



Introduction: Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance

Cüneyt Güler¹ and Philipp H. Fluri²

¹ *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies*,
<https://www.marshallcenter.org/>

² *Department of International Affairs, Wenzao Ursuline University (WZU), Kaohsiung, Taiwan*, <https://c041.wzu.edu.tw/>

Keywords: democratic backsliding, de-democratization, security governance, democracy, autocracy, Turkey, Georgia, strategic competition.

Introduction

Democratic backsliding, characterized by the incremental erosion of democratic principles and a resurgence of authoritarian tendencies,¹ profoundly influences the very fabric of security governance. While its impact on public administration has been explored by scholars of public policy and public administration,² the interaction between the backsliding process and security governance has not been widely discussed in the contemporary context. This dedicated edition of *Connections* is intended to fill the gap in understanding the process of democratic backsliding and its impact on security governance. To that end, this edition explores how security institutions can become both tools and victims in the hands of authoritarian populists, and how the professional objectivity of security professionals is challenged when confronted with an authoritarian leader's will.

¹ David Waldner and Ellen Lust, "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding," *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 93-113, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>.

² Michael W. Bauer and Stefan Becker, "Democratic Backsliding, Populism, and Public Administration," *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance* 3, no. 1 (March 2020): 19-31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ppmgov/gvz026>.

Global empirical data from the *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute* 2025 report³ indicate that, for the first time in over two decades, there are fewer democracies (N=88) than autocracies (N=91). In an even more worrying trend, the number of countries undergoing autocratization has increased from 42 to 45 in a single year, with the third wave of autocratization still rising and showing no sign of slowing down. According to the same report, in 2024, 40 percent of the world's population (approximately 3.1 billion people) experienced autocratization, and 72 percent (approximately 5.8 billion people) lived under some form of autocratic rule.

The processes of autocratization and democratic backsliding affect the core functions of states and state institutions. Under democratic regimes and during democratization, state institutions are designed to serve citizens without any precondition of political affiliation. Yet during backsliding, they become both the targets and instruments of political consolidation under populist authoritarian leaders.

The politicization of public services creates pressures and tensions among bureaucrats and compromises the integrity and accountability of public administration and security institutions. This issue takes a closer look at the interaction between political authorities—who are dismantling democratic safeguards and using security institutions as tools—and victimized professionals, who seek to maintain the ethical standards of civil service and an apolitical stance.⁴ Populist authoritarian leaders pay special attention to security institutions and prefer them to be led by individuals loyal to their authority.⁵ This tendency creates complicated situations for security professionals who have been educated and trained under democratic principles and who have already established a balanced relationship with political leadership. Under populist authoritarian leaders, security professionals are expected to serve primarily to consolidate the leader's power and guarantee reelection, rather than to focus solely on ensuring public safety and national defense in an apolitical manner.

The collection of articles in this special edition examines democratic backsliding as it relates to security governance from different perspectives and aims to bridge a significant gap in current research. These articles present diverse theoretical models, comparative analyses, and case-based studies, taking into account international systemic-level variables, regional dynamics, and domestic

³ Marina Nord et al., "Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?" *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute Report*, March 6, 2025, www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf.

⁴ Greg Sasso and Massimo Morelli, "Bureaucrats under Populism," *Journal of Public Economics* 202 (2021): 104497, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2021.104497>.

⁵ John Polga-Hecimovich, "Bureaucratic Politicization, Partisan Attachments, and the Limits of Public Agency Legitimacy: The Venezuelan Armed Forces under Chavismo," *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 2 (2019): 476-98, <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.142>.

and national-level interactions between politics and the various elements of security governance.

The following insightful contributions deepen our understanding of the security implications of these profound political regime shifts. Collectively, they illuminate different facets of this complex challenge.

Cüneyt Güner and Elena Walczak's "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance" addresses the core theme by exploring how security governance becomes both a tool and a victim in the hands of authoritarian populist leaders. This article sets the stage for further discussion. It highlights the conflict between professional objectivity and a leader's will to pursue personally motivated outcomes, elaborating on a model developed from empirical research that provides a foundational understanding of the relationship between security professionals and populist authoritarian regimes.

Serdar San's "Transformation of Coercion under Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Turkey" provides an in-depth analysis of how coercive institutions are redesigned and restructured in authoritarian contexts to suppress challenges to the regime and maintain power. By focusing on the Erdogan government in Turkey, this article reveals how shifting threat perceptions of authoritarian leaders drive the redesign of organizational structures and the use of security institutions for political ends.

Kelemen et al.'s "Public Trust in National Security Institutions as a Key to Sustainable Security" emphasizes the crucial role of public trust in maintaining credible and consistent state security policy and defense operations. The article examines the relationship between UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national security actors within the rule of law framework, highlighting how trust influences goal fulfillment and promotes long-term social stability and effective solutions through the integration of SDGs into national security strategies.

Paulina Spodniewska's "Strategic Competition in Africa and Democratic Backsliding in the Central African Republic" analyzes how intensified strategic competition between Western powers and Russia in Africa impacts security governance in the region. Through a case study of CAR, the article assesses how this rivalry reshapes security governance, particularly as Russia increases its presence and undermines good governance efforts amid democratic backsliding.

Susan Loftus's "Strategic Competition and Illiberal State Capture in Georgia – A Win for Moscow" investigates how the ruling Georgian Dream party has exploited feelings of insecurity amid strategic competition between the West and Russia, amplifying ties to Moscow and promoting anti-Western rhetoric. The article illustrates how gradual state capture of vital institutions in Georgia has enabled authoritarianism, frustrated the country's Euro-Atlantic integration prospects, and demonstrated Russia's increasing influence.

Elira Luli's "Small States, and Choices: Gambling on Security or Regional Cooperation Under a Common Banner?" addresses the security dilemmas faced by

Western Balkan states amidst democratic backsliding and reemerging power politics. The research explores how these small states, with their limited capacities, navigate insecurity by employing various international partnerships and foreign alignments, and questions whether these strategies have achieved their goals given the benefits of joint integration paths and regional cooperation.

Michael Cecire's "Strategic Performance and Complementarity: A Substantiveness Analysis of Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia Trilateral Cooperation." assesses the trilateral relationship between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, examining its institutional "thickness" as a mechanism for security governance. The article finds substantial trilateral cooperation, positing that this alignment may stem from complementary strategic priorities and increasingly aligned regime types.

Fluri & Pataraia's "Democratic Backsliding and De-Democratization: How the Georgian Dream Party Eroded the Rule of Law, Undermined the Integrity of Independent State Institutions, and Consolidated Power" analyzes Georgia's democratic trajectory, highlighting policies and legislative actions between 2020 and 2024 that have undermined EU integration goals. The article sheds light on the process of de-democratization, the consolidation of power, and the erosion of independent institutions, drawing lessons and warning signs from this case study for other transition contexts.

Collectively, these contributions help us understand the complex and multi-dimensional security implications of political regime shifts toward authoritarianism, offering crucial insights for informed defense and security affairs practitioners and academics. This special edition serves as a timely and vital resource as the global landscape continues to be shaped by evolving democratic dynamics and their profound impact on security governance.

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.

About the Authors

Cüneyt Güler – see the short CV on p. 31 of this issue, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.23.4.01>.

Philipp H. Fluri – see the short CV on p. 158 of this issue, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.23.4.08>.

Bibliography

- Bauer, Michael W., and Stefan Becker, "Democratic Backsliding, Populism, and Public Administration," *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance* 3, no. 1 (March 2020): 19-31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ppmgov/gvz026>.
- Nord, Marina, et al., "Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?" Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute Report, March 6, 2025, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf.
- Polga-Hecimovich, John, "Bureaucratic Politicization, Partisan Attachments, and the Limits of Public Agency Legitimacy: The Venezuelan Armed Forces under Chavismo," *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 2 (2019): 476-98, <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.142>.
- Sasso, Greg, and Massimo Morelli, "Bureaucrats under Populism," *Journal of Public Economics* 202 (2021): 104497, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2021.104497>.
- Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust, "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding," *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 93-113, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>.