



Authoritarianism is a Systemic Risk

Hardy Merriman

Implications of Rising Autocracy on
Domestic and Global Affairs

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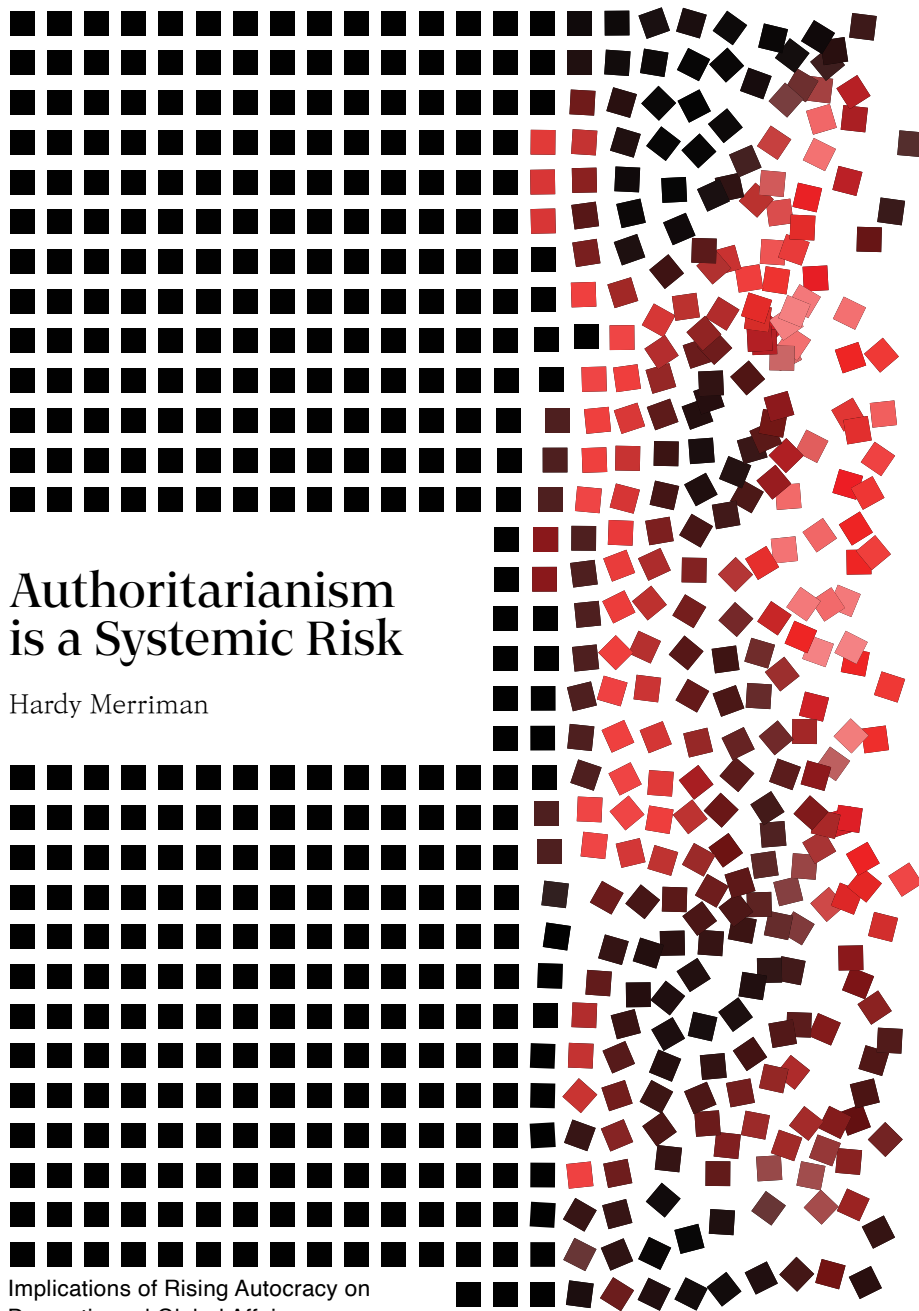
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Introduction



The world is amid a powerful autocratic wave. Over the last two decades, authoritarian governments have become stronger, more coordinated, and more aggressive at attacking political opponents and undermining democracy abroad.¹ Simultaneously, democratic governments have backslid—as elected demagogues foment toxic polarization, violate institutional norms, crack down on civil society, increase corruption, and distort political systems in their favor.

A growing circle of people, organizations, and institutions recognize rising authoritarianism as a global crisis. Yet in too many countries this crisis has not galvanized the level of response needed to turn the tide.

There are several likely reasons for this. One is that authoritarianism can seem abstract—a threat, but one that is assumed to not require an immediate response. People may feel that an authoritarian leader may naturally weaken over time, or that it is someone else’s job to step up and confront this challenge.

Another reason is that people are confused about how to respond. Traditionally it has been the job of courts, independent media, and government watchdogs to try to rein in an out-of-control leader between election cycles. Yet authoritarians attack or capture these very same institutions and undermine their power.

A further challenge is people’s sense of denial. Those living in democracies have generally experienced a set of stable institutional arrangements (even when flawed or unfair) in their political, legal, and economic systems.² Their experience of relative

stability in the past can lead them to assume—erroneously—that a previously democratic country will not succumb to the chaos of backsliding and authoritarian rule.

Undergirding these reasons is the fact that people may not understand the dire stakes of rising authoritarianism in their country and the world as a whole. That is the focus of this publication. It is based on the view that if people understood the stakes, they would be much more likely to respond with urgency and firm resolve to signs of authoritarianism in their own society, and more likely to stand against it abroad.

The following pages present evidence that—similar to climate change—growing authoritarianism worldwide is a systemic risk. Research reveals that authoritarian governance is a structural impediment to achieving gains on nearly every issue vital to human development. When it grows unchecked, it produces rapid deterioration in peace and security, economic development and prosperity, environmental sustainability, accountability and justice, free and independent media, political affairs, and human rights.

These consequences compound over time. Therefore, rising authoritarianism demands resolute action *now*.

1. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World* 2026; Nord et al., *Democracy Report* 2026.

2. Boese et al., “How Democracies Prevail.”

01

Defining Democracy and Authoritarian Rule



Understanding the authoritarian threat—domestically and internationally—entails first defining the terms “authoritarian” (sometimes also referred to as “autocracy”) and “democracy.” These terms are widely used in political rhetoric, which can lead to confusion about their precise meanings. For example, authoritarian leaders tend to claim that they are the ones who stand for democracy, while simultaneously dismantling democratic institutions and norms, and labeling their opponents as authoritarian.

The first step in cutting through this confusion is understanding “democracy” and “authoritarian” as technical terms with precise meanings. Doing this allows us to identify trends and analyze the wide-ranging domestic and global impacts of these two forms of governance.

There are two primary ways in which these terms are defined by analysts: First, they can be understood as opposing *ideals*, in which democratic and authoritarian attributes exist on a scale, with each government having varying degrees of these attributes. Second, they can be understood as *labels*, in which particular governments are classified as “democratic,” “autocratic,” or variations thereof.

In either definition, a central distinction between these two forms of governance is how societal conflict is managed.

Democracy and Authoritarian Rule as Opposing Ideals

All societies involve disagreements over decision making, and government is a primary arbiter in these conflicts. The *ideal of democracy* is that different views of the population are channeled through regularly elected representatives and institutions, in which fair rules are applied.

Democratic competition happens through these institutions and results in winners and losers. However, no win is predetermined, and no loss is permanent. Victorious candidates are subject to accountability mechanisms—including future elections, independent media scrutiny, and an independent judiciary—and they attempt to perform well in order to renew their popular mandate in the next election. Meanwhile, losing candidates know that they will have a chance to strengthen their ideas, communicate them to the public, get another opportunity to compete, and be subject to the same accountability mechanisms as winners.

A feature of the democratic ideal is that it enables a government to function at large scale without threats or the use of physical violence as instruments of societal decision making.¹

For such a system to work, trust is paramount. Incumbents that lose elections need to trust that they can cede power to the winners, and that—due to the presence of rights, an independent judiciary, rule of law, an active civil society, and democratic norms—those winners will not be able to use their new positions to unfairly persecute or disadvantage them in the next election. Similarly, winners must trust that if they lose the next election, they too will not be unfairly persecuted or disadvantaged. This trust in the “rules of the game” takes time to build, and dedicated government institutions, laws, and an active and engaged population are often required to uphold democracy’s guardrails.

Based on this understanding, democracies are comprised of at least five reinforcing pillars, which are:

1. Regular free and fair elections

Elections must be open to a wide range of parties and candidates; all adult citizens must be able to participate without fear of casting their ballot; and all votes must be counted and registered in the final election result.

2. Widespread popular participation in elections

A large portion of the population participates in elections. To enable this, laws, rules, and practices must support civic participation, rather than create excessive barriers to it.

3. Rule of law

Laws are upheld and enforced impartially. At minimum, this requires an independent judiciary and ongoing efforts to curtail corruption.

4. Civil and political rights, particularly rights to free expression and assembly

People have rights to freely participate in public life, including speaking freely, forming associations, and assembling (which includes protesting), and to be free from discrimination. These rights support the free debate of ideas, enable individuals to hold government accountable, uphold equality, and protect groups that lose elections or criticize powerholders from persecution by incumbents in government.

5. Free and independent media

The news media can report freely and independently on public affairs, without fear of government retaliation. This ensures an informed citizenry and serves as an additional check on potential government abuse.*

At minimum, all these mutually reinforcing pillars are

* There are many variations on definitions of democracy. These five pillars are common included among them. The descriptions of the five pillars used here are based on: Merriman, *Harnessing Our Power to End Political Violence*.

Autocracy

Democracy



necessary for sustainable democracy.* Without all five, the rules and norms of democratic competition weaken and can begin to unravel. For this reason, attacks on or erosion of any of these pillars can spread to the others and weaken democracy as a whole.

The five pillars also help us determine how democratic or authoritarian a country’s government is. The stronger the pillars are, the more democratic a government is. The weaker they are, the more autocratic a government is.

When these pillars are weak or absent, the dynamics of governance shift dramatically. Under the *ideal of authoritarian rule*, government is led by an individual or a small power clique. Conflicts may be channeled through institutions, but

* Democratic attributes are not limited to these five pillars—for example, the sustainability of democracy can also depend on the degree of separation of religion and state, the depth and breadth of organized civil society, and civilian control of the military.

laws and rules are not fairly applied, and state power is wielded to further the personal interests of the ruler and his allies. A variety of coercive measures and threats, including political violence, are also used to enforce the rule of a dictator and small governing elite. Human rights are often violated routinely to instill fear in the population. The economy and individual businesses are increasingly controlled and captured for their benefit. Corruption is rampant as powerholders enrich themselves at the expense of the broader population. Elections may be held, but they are unfree, unfair, or altogether stolen; instead, autocrats use them as a way to consolidate their rule with a veneer of legitimacy.

Under autocracy, incumbents fear ceding their power because losing control can result in them being held accountable for their abuses. Thus they view maintaining their rule as a means of survival, and set up a zero-sum game in which they use coercive measures such as heightened repression and violence against any viable challenger. To maintain control, they destroy fair competition; persecute free expression, debate, and independent media; and criminalize transparency. Their fear of internal challenges also drives them to value loyalty over competence in hiring government personnel, with disastrous implications for their country's population. For these reasons, human suffering under autocratic governments tends to be vast, but reporting on this is more challenging than in democracies, since autocrats attack or outlaw independent media outlets, while spewing disinformation and propaganda.

Hybrids

The ideals of democracy—or autocracy—are predominant in a range of governments around the world. However, some governments have a close combination of both democratic and autocratic traits and thus fall somewhere between these two ideals. For example, some governments regularly have rotation of power

through elections, but rampant corruption undermines rule of law, and therefore election winners are unable to perform effectively or deliver adequate services to their populations. Other governments have long stretches of single-party rule where elections lead to new leaders but no genuine rotation of power. Technically, opposition parties could win an election in these systems, but in practice they are rarely able to do so.² In either scenario, an incumbent government is likely to point to the presence of elections and claim to be “democratic,” but more accurately such a government is a hybrid of democratic and autocratic attributes, and on balance, some may fall more on the autocratic side of the spectrum.

In addition, even well-established democratic countries can have aspects or enclaves of authoritarianism—as is sometimes evidenced by their treatment of certain minority groups, in the way corruption distorts aspects of the political process and institutions, or in the behavior of certain sub-national (i.e., local or provincial) governments. At the same time, some authoritarian-ruled countries can have marginal democratic attributes—for example, some aspects of rule of law may be consistently enforced, some local governments may be relatively liberal, and some institutions of the federal government may show a degree of independence and autonomy.

Labels and Varieties of Democracy and Authoritarianism

Because of nuances found in various countries, evaluating governments and applying clear “*democratic*” or “*authoritarian*” labels to them can be a challenge. Yet labeling can be important because it enables analysis and comparison of the effects of democratic and authoritarian governance.

Doing this involves judgment calls, sometimes amid conflicting signals within a particular country. To account for such variations, different categories and rating systems of governments have been adopted by researchers and analysts. For example, a

common one is the four-part typology used by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, with categories as follows:*

Democracies:

1. Liberal democracy

Attributes include: “Multiparty elections for the executive are free and fair; satisfactory degrees of suffrage, freedom of expression, and freedom of association,” as well as “judicial and legislative constraints on the executive along with the protection of civil liberties and equality before the law.”

2. Electoral democracy

Attributes include: “Multiparty elections for the executive are free and fair; satisfactory degrees of suffrage, freedom of expression, and freedom of association.”

Autocracies:

3. Electoral autocracy

Attributes include: “Multiparty elections for the executive exist; insufficient levels of fundamental requisites such as freedom of expression and association, and free and fair elections.”

4. Closed autocracy

Attributes include: “No multiparty elections for the executive; absence of fundamental democratic components such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and free and fair elections.”³

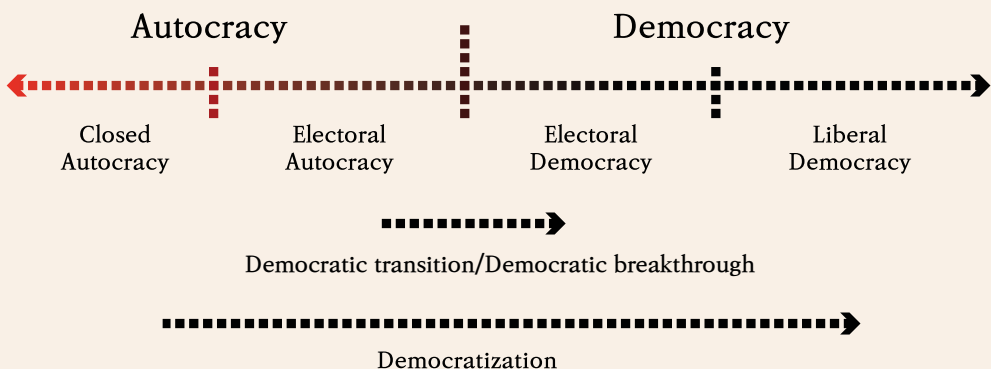
* Different terms are sometimes also applied to describe these political systems or to point to variations among them. For example, sometimes electoral autocracies are referred to as “competitive authoritarian” or “hybrid” regimes. Sometimes liberal democracies are referred to as “consolidated democracies.” Autocratic regimes are sometimes subcategorized as “personalist” (rule centered on an individual), “military” (rule centered on a military junta), or “single party” (rule centered on dominance by a single political party).

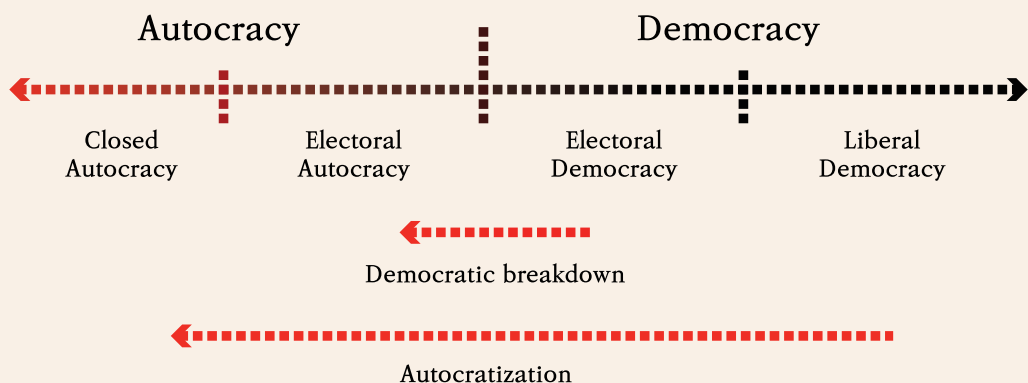
Changes Over Time: Democratization and Autocratization

Changes within and among various government categories can happen over time. Sometimes a country experiences an increase in democracy (a process referred to as “democratization”). This can happen even in countries that remain predominantly autocratic. For example, a closed autocracy can experience some degree of democratization (i.e., a marginal increase in freedom of expression) but still remain a closed autocracy. Or a closed autocracy may experience sufficient democratization to transition to become an electoral or liberal democracy. Or a closed autocracy may experience sufficient democratization to transition to become an electoral or liberal democracy.

When a government changes its category, it is referred to as a “political transition.” When a previously autocratic country shifts so much that the government becomes predominantly democratic, that political transition can also be referred to as a “democratic transition” or “democratic breakthrough.”

Countries can also experience an increase in autocracy (a process referred to as “autocratization”). This can happen even in countries that remain predominantly democratic.⁴ When autocratization crosses a certain threshold in democracy





(which analysts determine based on a sustained decline of core democratic attributes), the democracy can be labeled as “backsliding.”* In addition, when backsliding reaches the point that the government as a whole experiences a political transition to autocracy, the transition can be referred to as a “democratic breakdown.”

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1. Ignatieff, “Politics of Enemies.”
 2. Carothers, “End of the Transition Paradigm.”
 3. Nord et al., *Democracy Report 2024*, 12. For a more detailed discussion of this typology, see Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg, “Regimes of the World.”
 4. Lührmann and Lindberg, “Third Wave of Autocratization,” 1099.

* For an example of how researchers identify significant episodes of autocratization in democracies, see Vanessa A. Boese, et al., “How Democracies Prevail.”

02

The Third Autocratic Wave



Analysts find that historically democracy and autocracy advance and retreat globally in “waves”—large number of countries moving in one direction or another. It is generally regarded that there are three past democratic waves, alongside three autocratic ones (the most recent of which is still ongoing). The exact dates of these waves are subject to debate, and within each wave there is variation among countries, but the existence of the overall trends is notable.*

The **first democratic wave** was gradual and spanned nearly 100 years, from roughly 1828 to 1926. It reflected a growing recognition that democratic institutions were a viable alternative to monarchy, and it drew inspiration from ideas advanced in the American and French revolutions. Democratizing countries during this first wave did not achieve democracy by today’s standards, but they moved in that direction.

This first wave was powerful, but shortly after its culmination it unexpectedly came to an end and began to recede by 1926. The aftermath of World War I brought extremist political movements from the right and the left that destabilized many newly established democratic governments. This destabilization marked the beginning of **the first autocratic wave**, which lasted until 1945. During this time, many of the new democracies that

* The years I use to refer to the first and second democratic waves come from: Huntington, *The Third Wave*. Also, within a given wave, there will be variations between countries—for example during democratic waves many countries democratize, but some countries can still backslide toward autocracy, and vice-versa.

emerged in Europe and elsewhere were overtaken by fascism and communism.

The end of World War II led to a **second democratic wave**. The military defeat of fascist regimes marked an ascent of democratic institutions and values, and led to campaigns of decolonization in numerous countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

However, by 1962, Cold War geopolitics led to a **second autocratic wave**, and over the next 12 years many democracies in newly independent states slid toward authoritarianism. In particular, military coups derailed dozens of democratic governments around the world.

By 1974, the second autocratic wave reduced the number of nominal democracies around the world from approximately 50 to 30.¹ Pessimism set in about democracy's future. Yet skeptics were ultimately proved wrong. Although it was unrecognized at the time, 1974 marked the beginning of the **third democratic wave**. The wave moved slowly in its first decade, began to accelerate by the mid-1980s, and then cascaded at the end of the Cold War. On balance, the third democratic wave continued to 2006, by which point 58 percent of countries with populations over one million were classified as democratic.²

Thereafter, the **third autocratic wave** began, which persists to this day. Ironically, the current autocratic wave emerged in part out of the success of the third democratic wave. Feeling threatened by democracy's advance, autocrats began investing in cross-border learning and collaboration to counter democratic movements in their own societies. They also increasingly took the offensive in their attempts to undermine democratic governments around the world. Meanwhile, many democratic governments—perhaps with a false sense of confidence—failed to adequately address rising discontent by their own populations, failed to identify the gravity of domestic and international authoritarian threats, failed to work collaboratively on countering these threats, and were adversely impacted

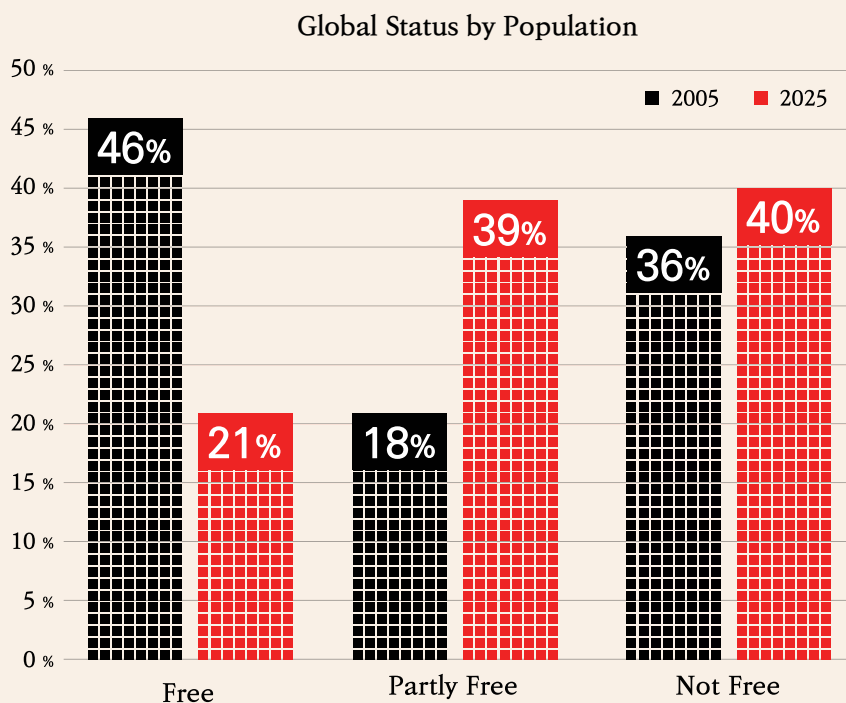


Figure 1. Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2006*; *Freedom in the World 2026*.

by the polarizing impact of new information technologies.

The net effect of the current autocratic wave is now clear. According to the organization Freedom House—which analyzes the degree of political rights and civil liberties in countries and territories around the world—each of the last 20 consecutive years featured autocratic gains and democratic decline globally.³ As a result, much of the world’s population has experienced a massive shift in governance in a single generation.

Freedom House finds that during this time (2005–2025), the percentage of the global population living under democratic governments declined precipitously from 46% to 21%. Meanwhile,

Number of Countries Democratizing



Number of Countries Autocratizing

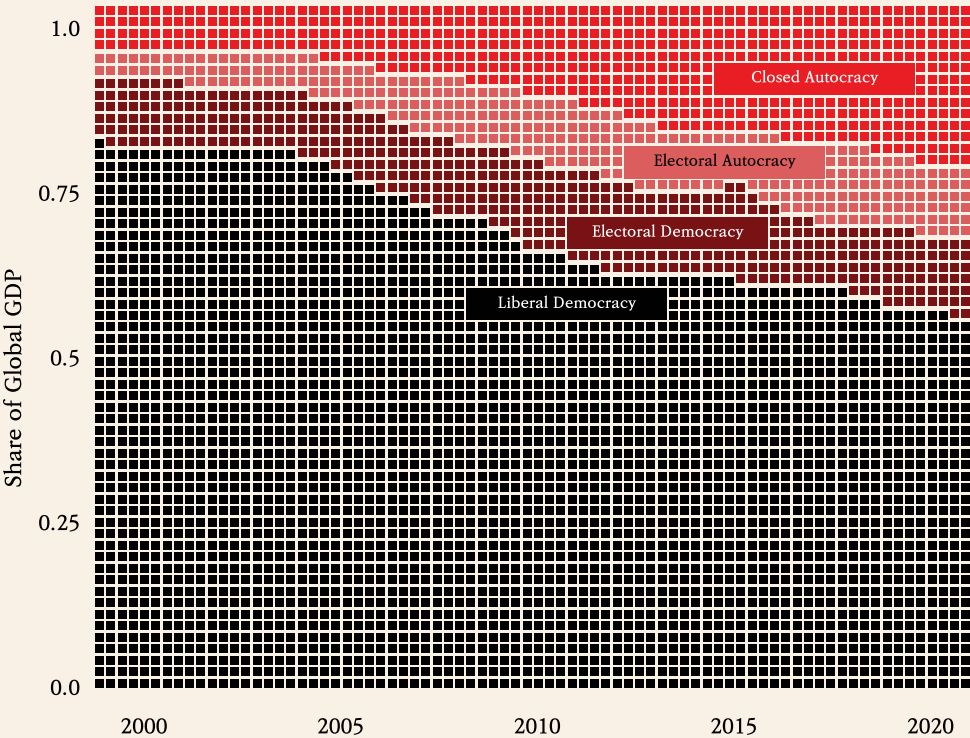


Figure 2. Source: Nord et al., *Democracy Report 2026*.

the number of people living in “partly free” countries—with a mix of democratic and autocratic attributes—increased from 18% to 39%; the number of people living in full autocracies rose from 36% to 40%.⁴

This data reveals that many democracies have backslid into hybrid regimes (designated by Freedom House as “partly free”), and some hybrid regimes have become fully authoritarian governments over the last two decades. Reflecting the magnitude of this shift, experts at the V-Dem Institute assess that the average level of freedom experienced by a global citizen in 2025 was at its lowest point since 1978.⁵

Share of Global GDP by Regime Type Across 21st Century



Source: Ekiert and Dasanaike, "Return of Dictatorship," 184.

Moreover, the downward trend has accelerated. The first decade of the autocratic wave moved slowly, prompting debate about its possible scope and severity.⁶ Yet since approximately 2016, a growing number of democracies have experienced breakdown. For example, in the year 2025, the V-Dem Institute found that 44 countries worldwide were in the process of autocratization, while only 12 countries were democratizing.⁷

The implications of the current autocratic wave go even further. Despite the relatively small proportional increase of the

world's population living in full autocracies from 2005 to 2025, during this time dictatorial governments such as those in China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran have become much more powerful, repressive, and coordinated in supporting each other's aggression and impunity. As one measure of this growth of autocratic power, in the year 2000, autocratically ruled countries produced approximately 10% of global GDP, but by 2023, they accounted for 35%.⁸

In the face of this crisis, a fourth democratic wave may develop. However, democratic waves are not like pendulums that swing automatically. Rather, they happen because people make them happen. Two decades of rising autocracy creates the potential for reversal, but seizing this potential requires that people take strategic and firm actions to do so.

At present, the autocratic wave shows no signs of slowing, and this should deeply alarm people around the world. It has profound implications on nearly every issue in society related to rights, freedom, justice, economic development, human security, corruption, and war and peace. It is especially important to understand this now. Diverse stakeholders have a vital shared interest in democracy, and they must work together in common cause to push back against the systemic risk of authoritarianism.

1. Huntington, "The Third Wave," 13-31.

2. Diamond, "Ill Winds," 54.

3. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026*.

4. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026*; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2006*.

5. Nord et al., *Democracy Report 2026*.

6. Plattner, "Is Democracy in Decline?"; Merriman, Quirk, and Jain, *Fostering a Fourth Democratic Wave*.

7. Nord et al., *Democracy Report 2026*.

8. Ekiert and Dasanaike, "Return of Dictatorship," 184.

9. Ekiert and Dasanaike, "Return of Dictatorship," 185.

03

The Stakes: Authoritarianism Is a Systemic Risk



Growing autocracy portends a much more dangerous world, with vast human suffering and ecological decline. The implications of this trend are so profound that they must compel a firm and sustained response. Research provides extensive evidence of the negative effects of autocracy on peace and security, economic and human development, gender equality, climate change, corruption, human rights, international stability, and migration and refugees. In contrast, a more democratic world offers a promising path forward on all these issues. Relevant findings are outlined below.

Peace and Security

As autocracy increases globally, peace and security worsen. In 2025 there were 65 *state-based conflicts* (conflicts where at least one party is a state) around the world, which was the highest number ever recorded since the end of World War II.*

Moreover, in the post-World War II era, four of the five years with the highest battlefield death tolls from state-based conflicts were 2021, 2022, 2024, and 2025. This indicates the establishment of a new high-level baseline over the last six years.¹

A particularly destructive variety of state-based conflicts are

* A **state-based conflict** is defined by Rustad (2026) as: “A contested incompatibility over government and/or territory, where at least one party is a state and the use of armed force results in at least 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year.” Some state-based conflicts remain low-intensity, but others can devolve into war, defined as “a conflict or dyad which reaches at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a calendar year.”

interstate conflicts (conflicts between two parties that are states), which have increased significantly in recent years. In 2025 there were eight active interstate conflicts, which is also the highest number recorded since 1946.²

These developments are consistent with research that suggests that rising authoritarianism will lead to more violent conflict around the globe. For example, numerous studies find that democracies are highly unlikely to wage interstate warfare against each other.³ In contrast more autocracies in the world are likely to lead to more international conflict.⁴

In addition, autocratic governments are less stable than democracies, and have a higher risk of experiencing civil war.⁵ However, the most likely countries to experience civil war onset appear to be those that have hybrid (autocratic and democratic) attributes.⁶ This means that periods of democratic backsliding, which have occurred with increasing frequency over the last 20 years, can lead particularly to heightened risk of internal armed conflict. Conversely, it also means that countries transitioning out of authoritarianism *toward* democracy can experience heightened security challenges, and autocratic forces within and outside of these countries may try to foil democratic transitions by exploiting these vulnerabilities.

As autocracy has risen, worldwide *violent conflict among non-state actors* has also increased over the last decade, and now seems to be establishing a new baseline at a far higher level than in the previous decade.⁷

Incidents of *one-sided violence* have also increased in the current decade of accelerating authoritarian resurgence, relative to the previous decade.⁸

Consistent with these developments, some research finds that autocratic governments are more likely to *harbor violent extremists* than democracies.⁹ Data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) covering 2002–2016 also show that higher quality democracies sustain fewer *terrorist attacks* than other regime types,

and that democracies experienced a substantially lower rate of increase in attacks over this period.¹⁰

Yet international threats to peace and security extend beyond violent conflict. Authoritarian governments also project power through *cyberattacks* that threaten critical infrastructure, and they destabilize democratic governance through *disinformation campaigns*, *electoral interference*, and the *disruption of internet communications*.¹¹

Reflecting this rising risk, NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept listed rising authoritarianism globally as a security threat, stating:

Authoritarian actors challenge our interests, values and democratic way of life. They are investing in sophisticated conventional, nuclear and missile capabilities, with little transparency or regard for international norms and commitments. Strategic competitors test our resilience and seek to exploit the openness, interconnectedness and digitalisation of our nations. They interfere in our democratic processes and institutions and target the security of our citizens through hybrid tactics, both directly and through proxies. They conduct malicious activities in cyberspace and space, promote disinformation campaigns, instrumentalise migration, manipulate energy supplies and employ economic coercion. These actors are also at the forefront of a deliberate effort to undermine multilateral norms and institutions and promote authoritarian models of governance.¹²

Economic Development

Just as democracies outperform autocracies on measures of peace and security, they also tend to lead to greater prosperity, development, public goods investment, and stronger social safety nets.

Research summarized by the V-Dem Institute reveals that frequently democracy leads to higher and more stable *economic growth* than autocracy. Democracies on average “produce a 1.1%

higher annual GDP per capita growth than autocracies.”¹³

Consistent with these findings, transitioning from autocracy to democracy has proven good for economic development: a country that experiences a democratic transition has a GDP per capita that is roughly 20 to 25% higher after 25 years than it would have had if it stayed a nondemocracy.¹⁴

Autocracies are also approximately three times more likely to experience *economic crises* than democracies.¹⁵ More broadly, democracies show lower *variance in economic performance*, making business in democracy a less risky proposition for citizens and investors alike.¹⁶

A country's level of democracy also affects its *ability to attract investment and borrow affordably*. Research on sovereign borrowing documents a “democratic advantage”: all else being equal, democracies access credit markets at lower interest rates, longer maturities, and more often in their own currencies than autocracies. As democratic institutions erode, governments face higher borrowing costs, greater difficulty rolling over debt, and a heightened risk of credit rating downgrades.¹⁷

In addition to macroeconomic risks, democratic decline also represents a direct threat to specific businesses. As autocrats seek to control and extort the private sector, firms that resist are likely to face retaliatory taxation, punitive regulation, excessive licensure requirements, and be cut or barred from government contracts and public services.¹⁸ This leads to a progressively smaller circle of politically connected and corrupt firms reaping economic benefits under authoritarian governments, while other firms that seek to play by fair rules of competition are shut out.¹⁹

Human Development

Democracies tend to protect *labor rights* and pay *higher wages* than autocracies. Empirical research shows that higher democratic rights are associated with higher wages, and that improving the quality of democratic institutions leads to wage improvements.²⁰

In addition, data from 1994 to 2012 suggests that democracies provide greater protection of labor rights such as freedom of association and collective bargaining in both law and practice.²¹

However, in spite of these benefits, on average democracies are no better than autocracies at reducing *income inequality*.²² This suggests that while democracy provides a pathway for people in lower socio-economic brackets to exercise their power to advance their interests, in practice these people must be organized to vote and act accordingly in order to actualize that pathway. When unaddressed, high levels of income inequality may also be a contributing factor in democratic backsliding.

Yet even as some democracies experience significant income inequality, they tend to invest more in programs to support the poor. In general, democracies tend to allocate public resources in ways that benefit their populations and build a social safety net. For example, countries transitioning from “closed dictatorship to a full democracy” increase their *social protection spending* by an average of over 100%.²³

Highly accountable democracies also tend to *invest in public goods*, “providing 23% more safe water access, 35% more immunization to young children, and up to 40% more electricity access, than autocracies.”²⁴ On average, democracies also have double the road density and a 300 percent higher rate of internet access than autocracies.²⁵

Public health is also higher in democracies. A study comparing political, economic, and health-related data for 168 nations from 1960 through 2010 finds “that electoral democracies have 11 years of longer life expectancy on average and 62.5% lower rates of infant mortality.” Some of this variation is attributable to difference in GDP (which can be related to whether a country is democratic or not) as well as other factors, but the researchers also find a direct association with whether a country is democratic or autocratic.²⁶

A further study found that transitioning to democracy increases

life expectancy by 3 percent within ten years, and moving from a closed autocracy to a full democracy reduces infant mortality by 94 percent.²⁷

Cross-national analysis also estimates that countries with a free and independent press have life expectancies roughly 1.6 years higher than countries with a partly free or unfree press. A free press appears to improve health outcomes by pressuring governments to respond to public-health threats and by exposing corruption and negligence in health systems.²⁸

Democracies also tend to invest more in *public education*, with an increase of up to 30 percent (relative to GDP) in fully democratic governments compared to fully autocratic ones. Democracies further do a better job providing education for their citizens, increasing “secondary school enrollment by almost 70% over autocracies in the long run.”²⁹ Democracies are also likely to yield an increase in student classroom time and a reduction in primary school education fees.³⁰ However, surprisingly the above attributes do not always correlate with higher educational quality and educational outcomes in democracies, although research finds that democracy is associated with higher reading skills.³¹

Gender Equality

Democracies require a significant degree of gender equality in order to retain their democratic character, and research finds that respecting women’s civil liberties is essential to successful democratization.³²

However, the same cannot be said of autocratic governments, which can retain their status without gender equality. Indeed, the most highly gender-oppressive governments in the world are autocracies. As scholars Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks state:

In fully authoritarian states, the mechanisms of sexist repression can be uncompromising and brutal. Often, they take the form of policies that exert direct state control over

women's reproduction, including through forced pregnancies or forced abortions, misogynistic rhetoric that normalizes or even encourages violence against women, and laws and practices that reduce or eliminate women's representation in government and discourage women from entering or advancing in the workforce.³³

Even among authoritarian governments that have women in visible *government roles*, research finds that women in democracies tend to hold more powerful government *positions* than those in autocracies.³⁴

Democracies also produce *attitudes of gender equality* among their citizens, with a study of 72 nations concluding that:

...in more democratized countries, all individuals, and men and women separately, are less inclined to agree with gender inequality [related to women in politics, business, access to university education, and employment] than individuals in less democratized and oppressive regimes.³⁵

High levels of education in democracies significantly contribute to attitudes of gender equality. In contrast, high levels of education in autocratic regimes do not achieve this effect.³⁶ Research also shows that voters with sexist attitudes are more likely to support far-right authoritarian parties and leaders.³⁷

Full democracies are further associated with very low levels of *violence against women*, relative to autocratic governments.³⁸ Coinciding with the global autocratic wave and rise in democratic backsliding, research also points to a rise in violence against women in their capacity as political actors. Since 2019, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project has documented a global increase in physical violence against women in politics, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union finds that women legislators are far more likely than men to be targeted for their gender, with

nearly half reporting violent threats.³⁹

The benefits of higher gender equality in democracies have far-reaching impacts in other areas as well. For example, evidence suggests that societies with greater gender equality and women's political empowerment have a lower likelihood of experiencing violent civil conflict.⁴⁰ Drawing on global data spanning 1817 to 2015, one study finds that annual civil-conflict risk (in which at least 25 battle-related deaths take place in a given year, but which can also rise to the civil war threshold of at least 1,000-related battle deaths in a given year) is nearly five times higher in the most patriarchal countries than in those where women are highly empowered (measured through women's suffrage, civil liberties, and participation in civil society), when other factors such as GDP are held constant.⁴¹

LGBTQ+ Rights

Democracies secure the *rights of sexual minorities* far more reliably than autocracies. LGBTQ+ rights are virtually nonexistent in nondemocracies, and studies show that the absence of political freedoms is one of the most common traits shared by most jurisdictions criminalizing same-sex conduct.⁴²

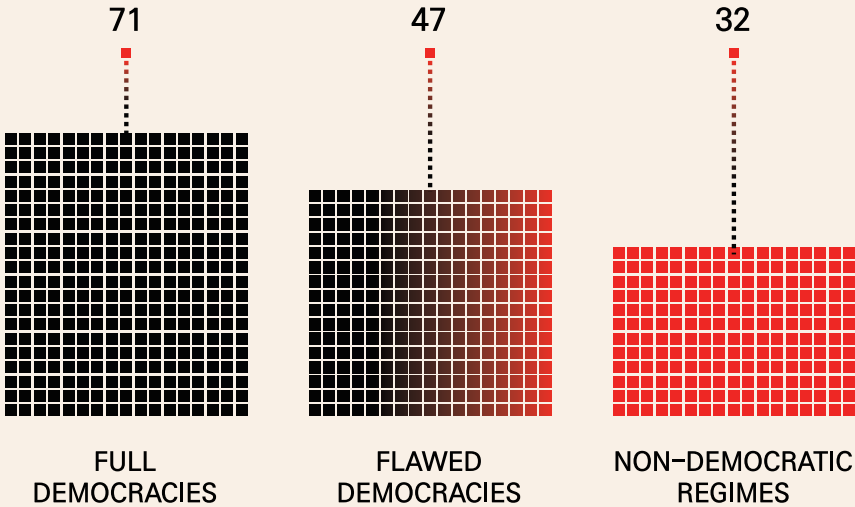
Research also finds that the type of political regime in a country “is a better predictor of gay rights than either economic development or cultural factors such as religion.” Likewise, gay rights advanced most where the third democratic wave succeeded and stalled or reversed where it failed or where democracy backslid.⁴³

The same divide plays out in international institutions, where autocracies resist the expansion of sexual orientation and gender identity rights. Within the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), resistance to resolutions related to the rights of sexual minorities have come largely from autocratic regimes.⁴⁴

Anti-LGBTQ repression also tends to signal broader

Average CPI 2025 Score for Different Types of Government*

Strong democracies control corruption far more effectively than flawed democracies or authoritarian regimes.



Transparency International. *Corruption Perceptions Index* 2025, 7.

*Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index and Transparency International's 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index.

authoritarian consolidation: a study of 175 countries from 1981 to 2020 found that governments deploying anti-LGBTQ rhetoric or measures are more likely to engage in other attacks on democracy, such as restrictions on independent media and freedom of assembly.⁴⁵

Corruption, Transparency, and Data Integrity

Full democracies have the lowest levels of corruption of any government type. For example, the organization Transparency International ranks countries around the world annually on *public sector corruption* as part of their Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). In

2025, they noted that:

Persistently low or declining CPI scores usually go hand in hand with limited or eroding democratic checks and balances, the politicization of justice systems, undue influence over political processes, and a failure to safeguard civic space.... [C]ountries with full democracies tend to score highly on the CPI, while non-democratic regimes largely perform the worst. In most of the world's full autocracies... corruption is systemic and manifests at every level.⁴⁶

Reflecting this pattern, full democracies have a CPI average of 71, flawed democracies have one of 47, and nondemocratic regimes score just 32.⁴⁷

In addition to showing that more authoritarian regimes tend to have more public sector corruption than democracies, Transparency International's data reveals that transitions from a "full democracy" to a "flawed democracy" tend to be accompanied by a major increase in public sector corruption. That means that democratic backsliding is associated with a significant rise in corruption.

Other research validates that hybrid governments have high levels of corruption, but then concludes that hybrids are even more corrupt than fully autocratic regimes.⁴⁸ However, corruption under autocratic regimes is particularly difficult to study and measure, since doing so depends on the availability of clear data that may be much harder to obtain in countries ruled by dictators.⁴⁹

Surprisingly, democratic transitions are found to slightly increase corruption, as changes in governance structures and rules may create new opportunities for graft and illicit influence. However, research shows that as democracy subsequently strengthens, corruption decreases.⁵⁰ Critically, accountability measures that are fundamental in democracy—such as ensuring

high quality free and fair elections, strengthening judicial independence, and respecting freedom of expression (including independent media)—play a powerful role in curtailing corruption.⁵¹

A key aspect of curtailing corruption is the availability of *reliable, transparent data* from governments. Studies show that autocrats systematically manipulate official statistics to create an appearance of competence, particularly on economic performance and public health.⁵² Evidence demonstrates that autocratic governments overstate GDP growth figures by amounts ranging from roughly 0.7 to 1.5 percentage points.⁵³ The same pattern appears in pandemic mortality data, with research concluding that: “on average, the most autocratic countries underreport Covid-19 mortality by 12.7 deaths per 100,000 people per month compared to the most democratic countries...”⁵⁴

Responding to Climate Change

Both autocratic and democratic countries contribute to climate change, and some democracies contribute a disproportionate amount. Yet even in such cases, on average, the more democratic a country is, the more informed the country’s population is about climate change, the more space there is for civil society groups to advocate for policy responses, and the more likely the government is to take meaningful measures to address the climate crisis.

Such measures can still fall short of targets set by the Paris Climate Accords of 2015. Yet it is hard to make the argument that a particular democratic government would be more effective at responding to climate change if it became authoritarian. Research finds that country-level civil liberties are among the strongest predictors of whether individuals believe in human-caused climate change, associated with roughly a 7% higher likelihood of belief.⁵⁵ In addition, advocacy by environmental NGOs in a free civil society—as is found in democracies—is associated with

reductions in CO₂ emissions.⁵⁶

Consistent with this, a government's willingness to fight climate change depends significantly on that government's level of democracy. For example, the V-Dem Institute concludes that:

Moving from the lowest levels of democracy (e.g., China) to the highest (e.g., Canada) equals an increase in policy commitments to climate change mitigation by 19%.... Moving from a fully authoritarian regime to a full democracy... generates a large increase in ambition [targets under the Paris Agreement], equal to almost -1.6°C.⁵⁷

Research also shows that higher climate change ambitions result in substantive reductions of CO₂ emissions. For example, analysis of 1,092 environmental laws passed in 133 countries between 1999 and 2016 found that “each new law reduces annual carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions per unit of gross domestic product by 0.78% nationally in the short term (during the first three years) and by 1.79% in the long term (beyond three years).”⁵⁸ Moreover, most of the estimated emission reductions can be credited to legislative acts rather than executive orders.⁵⁹

Within these averages, researchers also find that the “impact of climate laws is significantly higher in countries with a strong rule of law, where legal provisions are more likely to be followed.”⁶⁰ Thus, democracies' higher climate ambitions tend to matter, especially when they are matched with low levels of corruption and high levels of rule of law.⁶¹

Domestic Human Rights

Democracies do not have a perfect record of respecting human rights within their borders, but relative to autocracies, they are vastly better. The recognition and exercise of human rights is definitional to democracies, and in general, the more democratic a country is, the greater its respect for its population's human

rights.

In contrast, autocratic governments are characterized by human rights violations. A review of academic research on the use of repression (coercive power) used by governments concludes:

...the scope and intensity of repression is conditioned by regime type... [countries] that surpass a certain threshold of democratic institutional consolidation are far less likely to commit routine human rights abuses, declare martial law, perpetrate mass killings, or use other extralegal forms of repression than authoritarian or hybrid regimes.... the only exceptions to this phenomenon tend to exist in contexts where a democracy is engaged in counterinsurgency, foreign military occupation, or is facing violent dissent.⁶²

Beyond violent human rights abuse, authoritarian governments also routinely violate human rights by taking actions that *shrink civic space*. The last two decades are characterized by authoritarian leaders worldwide aggressively cracking down on civil society, passing repressive laws, curtailing access to funding and resources, deregistering or expelling organizations, criminalizing acts of protest, and persecuting activists. These violations of fundamental human rights of freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly, among others, increase in backsliding democracies, and are routine and widespread in consolidated authoritarian regimes.

International Human Rights

Internationally, democracies have a mixed record of upholding and supporting *human rights* in their foreign policies. Historically, positive examples of the US and other democratic countries on this topic may be contrasted with notable inconsistencies and failures. While the record is uneven, and failures should not be

overlooked, evidence suggests that in places where the United States has focused democracy support, those efforts have helped democracy (which corresponds strongly with human rights) in various countries.⁶³ In addition, economic sanctions and diplomacy by democracies have at times been employed to deter and constrain autocratic governments from engaging in human rights violations.

In contrast, autocrats have a consistently terrible record of supporting human rights globally and seek to undermine them and to persecute human rights activists internationally.

Autocrats actively work together to eviscerate *human rights norms*, undermine *human rights concerns*, and *undercut human rights monitoring bodies and accountability mechanisms* at the United Nations. They also seek to weaken human rights principles at multilateral organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Interpol, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).⁶⁴

A central argument autocrats use to try to silence human rights defenders is that national sovereignty and the norm of non-intervention prohibit international actors from taking actions to defend or even comment on human rights abuses in other countries. However, this narrow and self-serving interpretation of sovereignty is directly contradicted by other fundamental aspects of international law that establish sovereignty as residing in a country's population, rather than inherently in a head of state.⁶⁵

Moreover, authoritarians regularly betray their espoused defense of sovereignty by engaging in extensive illicit interference efforts internationally, including military threats and invasions of other countries, as well as increasingly sophisticated acts of *transnational repression* to attack, intimidate, and silence critics abroad. For example, Freedom House analyzed 854 incidents of transnational repression committed by 38 governments in 91 countries from 2014 to 2022. They documented the use of assassination; physical assault and intimidation; disappearances;

rendition; detention; unlawful deportation; Interpol abuse; passport and document controls; digital threats; attacks against family members, friends and partners; and targeted use of spyware.⁶⁶

Cooperation among autocrats in this transnational repression is evident—in 2022, 70% of the documented cases involved an autocratic government targeting an individual residing in a country ruled by another autocratic government.

The damage from these actions is severe, with analysts commenting that “More than just a threat to individual activists, transnational repression is a tool of global authoritarianism. It imperils human rights, democratic values, and national security.”⁶⁷ Its consequences “ripple out into a larger community” and spread fear and self-censorship.⁶⁸

Refugees and Immigration

The poor economic conditions, human rights abuse, and domestic insecurity created by autocratic governments tend to drive *migration*.⁶⁹ For example, the higher probability of autocratic governance leading to armed conflict also leads to more situations of internally displaced people and refugees.*

Thus, the current autocratic wave is resulting in major waves of migration. According to the Japanese news organization Nikkei Asia, in 2023, a record high “24.07 million refugees and asylum seekers had left countries with authoritarian regimes....”⁷⁰ Of these, 6.34 million sought protection in democratic countries, which is a “threefold increase from a decade earlier and constituting a record-high 26% of all people seeking refuge.”⁸¹

* “A simple analysis of how levels of democracy correlate with refugee outflows during the period of 1989-2013 shows that countries with higher levels of democracy produce fewer refugees. Conversely, nondemocracies are more likely to have larger outflows of refugees. This finding, while not controlling for other variables, holds true across different measurements of democracy. Seen in this light, the international community should take regime type seriously as it considers how best to mitigate and eventually resolve the global refugee crisis.”

Albright, et. al., *Liberal Democracy and the Path to Peace and Security*, 7.

Moreover, these 2023 migration numbers reflect a larger multi-year trend, which surpasses waves of migration from the early 20th century as well as in the decade following the end of the Cold War.⁷²

There is evidence that autocrats also use migrants as an opportunity to destabilize or extract concessions from democracies. For example, in 2021, Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko brought migrants fleeing armed conflict to the Poland–Belarus border in what European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen referred to as “an attempt by an authoritarian regime to try to destabilize its democratic neighbors.”⁷³

Five years earlier, Russian dictator Vladimir Putin was accused of deliberately targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure in Syria to try to drive Syrian refugees to Europe, with Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stating that Russia is “behaving like a terrorist organization and forcing civilians to flee” by carrying out air strikes “without any discrimination between civilians and soldiers, or children and the elderly.”⁷⁴

However, the autocratic Turkish government later also threatened the European Union with migrants, saying it would “open the gates and send 3.6 million refugees your way,” unless the EU stopped criticizing Turkish military action in northern Syria.⁷⁵

1. Rustad (2026)

2. Rustad, *Conflict Trends*, 14.

3. Albright et al., *Liberal Democracy and the Path to Peace*, 4; Papada, Lundstedt, and Lindberg, *Case for Democracy*, 8; Hegre, “Democracy and Armed Conflict,” 160.

4. V-Dem Institute, *Does Democracy Bring International and Domestic Peace and Security?*

5. Papada, Lundstedt, and Lindberg, *Case for Democracy*, 8; Bartusevičius and Skaaning, “Revisiting Democratic Civil Peace,” 626, 638.

6. Hegre, “Democracy and Armed Conflict,” 160; Cassel and Lührmann, *Democracy and Civil War*.

7. Rustad, *Conflict Trends*, 20.

8. Albright et al., *Liberal Democracy and the Path to Peace*, 2, 8–9.

9. Magen, "Fighting Terrorism."
10. Rustad, *Conflict Trends*, 22.
11. Piccone, Democracy and Cybersecurity.
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21. Wang, "Democracy, Policy Interdependence, and Labor Rights."
22. Knutsen, "Reinvestigating the Reciprocal Relationship"; Nikoloski, "Democracy and Income Inequality"; Papada, Lundstedt, and Lindberg, *Case for Democracy*, 5.
23. Murshed et al., "Fiscal Capacity, Democratic Institutions," as cited in Papada, Lundstedt, and Lindberg, *Case for Democracy*, 5.
24. Papada, Lundstedt, and Lindberg, *Case for Democracy*, 5.
25. Weidmann et al., "Digital Discrimination," as cited in Papada, Lundstedt, and Lindberg, *Case for Democracy*, 5.
26. Patterson and Veenstra, "Politics and Population Health."
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28. Li, Loh, and Ye, "Shushing the Press Shortens Lives."
29. V-Dem Institute, *Does Democracy Have Dividends for Education?*
30. V-Dem Institute, *Does Democracy Have Dividends for Education?*
31. Tudor, "What Democracy Does . . . And Does Not Do"; Dahlum and Knutsen, "Do Democracies Provide Better Education?"
32. Wang et al., "Women's Rights in Democratic Transitions"; Welzel, Norris, and Inglehart, "Gender Equality and Democracy."
33. Chenoweth and Marks, "Revenge of the Patriarchs."
34. Papada, Lundstedt, and Lindberg, *Case for Democracy*, 8.
35. Zagrebina, "Attitudes towards Gender Equality."
36. V-Dem Institute, *Does Democracy Promote Gender Equality?*
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38. Albright et al., *Liberal Democracy and the Path to Peace*, 16–17.
39. Robinson, "Global Assault on Women in Politics."
40. Dahlum and Wig, "Peace above the Glass Ceiling"; Albright et al., *Liberal Democracy and the Path to Peace*, 16–17.
41. Dahlum and Wig, "Peace above the Glass Ceiling."
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49. UNODC, Corruption and Comparative Politics, 13.
50. McMann et al., “Why Low Levels of Democracy Promote Corruption,” as cited in V-Dem Institute, *Does Democracy Improve Public Goods Provision?*
51. Papada, Pavlova, and Lindberg, *Can Democracy Limit Corruption?*
52. V-Dem Institute, Democracies Produce More Transparent Data.
53. Magee and Doces, “Reconsidering Regime Type and Growth”; Martínez, “Dictator’s GDP Growth Estimates.”
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57. V-Dem Institute, *Do Democracies Perform Better Combatting Climate Change?*
58. Eskander and Fankhauser, “Reduction in Greenhouse Gas Emissions.”
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61. Povitkina, “Limits of Democracy in Tackling Climate Change.”
62. Chenoweth, Perkosi, and Kang, “State Repression and Nonviolent Resistance.”
63. Finkel et al., *Deepening Our Understanding of US Foreign Assistance*.
64. Inboden, *Defending the Global Human Rights System*, 3.
65. Kiai, “Report of the Special Rapporteur,” para. 8; Voule, “Report of the Special Rapporteur,” para. 14; Merriman, Quirk, and Jain, *Fostering a Fourth Democratic Wave*.
66. Schenkkan and Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*; Gorokhovskaia, Schenkkan, and Vaughan, *Still Not Safe*.
67. Gorokhovskaia, Schenkkan, and Vaughan, *Still Not Safe*, 1.
68. Schenkkan and Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*, 2.
69. Roylance, “Migrant Crisis.”
70. Asada and Noishiki, “Migration Crisis.”
71. Asada and Noishiki, “Migration Crisis.”
72. Asada and Noishiki, “Migration Crisis.”
73. Ordoñez, “Authoritarians Are Using Migrants as Weapons.”
74. Synovitz, “Is Russia ‘Weaponizing Refugees?’”; Dearden, “Russia and Syria ‘Weaponising’ Refugee Crisis.”
75. Trew, “Erdogan Threatens to Flood Europe with Refugees.”

Collectively, these impacts must be understood as a major crisis. Autocracy is a structural driver of damage to peace, freedom, economic growth and stability, equitable development, human security, and justice. Moreover, because autocrats also actively work together to undermine democratic governments around the world, they represent a direct threat to the viability and security of democracies themselves.

While it is beyond the scope of this publication to offer a comprehensive strategy to counter autocrats, research provides valuable guidance.* Critically, it suggests that populations living under authoritarian rule are often the most powerful actors in doing so, especially when they form broader pro-democracy movements.¹ Institutional means like elections and the legal system remain vitally important, but they are often inadequate

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unless there is also a popular nonviolent movement pushing to uphold democracy and imposing social, economic, and political costs on the authoritarian leader and their enablers.

These movements are even stronger when a diverse range of actors—such as state or provincial governments, labor unions, professional associations, faith communities, businesses, civic associations, funders, legal institutions, universities, and others—coordinate in aligned efforts.²

The time to do so is now.

1. Pinckney and Trilling, “Breaking Down Pillars of Support.”

2. Stephan, “Lessons from around the World.”

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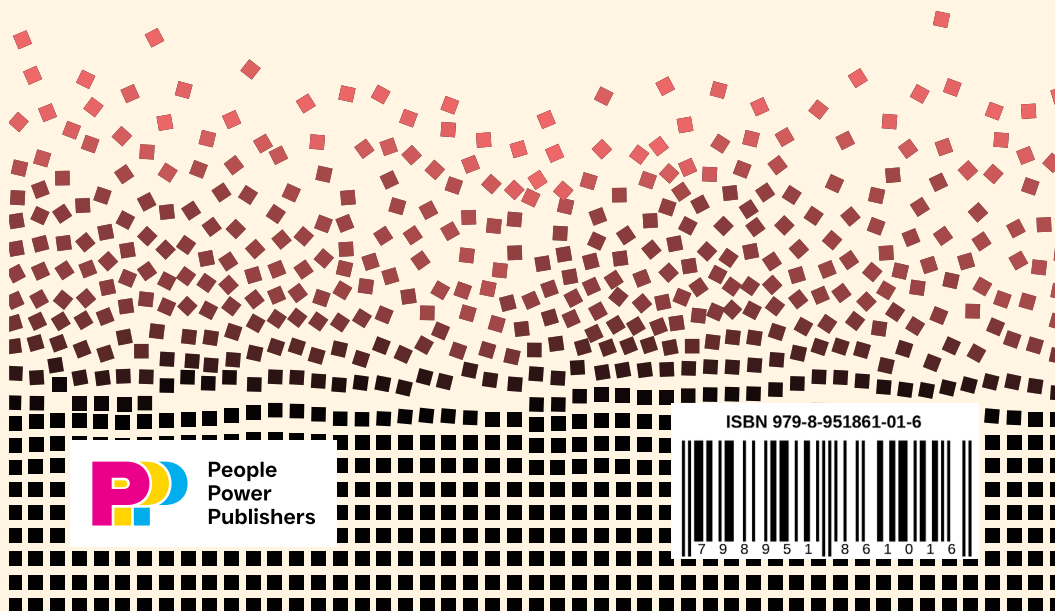
Rising authoritarianism is easy to dismiss as a distant political danger, a threat someone else needs to address, or a challenge that will take care of itself. It is anything but.

For two decades, authoritarian governments worldwide have grown stronger and more aggressive, while democracies have backslid amidst toxic polarization, eroded norms, and captured courts.

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