

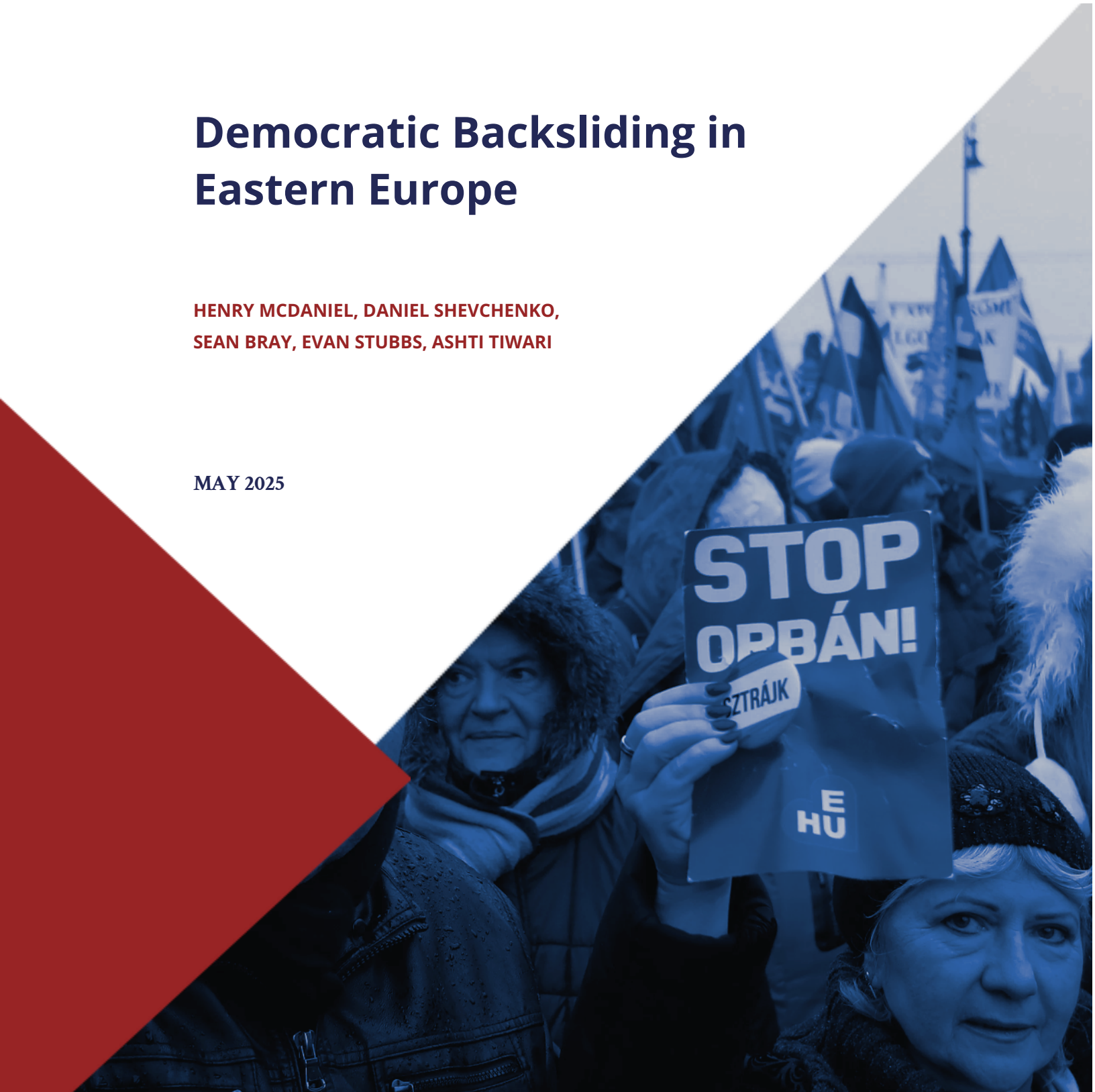


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# Democratic Backsliding in Eastern Europe

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# Three Kinds of Anti-democratic Coalitions

By “democracy,” we are specifically referring to liberal democracy. That means we are not only interested in elections, but also in the rule of law and individual liberties. We define an “anti-democratic coalition” as not only the politicians whose policies undermine democracy, but also their supporters and allies. These coalitions can be divided into three main interest groups: politicians, voters, and business allies.

There are three main kinds of coalitions. Each is defined by which of these interest groups is dominant.

## Bribery Coalitions

In these coalitions, businesses and politicians dominate. Here, officials dispense patronage and solicit bribes from their business allies. Businesses, in turn, seek competitive advantages over competitors. To avoid legal consequences, they attack the judiciary. To avoid electoral consequences, they attack the press. Since these coalitions’ motives are financial and not ideological, they can be big tents involving many parties. As a result, they are less likely to try to rig elections in any one party’s favor or limit the rights to speech or assembly. In the liberal democratic trinity of elections, rights, and laws, they are mostly just against laws.

## Extortion Coalitions

In these coalitions, politicians dominate. Here, an anti-democratic party creates a political machine that overpowers all opposition. These machines tend to be hierarchical with a strongman at the top. Unlike plutocracies, politicians are powerful enough to upgrade from soliciting bribes from business allies to extorting protection money from them. To reduce their need for public support, they change electoral laws. To ensure they meet this lowered threshold of support, they subjugate media companies.

## Mass Movements

In these coalitions, voters dominate. High polarization drives voters to fear opposition parties. As a result, they favor policies that give their side an unfair advantage. They also may grow spiteful towards the opposition and favor policies designed to punish them. These coalitions often enjoy large vote shares, reducing checks on their power. Politicians may still be corrupt and establish political machines, but these are not why they win elections.

# Mass Movements

## Poland

Poland is unique in the region for having successfully reverted to a backsliding state after a lengthy period of political erosion by the *Law and Justice* (PiS) party. The party has positioned itself as a defender of traditional values and rural, agrarian sectors in Polish

society, and originally came into power on a democratic mandate. However, the party curtailed judicial oversight and press freedom while in power, provoking internal concerns and EU funding cuts over rule-of-law violations.

Crucially, pushback against the party's reforms has been headed by NGOs and local-level politicians, including, for instance, the opposition mayors of Warsaw and Kraków. The country's history of economic and political organisation into trade unions has conditioned an effective system of political protest and independent journalistic monitoring of government activity. Furthermore, EU's blockage of funding in 2021 provoked widespread discontent and the formation of an electoral coalition that successfully won the following elections.

The relatively decentralised structure of local government in Poland, where municipality-level politicians control local budgets, hold elections, and control regional infrastructure companies, has been linked to more effective resistance to backsliding from the 'center'. However, individual government employees (at any level) have been shown to neither be *less* active in resisting backsliding nor *more* active.

This observation hints that regimes held in power by mass movements, given their wide popular power base, should not be combated based on value orientation alone. Tangible socioeconomic divisions, both nationally and at a local level, have been proposed to most

directly provoke protest sentiment in Poland and other backsliding states. Proposing a material route to counter such divisions, namely by supporting independent organisations or decentralised political actors, may be the most effective method to combat backsliding in 'mass-movement' regimes.

## Georgia

The *Georgian Dream* party, originally elected on a fair democratic mandate, has seen a rapid shift in rhetoric from a pro-European stance to moderately pro-Russian statements, bandwagoning for security while maintaining an official commitment to European integration. The Georgian government has appealed both to defense concerns and to earlier fragmentation in the country to retain political influence.

While civic activism and protest potential are high in urban areas, they remain relatively disorganised; large NGOs and civic society organisations are disconnected from the wider population and appeal to a mostly urban pro-European majority. The *Georgian Dream* party has also gradually cemented the country's economic dependence on Russia for tourism and trade — for instance, by reopening and expanding flights to Russia. Finally, persecution of potential political threats has been introduced against widespread protests in a law on 'foreign agents'.

While ideological concerns motivate citizens' activities during ongoing protests, it should be noted that these are even more so

impacted by socioeconomic and security worries. While many citizens have expressed only limited opposition to government centralisation, worries about external influence and movement away from European economies have been polled as major contributors to pro-democratic sentiment. Worries surrounding external influence have principally provoked current protests in Tbilisi. Beyond any ideological domain, it is these concerns that must be accounted for in establishing a program for combatting backsliding.

## Extortion Coalitions

### Hungary

Since 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz–KDNP coalition have systematically dismantled democratic institutions in Hungary, exemplifying the strongman coalition model through strategic weakening of the judiciary, legislature, media, and elections, rendering public support secondary to state control.

Orbán and Fidesz have consolidated authority through systematic control of the judiciary since 2010. Early retirement laws and court-packing tactics (e.g., 2012 judicial reforms, 2023 appointments by Fidesz) allowed Orbán’s coalition to replace independent judges with loyalists.

Under the guise of administrative reform, the Orbán government also established a separate administrative court system in 2018, placing

it under direct executive oversight. This restructuring shifted authority to the president of the National Judicial Office (NJO), severely weakening the National Judicial Council (NJC), which is Hungary's main judicial self-governing body. In 2023, the government adopted new judicial reforms requiring access to frozen EU funds, which were initially entrusted to the NJC to counteract the powers of the NJO president. Both reforms indicate centralization of judicial power to the ruling party, and discouragement from opposition voices or independent governing bodies to check this power.

After the Fidesz Party won the constitutional majority in 2010, it allowed them to uproot the frameworks of the Hungarian legal system. The “Fundamental Law of Hungary” was the new constitution enacted in 2012 that weakened the system of checks and balances and dismantled the rule of law. A government coalition able to freely draft and institute legislation because of a supermajority obtained with little opposition, evidences the considerable influence and consolidation of Orbán and the Fidesz Party over all functions of government.

Civil society in Hungary has been systematically restricted through new legislation. A 2017 law required NGOs receiving foreign funding to register as foreign-funded organizations. Subsequent legislation in 2021 imposed mandatory annual

financial audits and required disclosure of donations exceeding €55,000.

Furthermore, the "Stop Soros" law criminalizes assistance to asylum seekers, targeting NGOs and legal professionals who support refugee rights. These measures not only hinder the operation of civil society organizations but also cast them as threats to national security, thereby delegitimizing dissent towards these reforms.

Orbán's ruling party had sources financing 80% of media outlets by 2019 and established the National Media and Infocommunications Authority and its parent body, the Media Council, to supervise private media, radio, television, and internet. Both organizations are packed with Fidesz loyalists, and through further restrictive legislation, such as the Media Law, they have centralized power to arbitrarily regulate the media.

Electoral reforms in Hungary have systematically favored the Fidesz-KDNP coalition. Mechanisms such as winner compensation, strategic vote reallocation, and gerrymandering have enabled the party's dominance, regardless of popular support. The OSCE election observation mission diagnosed Hungary's elections as "free but not fair", particularly finding significant media bias in favor of the ruling party, which undermined voters' choices to make informed choices and favor the incumbent government.

Although political parties in Hungary can legally form and operate, opposition groups face significant structural and practical

challenges to political pluralism. The distorted advertising market, the frequent smear campaigns against opposition candidates in pro-government media, and financial interference during campaign activities are all limiting factors.

Furthermore, a 2020 amendment to Hungary's electoral law raised the threshold for national list registration, from 27 to 71 single-member districts, effectively forcing opposition parties to unify behind a single list in the 2022 elections.

## Bribery Coalitions

### Czechia

Czech democracy has held steady according to most democracy indices. However, it does have a strong authoritarian coalition. Former Prime Minister Babis together with former President Zeman repeatedly tried to undermine checks and balances. However, their attempts have not yet been successful.

Andrei Babis is a perfect example of a bribery coalition leader. Babis began his career as a businessman. He then got into politics, likely to advance his business interests regarding government contracts. His political party saw great success, in large part due to Babis's personal ownership of a large share of Czech media. His party has since gotten into several corruption scandals, including a 2019 incident where Babis was caught abusing EU funds.

Babis and Zeman attempted to modify Czech electoral laws, protect each other from threats



of removal from office, and expand the power of the Presidency to levels many experts on the Czech constitution consider to be illegal. However, they never accumulated sufficient support in parliament to carry out their plans effectively. Babis lost the prime ministership in 2021. Since then, his successors have passed laws designed to prevent media owners from using their private wealth to advance their politics as Babis did.

## **Slovakia**

Slovakia presents an interesting dichotomy in democratic backsliding. While most objective metrics depict only limited backsliding happening in Slovakia, the Slovak people perceive their democracy to be in an acute crisis. Certainly, some of the Slovak people's fears are substantiated by recent events. Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico has made national and international headlines for his anti-democratic actions which include, among other things, gutting anti-corruption offices and targeting the press. In 2024 alone, Fico eliminated Slovakia's Special Prosecutor's Office, passed an NGO "Foreign Agent" law, and launched a new state-controlled media organization. Just recently, Fico announced that he'd be attending a military celebration in Russia— a direct overture to Europe's most powerful authoritarian, Russian President Vladimir Putin. All of these developments have contributed to a crisis of confidence in which only 32% of Slovaks—the lowest total of any EU member state—express confidence in

their democracy. Nevertheless, Freedom House continues to score Slovak democracy relatively highly, with only a fractional decrease in "democracy score" since 2018. Scholars of democracy in Slovakia have noted that despite alarming press, "Slovakia is moving in an indecisive direction becoming neither less nor more democratic," and "not experiencing democratic backsliding, and only a limited degree of the hollowing of democracy." The case of Slovakia is therefore a useful and worthwhile study in how democratic institutions can withstand authoritarian leadership while still remaining viable. The crisis of public opinion is a separate and pressing matter, but on the whole, Slovakia stands out as a resilient democracy able to withstand authoritarian assault without significant loss of freedoms.

## **Serbia**

According to a NATO report from 2020, "When it comes to foreign disinformation, Serbia is considered to be at the epicentre." There exists a lack of free and independent media in Serbia, and government-sponsored news outlets are often influenced heavily by the Kremlin. Civil society is engaged only at the margins, having little to no voice in the public consciousness. Not only is Kremlin disinformation distributed within Serbia, but in other Western Balkans nations with significant Serb minorities, such as Montenegro and Bosnia. Some major Serbian news outlets that are considered mouthpieces for the Kremlin include Sputnik Serbia and

RT Balkan. According to a report by European Western Balkans, “In addition to being a penetrative channel for Kremlin propaganda dissemination, Russian state media in Serbia also serve as a platform for spreading narratives beneficial to Serbian state officials.”

A key way in which Russia is waging its disinformation campaign is through utilizing the legacy of the Yugoslav wars and NATO’s strategic bombing campaign of 1999. By empowering ultranationalist groups that seek the full reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia, Putin is mobilizing support from the Serbian right wing. Another interesting case of disinformation is the narrative that the West instigated a ‘color revolution’ following the collapse of a railway station in Novi Sad that killed 15 people. After this incident in December 2024, mass protests erupted across the country. The idea that the West was involved in destabilizing Serbia contributes to the narrative that the Kremlin is a reliable partner that will not work to promote popular unrest. By portraying the West as meddling in Serbian affairs, Russia can make the West seem like the enemy and the EU seem like an unattractive partnership.

Due to factors such as “political capture of media, low-level media literacy, and absence of fact-checking institutions,” Russia is allowed to have virtually unchecked power over the news Serbians are receiving. Interestingly enough, President Vucic began his political career as the Minister of

Information in Serbia, where he was responsible for censoring sensitive information during the Yugoslav wars. Vucic understands the power of the media and has therefore consolidated control over it. He exercises this control through government grants to news outlets as well as advertisements supporting his regime. According to the Democratic Erosion Consortium, “during the 2017 election, RTV Pink broadcasted 267 times more coverage devoted to Vucic’s campaign than to all the opponents combined.” The lack of separation between the media and Vucic’s agenda is a concerning marker of democratic backsliding, one that the EU will not accept in a potential member state.

What about Russia’s sway over Serbian media? Alongside Russian-operated news outlets Sputnik and RT Balkans, Russian bots on social media websites also spread disinformation about the war in Ukraine, Kosovo, and the EU. Russia spreads narratives that blame the West for rampant corruption and economic woes in Serbia. Similar to its information tactics in Moldova, Russia also characterizes the West as spreading LGBTQ and non-traditional values, inflaming the already raging culture war. The EU is also said to be supportive of Muslim minorities in the Western Balkans, a tactic meant to anger the majority Christian population. If the EU could incentivize the Serbian government to identify Russian bots and proxies in the media, a solution to the problem could be set in motion. Russia uses

the media as a soft power tool to spread its anti-Western narrative in Serbia, and if Serbia has any continued interest in joining the EU, it should root out foreign proxies and empower independent news outlets.

## Recommendations

### Dealing with Bribery Coalitions

- **Mobilize Businesses:** Small and medium-sized businesses, as well as investors, are the most direct victims of rigged bidding and anti-competitive regulations. Civil society can work to inform and organize these stakeholders, and international organisations can support business development independently of central governments.
- **Internationalize the Judiciary:** The EU's anti-corruption institutions are less vulnerable to interference by the targets of their investigations than national courts. Advocates should push to expand these institutions' portfolios and resources.

### Dealing with Extortion Coalitions

- **Prevention:** Monitor and stop bribery coalitions before they can metastasize into extortion coalitions.
- **New Media:** Oligarchs can buy newspapers and TV channels, but not algorithms. Opposition parties and pro-democracy groups' disadvantage is much smaller online.

### Dealing with Mass Movements

- **Reducing polarization:** Active contact between civil society organisations and citizens, either online or in-person, can promote across-the-aisle socialisation and limit disinformation about the economic and social aims of backsliding governments, reducing polarisation.
- **Picking Battles:** Voters often choose anti-democratic candidates for their policies, rather than for values. Challengers should aim to build a big tent incorporating long-term socioeconomic development, rather than fragmenting over individual short-term policies.