Law and Selective Exclusion,” *Social Justice: A Journal of Crime, Conflict, and World Order* 38, no. 1–2 (2011): 71–86, https://marcschuilenburg.nl/_downloads/the%20securitization%20of%20society.pdf.

proceedings as attempted coups against the government (as will be examined below). Undermining judicial independence is critical for populist leaders to remain in power and is often the first step toward an authoritarian regime change.

Security Governance as the Victim of Authoritarian Populism

Victimization of security governance is relevant at both the individual and institutional levels. As a result of authoritarian populists' desire to establish personal loyalty within organizations, the neutrality of professionalism erodes, and the lack of oversight increases the likelihood of abuse of power. Changes made at the institutional level undermine democratic norms, weaken the structure of democracy, and embolden the leader.

However, victimization becomes more visible at the individual level when authoritarian populists increase their control over security institutions. At this point, a dilemma arises from the democratic oversight mechanisms established during the democratization process – mechanisms that are essential to a democratic system. Specifically, authoritarian populists benefit from the civilian oversight of security organizations when implementing their undemocratic (often “gray zone”) policies.

Scholars who examine the responsibility of public administration to uphold democratic principles during periods of backsliding argue that public administration, in general, should—and can—safeguard liberal democratic norms and resist pressure from populist politicians.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, establishing these mechanisms can be problematic, as they may be framed as resistance to legitimate political authority, potentially leading to legal consequences. This issue of defending democratic principles under populist rule is even more pronounced for security professionals due to democratic principles that intentionally place them under the direct supervision of political leaders.

At the individual level, this dilemma has direct consequences for security professionals. When they receive requests or orders from political leaders that contradict established procedures and legal or administrative standards, security professionals face an ethical and professional dilemma, often leading to moral distress. In the early stages of democratic backsliding, authoritarian populists link their directives to executive aggrandizement efforts and create gray areas for security bureaucracies, diverting them from their standard operational procedures. In extreme cases, bureaucrats may be forced to follow illegal orders, despite potential legal and administrative risks. Such orders can have dire consequences, as individuals remain personally accountable for their actions, even under pressure.

⁶⁷ Yesilkagit et al., “The Guardian State: Strengthening the Public Service against Democratic Backsliding;” Michael W. Bauer, “Administrative Responses to Democratic Backsliding: When Is Bureaucratic Resistance Justified?” *Regulation & Governance* 18, no. 4 (2024): 1104-1117, <https://doi.org/10.1111/regg.12567>; Bauer, “Public Administration Under Populist Rule.”

In the following section, this study presents a model illustrating the working mechanisms of democratic backsliding and its impact on security governance through multiple levels of analysis. It demonstrates how the interaction between political and bureaucratic spheres shapes the outcomes, as populists exploit security bureaucracies to advance their agendas. The model pays particular attention to institutional and individual-level dynamics to show how institutions and security professionals become victims of democratic backsliding.

The Model: Populist Victimization of Security Governance

The figure below illustrates how a country in which democracy is the norm—or where democratization is the primary objective of politicians and state institutions—is assumed to be progressing toward democracy. The process of democratization should improve the quality of institutions that reflect democratic principles and uphold the ideals and goals of democratically elected leaders, which bureaucrats and security professionals also support.

The speed of institutional progress in implementing democratic norms and principles is often slower than political changes in a country, simply due to the nature of these processes. As a result, the political and bureaucratic spheres in a domestic context operate on different timelines and follow distinct policy implementation dynamics. These processes—depicted as separate arrows in the figure—represent parallel but interacting streams. As shown, they influence one another to ensure that the democratic political agenda is carried out by the bureaucratic sphere and that political goals are balanced with expertise, legal norms, and technical considerations.

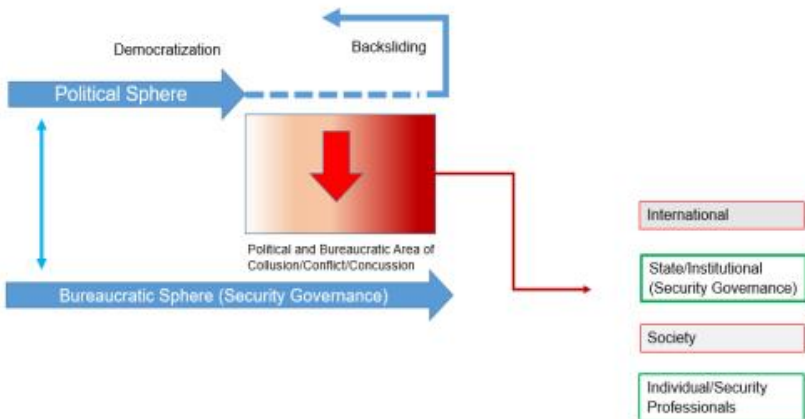


Figure 1: Political and bureaucratic interaction under democratic backsliding.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Cüneyt Güner, “Project Concept” in *Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance*, ed. Gashaj et al.

The political sphere typically pursues short-term policy goals, with outcomes expected within an electoral cycle to demonstrate effectiveness. In contrast, policy goals pursued by government institutions are often long-term and may span multiple election cycles. Once bureaucratic objectives are met—such as the implementation of democratization projects, the establishment of institutional structures, and the adoption of relevant laws—these elements become part of the state’s institutional and legal framework. This framework then provides democratically designed rules and processes for security institutions and bureaucracies to follow.⁶⁹

Whether fully established or still evolving, this system faces challenges when democratic backsliding occurs rapidly. Once the democratization of security organizations and the democratic oversight of security institutions are in place, the commitment of institutional and security professionals to democratic principles tends to increase. Rejection of democratic ambitions and departure from the democratic cycle usually begin at the political level and take time to filter into bureaucratic structures. When backsliding happens politically, the bureaucracy often continues to uphold the democratic norms and principles introduced during the earlier democratization phase. However, as illustrated in Figure 1, a reversal in the political agenda toward less democratic governance creates a gap between populist political leadership and the professional ethos of security institutions. The size of this gap depends on the extent of institutional democratization achieved and the severity of political backsliding.

The figure uses different color shades to demonstrate the level of pressure political actors exert on the security bureaucracy during the backsliding process. As backsliding intensifies, the pressure on security institutions increases over time. The level of anti-democratic tendencies in a political structure makes interaction with public administration, and more specifically with security institutions, more complicated.

Populist leaders use several pressure tactics against bureaucrats they consider disloyal to their leadership – tactics that, under normal circumstances, would be considered violations of democratic norms.⁷⁰ However, this dilemma can only be resolved by examining the nature of specific demands coming from the political elite toward security professionals, as well as the role populist leaders expect security institutions to play. Populist leaders often expect security professionals to be loyal to their rule—not necessarily to laws or norms—which security professionals must consider during these interactions. Professionalism and a strong understanding of the law are paramount, even if the populist authoritarian leaders reward those who stray from the law.

If a populist leader succeeds by implementing tactics that reward loyalists (through promotions or financial incentives), this fosters anti-expertise and anti-

⁶⁹ Thomas C. Bruneau and Florina Cristiana Matej, “Towards a New Conceptualization of Democratization and Civil-Military Relations,” *Democratization* 15, no. 5 (2008): 909-929, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340802362505>.

⁷⁰ Peters and Pierre, “Politicisation of the Public Service during Democratic Backsliding.”

institutionalism within administrations, both key characteristics of populist authoritarianism.⁷¹ Populist politicians may frame newly appointed individuals as true patriots capable of solving the state's problems. This shift in discourse and organizational priorities blurs the distinction between the security and political roles of security experts and institutions. It creates space for the authoritarian populist leader to securitize most issues that could otherwise be solved through non-security governance structures. However, the securitization of matters such as migration and economic deprivation adds to the "strongman" image of the populist leader and creates the (false) impression that these problems are resolved through rapid, securitized solutions.

If security professionals and institutions remain resilient against populist interventions in legal processes, the populist leader may declare this a "bureaucratic oligarchy"⁷² or a "violation of the people's choice,"⁷³ claiming that such resistance limits the ability to govern. As a result, anti-institutionalist and anti-expertise rhetoric may increase, and individuals opposing the authoritarian populist agenda could become targets of political retaliation. Authoritarian populist leaders may also reduce the budgets of organizations that use tactics to implement checks and balances on populist governance, using every opportunity to punish and replace these officials with loyalists.⁷⁴

Conclusion

This article presented a conceptual framework and model to explain the relationship between the democratic backsliding process and security governance. The traditional understanding of the democratization process and the mechanisms created to establish democratic control of security governance are not prepared to respond to democratic backsliding and its consequences for public administration in general, and security institutions in particular. More research is necessary to understand how backsliding and security governance interact, not only to examine and respond to authoritarian populist tactics that undermine democratic governance, but also to keep institutions out of politics and motivate them to serve the people rather than narrowly defined political interests.

⁷¹ Attila Bartha, Zsolt Boda, and Dorottya Szikra, "When Populist Leaders Govern: Conceptualising Populism in Policy Making," *Politics and Governance* 8, no. 3 (2020): 71-81, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i3.2922>.

⁷² Aslı Yılmaz Uçar, "An Analysis of the AKP's Bureaucratic Tutelage Discourse in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 26, no. 3 (2025): 501-534, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2025.2454475>.

⁷³ Oliver Schmidtke, "The 'Will of the People': The Populist Challenge to Democracy in the Name of Popular Sovereignty," *Social & Legal Studies* 32, no. 6 (2023): 911-929, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639231153124>.

⁷⁴ Luca Bellodi, Massimo Morelli, and Matia Vannoni, "A Costly Commitment: Populism, Economic Performance, and the Quality of Bureaucracy," *American Journal of Political Science* 68, no. 1 (2024): 193-209, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12782>.

The examination of security institutions as both tools and victims of authoritarian populists requires distinct analytical approaches. Often, security institutions are first used as tools and then become victims. As introduced in the model, the interaction between democratic backsliding and security governance has consequences on at least four levels – international, national/institutional, social, and individual. This study focused only on institutional- and individual-level conceptual analysis.

Authoritarian populist leaders often lack an understanding of the long-term damage they inflict on public administration, particularly on security organizations. This damage is not easily repairable. Ironically, informing such leaders about how their policies erode the institutional and social fabric would require a bureaucratic response capable of telling these leaders the truth. This, however, creates another dilemma, as these leaders constantly look for opportunities to establish a personally loyal system rather than a system that serves all citizens.

Security governance, which is equipped to defend democratic systems, should also be aware that institutions are not free from being poisoned by the power embedded in them unless a robust system of accountability is introduced. Therefore, defending democratic gains should not work against democracy itself by making security institutions too powerful in the long term.

Democratic backsliding often begins with small steps—typically by elected leaders—and can be identified through gradual developments, in line with the indicators outlined above. Officials in public administration and security professionals can anticipate the rise of populist authoritarianism and work to protect the judiciary and the system of checks and balances.

Public administration shares the responsibility of preserving democratic progress. Nevertheless, historical examples show that institutions have limited capacity to alter the course of events driven by elected authoritarian populists. Therefore, increasing public awareness of the potential consequences of backsliding should be communicated to ensure that our democratic institutions continue to serve and protect the rights of all individuals.

Disclaimer

The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Partnership for Peace Consortium, its participating institutions, or any governmental or international organizations affiliated with its governance structure.

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