THE GLOBAL SPREAD OF AUTOCRATIZATION: INTERNATIONAL SOURCES OF DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION AND AUTOCRATIC DEEPENING

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Abstract: Declines in democracy scores are globally ubiquitous, among backsliding democracies and deepening autocracies alike. This strongly suggests that domestic-level explanations are inadequate to make sense of autocracy's recent gains and democracy's recent setbacks. But how exactly is autocratization crossing borders? This review distinguishes three categories of mechanisms through which autocratization might travel – systemic, coercive, and emulative – and discusses the serious empirical challenges of identifying, disentangling, and measuring each of them. To effectively grasp the nuances of international autocratization, we propose that an integrative examination of the interplay among these three factors is essential: the structure of the international system, active external interventions, and mechanisms of emulation and learning.

1 Introduction

Declines in democracy scores are globally ubiquitous, affecting both backsliding democracies and deepening autocracies. This strongly suggests that domestic-level explanations are insufficient to fully understand autocracy's recent gains and democracy's recent setbacks. How exactly is autocratization crossing borders and spreading globally?

An emerging literature explores international influences on domestic autocratization. We review this growing body of work and connect it to prior research on autocracy promotion and authoritarian diffusion. While this earlier work is closely related, it remains unclear to what extent its findings apply to the international spread of autocratization, and whether democracies erode and autocracies deepen via separate or similar logics.

Research on international influences on regime change has a long history, but interest in how these influences affect autocratization is relatively new. This review examines the emerging literature in this area and connects it to established work on autocracy promotion and authoritarian diffusion. We identify three key categories of international influences on autocratization: 1) the structure of the international system, 2) external interventions, and 3) domestic emulations. We propose a unified framework that integrates structural conditions (international system) with agency (intervention, emulation). This approach permits us to attend both to the "permissive conditions" arising globally and the "productive conditions" arising from specific agents – superpower provocateurs as well as their autocratic beneficiaries – who are actually driving processes of autocratization across so much of the globe (Soifer 2012).

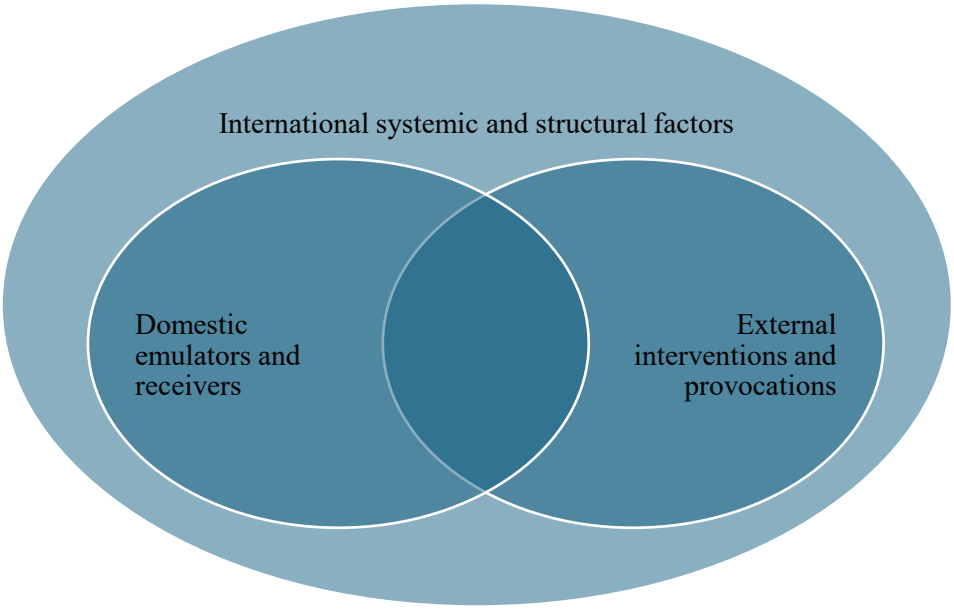
The study of international autocratization is a developing research area, and significant insights can be drawn from neighboring fields on autocracy promotion and authoritarian diffusion. The literature on autocracy promotion elucidates how external autocratic patrons offer support to stabilize authoritarian regimes through various means. However, it remains unclear whether this active external influence can lead to the deepening of autocratic traits within regimes that are initially less autocratic. Moreover, fewer studies have effectively examined the influence of external autocracies on democracies. Research on election interference and misinformation often overlooks the potential for democratic regression. We contend that while the body of work on autocracy promotion provides valuable insights into mechanisms of autocratic influence, much of this understanding has yet to be effectively integrated into the study of international autocratization.

The literature on authoritarian diffusion explores how authoritarian institutions migrate from one regime to another. However, research tracing diffusion from autocratic regimes to democracies, or between backsliding democracies, is less common. Concepts like authoritarian learning and linkages inform our understanding, but it remains unclear if authoritarian diffusion leads to autocratization, or whether domestic-level factors predominate. We argue that mechanisms of diffusion can broaden our perspective on international factors influencing autocratization processes.

Another critical area of inquiry shifts focus from direct promotion or diffusion to the broader systemic influences of international structures. These studies are diverse, yet they explicitly aim to unpack the systemic factors that contribute to democratic backsliding and autocratic deepening. Key systemic or structural factors include the balance of power between democracies and autocracies, the shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world, and the often adverse roles that international institutions and global governance play.

To effectively grasp the nuances of international autocratization, we propose that an integrative examination of the interplay among three factors is essential: the structure of the international system, active external interventions, and mechanisms of emulation and learning. A Venn diagram illustrates these combined forces. Systemic factors, the outer circle, exert influence on all countries, even if the effects vary considerably. While all regimes interact with shared global structural factors, their individual susceptibility to systemically induced autocratization is significantly influenced by domestic conditions. Countries also subjected to intervention or diffusion mechanisms - or both - are likely to experience a compounded effect from international influences.

Figure 1: Three International Influences on Autocratization



We will illustrate our framework through two case studies, one a regressing democracy (Hungary) and one a deepening autocracy (Cambodia), to demonstrate the interactions of intervention, emulation, and systemic factors. This highlights the complexities surrounding international autocratization, emphasizing a need for further research in this area.

2 Literature: Authoritarian Diffusion and Democratic Regression

We follow colleagues who have defined democratic regression as the gradual dismantling of democratic institutions in democratic regimes carried out by government and state actors (for example Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018). We use the terms democratic regression and democratic backsliding interchangeably. The definition sets democratic regression apart from democratic breakdown – the

abrupt and full-scale abandonment of democracy and introduction of an authoritarian regime. It highlights that the scope of the analysis is restricted to democratic regimes and intra-regime change, until the point where eroding democracies are reversed to autocracies (Haggard and Kaufman 2021). By contrast, related concepts such as Lührmann and Lindberg's (2019) autocratization trace gradual deterioration of democratic features in all regime types, also autocracies. Importantly, the definition identifies democratically elected governments as the main culprits.

While there is a vast literature on international diffusion of political regimes and regime change, few studies have examined the diffusion of democratic backsliding, particularly from one backsliding democracy to the next. The literature on the diffusion of democracy has demonstrated how democracy travels across borders, and that a more democratic international environment makes it more likely for a regime to become democratic itself (Strang 1991; Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Gleditsch and Ward 2006; see also DiMaggio and Powell 1983).[1] More recent research on authoritarian diffusion builds on this now classic work, and examines the transfer of authoritarian institutions and practices between autocratic regimes, less often from autocracies to democracies (for an excellent overview, see Tolstrup 2024). While much of authoritarian diffusion appears applicable to diffusion of backsliding between democracies, scholars have yet to acknowledge this important issue. In the meantime, the primary focus of authoritarian diffusion research is on autocracy-to-autocracy diffusion of authoritarian features, less about whether the adoption of such features make autocracies more autocratic. Authoritarian diffusion is not about autocratization. It is not about democratic backsliding either.

We build on the work on authoritarian diffusion and therefore concentrate our literature review on this field. We also consider some relevant adjacent literatures, such as research on authoritarian learning, autocratic linkages, authoritarian International Organisations, the diffusion of populism, and coup contagion.

A key conceptual contribution we draw on extensively in our theoretical argument below is Thomas Ambrosio's (2010) *Constructing A Framework of Authoritarian Diffusion.* Building on the literature on democracy diffusion, and here particularly Elkins and Simmons' (2005) conceptual framework, Ambrosio distinguishes two broad mechanisms of authoritarian diffusion: *appropriateness* and *effectiveness*. Authoritarian diffusion is driven by appropriateness when previous adoptions of an authoritarian practice make later adoption more normatively acceptable. Authoritarian diffusion is driven by effectiveness when previous authoritarian practices are seen as successful. As we will show later, particularly appropriateness can play an important role in the diffusion of anti-democratic reform between backsliding democracies.

Empirical studies of authoritarian diffusion examine a broad range of diffusion objects. We structure our review of this literature along two dimensions: origin and destination regime types – autocracy-to-autocracy, autocracy-to-democracy, and democracy-to-democracy diffusion – and the object of authoritarian diffusion – specific policies and legislation, more loosely defined authoritarian practices, and authoritarian norms, ideas, and narratives more generally.

2.1 Autocracy-Autocracy Authoritarian Diffusion

A first group of studies examines the diffusion of specific authoritarian policies or pieces of legislation. Most scholars here trace adopted passages in legislative texts on specific issues. Many find this happening in the post-Soviet space, with Russian laws being adopted by autocracies in the region. For example, M. Bader (2014) shows that electoral laws falling short of democratic standards have been adapted across nine post-Soviet autocracies from similar Soviet and Russian laws. Lemon and Antonov (2020) demonstrate how legislation on peaceful assembly, civil society, and participation is transferred among five post-Soviet authoritarian regimes, with Russian laws mostly serving as the blue print. Waller (2023) traces the spread of Russian anti-LGBTQ laws to post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia. Kerr (2018) argues that the similar policies restricting internet use have diffused among states of the former Soviet Union.

[1] Besides democracy diffusion, a vast literature on policy diffusion provides useful insights on diffusion processes and mechanism more generally, albeit not directly related to democratic regime change (Shipan and Volden 2008; Marsh and Sharman 2009; Graham, Shipan, and Volden 2012; Gilardi and Wasserfallen 2019).

A second group of studies is concerned with a more broadly defined set of authoritarian practices. These do not necessarily take the codified form of specific pieces of legislation but draw from the larger tool-box of authoritarian practices. One practice that is frequently studied is repression. For example, Darwich (2017) shows the regional and domestic conditions under which Saudi Arabia's repression of the Muslim brotherhood spread to some autocracies in the region, but not to others. Olar (2019) shows in a quantitative study that institutionally similar autocratic regimes align levels of state repression, arguing that rulers learn and emulate from peers to overcome uncertainty about whether repression can be effective. Glasius, Schalk, and Lange (2020) show that the likelihood that a country adopts policies restricting Non-Governmental Organizations increases when more countries in the vicinity have previously introduced such restrictions. (Note however, that the authors do include autocracies as well as democracies in their dataset.) Similarly, Mataic (2018) analyses a mixed dataset to show that restrictions of religious freedom become more likely when other countries introduced them before. Another field of study is the diffusion of digital authoritarian practices (Aslan and G. Yilmaz 2024; Bashirov et al. 2025).

A third group of studies highlights the diffusion of a broader spectrum of authoritarian norms, ideas, and narratives, sometimes providing a more conceptual assessment. For example, Weyland (2016b, 2017) points out that contemporary authoritarian diffusion and cooperation is much more interest-driven than the more ideologically motivated processes of the past. Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2016) argue that "authoritarian gravity centres" exert a gravitational pull towards authoritarianism by means of both diffusion and autocratic promotion. La Torre (2017) argues that leftist leaders and parties in Latin America emulated 'Bolivarianism' as promoted by Hugo Chávez, a mix of plebiscitary constitutional reforms and a state-controlled economy, media, and civil society – albeit only where domestic democratic institutions were vulnerable (in Bolivia and Ecuador). Roberts and Ziemer (2018) find evidence of the transfer of authoritarian norms and ideas regarding NGO and LGBTQ rights from Russia to Armenia (but not much policy convergence in other areas). I. Yilmaz, Morieson, and Shakil (2024) argue that Pakistani viewers of a Turkish historical TV drama adopt the authoritarian narratives and attitudes in it that reflect the views of the Turkish regime. In a noteworthy negative, Thomas Ambrosio (2012) in a media study of international media sources, finds little evidence that the China model of illiberal capitalism finds much traction in outlets outside China. (Note, however, that his media sample is taken from both autocratic and democratic regimes.)

Adjacent related research fields include authoritarian learning, autocratic linkages, and authoritarian International Organizations. While the work in these fields does often not directly address diffusion, the phenomena being analysed can be seen as facilitators of authoritarian diffusion. Sometimes the objects of this research are considered to be part of the mechanisms of diffusion in the diffusion literature. This is most obvious for scholarship on authoritarian learning (Hall and Ambrosio 2017; Heydemann 2024). Studies of authoritarian learning examine how autocracies observe other autocrats' behaviour and adjust their own actions according to the examples' success or failure (Heydemann and Leenders 2011; Koesel and Bunce 2013; Weyland 2016a). Learning is explicitly conceptualized as a mechanism of diffusion in the key theoretical contributions (Elkins and Simmons 2005; Ambrosio 2010).

Autocratic linkages – the sum of ties between two autocratic regimes – have been shown to stabilise autocratic regimes (Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2017; Schmotz and Tansey 2018; Cameron and Orenstein 2012; see also Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016; Akyuz and Hess 2018; Vangeli 2019; San and Akca 2021). Linkage can be understood as a condition for diffusion: only if there are linkages between two autocracies, authoritarian practices have a chance to travel between them. In diffusion studies, geographic proximity is often introduced as a short-hand for linkages, arguing that closer examples are more relevant for diffusion (citation). But linkages can also entail more complex socio-economic ties between countries. For example, Vangeli (2019) argues that the Chinese One Belt One Road initiative – while not calling it linkage – can serve as a vehicle for the diffusion of the principles of state neo-liberalism that make up the China Model.

Another line of research examines the role of authoritarian-dominated International Organization (Libman and Obydenkova 2018a, 2018b; Meyerrose 2020; Stephen 2021; Debre 2022). Joint membership in an IO can be understood as a particular form of linkage, and the cooperation of autocracies in these organization as a condition that facilitates authoritarian diffusion.

2.2 Autocracy-Democracy Authoritarian Diffusion

Fewer studies examine authoritarian diffusion to democracies. This line of research includes the diffusion of entire autocratic political regimes to formerly democratic countries. Here, a focus of research is the period between the two World Wars in Europe. For example, Møller, Skaaning, and Tolstrup (2017) argue that the shifting balance from democratic to autocratic great powers in the interwar years enhanced autocratic demonstration effects that led to democratic regression and breakdown in some of Europe's domestically vulnerable democracies. Similarly, Lutz (2017) argues that emulation contributed to the spread of autocratic regime changes in interwar Europe, and shows the effects of a range of diffusion variables in the 1930s (Lutz 2017). The interwar years align with Huntington's (1991) first reverse wave, and scholars have since described how autocratization occurs in historic waves (Weyland 2016b; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). However, diffusion is only one possible mechanism leading to a wave of autocratization (Gunitsky 2018). Assessing whether waves are caused by diffusion is often not the authors' aim.

Related to the literature on authoritarian regime diffusion is research on coup contagion (R. P. Li and Thompson 1975; Wilén 2024). This literature applies diffusion concepts and mechanisms to examine whether and how military coups spread. Given that the result of a coup is by definition the installation of an autocratic regime, this line of research can be understood as a version of autocratic regime diffusion. Note however, that recipient regimes are often, but not always, democratic. Also, there is some more recent evidence that diffusion is less relevant for the proliferation of coups (Miller, Joseph, and Ohl 2018; Singh 2022).

Beyond the diffusion of entire autocratic regimes, authors also examine the diffusion of authoritarian norms and ideas, policies, practices, and narratives to democratic regimes. These diffusion objects are similarly diverse as those examined in autocracy-to-autocracy diffusion studies. For example, Ambrosio (2020) demonstrates how anti-liberal reform in Hungary mimics the Russian blue print in the institutional areas it targets (the judiciary, electoral system, media, and civil society) and the methods by which it targets them. Huang (2019) argues that the decrease in Taiwan's press freedom is partly due to norm diffusion from autocratic hegemon China, facilitated by dense economic linkages to the country. Rivetti (2024) analyses Iranian and Italian social media accounts to show how the Italian far-right adopts authoritarian narratives from Iran, championing traditional values and anti-Trans-Atlantic sentiment, and facilitated by long-standing ties between the two.

There are also some notable null-findings of autocracy-democracy diffusion: Ambrosio (2012) finds little evidence that the narrative of the 'China Model' of illiberal capitalism gains traction in media discourse in the US and other media around the world, as mentioned above. Chou, Pan, and Poole (2017) find little evidence of diffusion of authoritarian norms from China and Singapore to Australia. Buzogány (2017) argues that Hungary's backsliding was not emulated from Russia, but that the countries' relationship grew closer since 2010 due to mutual interests (see case discussion below and footnote 9).

2.3 Democracy-Democracy Authoritarian Diffusion

While the literature on authoritarian diffusion offers great insight into when and how a plethora of authoritarian features are transferred to other autocracies and democracies, they fall short of explaining the diffusion of democratic regression between backsliding democracies. On the one hand, scholars for the most part direct their attention towards diffusion between autocracies, to a lesser extent from autocracies to democracies. While it seems plausible that many of the mechanisms apply to the diffusion of backsliding between democracies, empirical tests of this assumption are scarce. In fact, the closest we could find to a study of diffusion of democratic regression between backsliding democracies is Holesch and Kyriazi (2022) study of the recent cooperation between Poland and Hungary. The authors argue that the two countries can protect each other against EU sanctions; learn from each other's anti-democratic reforms; and use the respective other's example to legitimate their own policies domestically. Clearly, the two last points (albeit not the first) speak to diffusion mechanisms: learning and legitimation through precedent can be understood as two of the key diffusion mechanisms (Elkins and Simmons 2005; Ambrosio 2010).

Research on the diffusion of populism – a main driver of democratic backsliding – promises important insights, but does often not explicitly address the consequences of the diffusion of populism for democratic regression (Rydgren 2005; Rooduijn 2014; Kaltwasser and Sandoval 2024; Wiesehomeier, Düpont, and Ruth-Lovell 2024).

On the other hand, research on authoritarian diffusion is not about autocratization. Authoritarian diffusion often does not make autocracies more authoritarian. Rather, it describes the transfer of institutions and practices among similar authoritarian regimes, with no discernible effect on how authoritarian they are. The literature on authoritarian diffusion is about diffusion between autocracies, not about the diffusion of autocratization.

3 Literature: Autocracy Promotion and Democratic Backsliding

Despite the recent surge in research on democratic backsliding (see Waldner and Lust 2018, 94), we know relatively little about how backsliding is affected by external influences, particularly external autocratic influences. I review two strands of literature to present the state-of-the-art and my contribution to it: first, research on causes of democratic backsliding, and here particularly the smaller subsection of the debate dealing with international influences; and second, the literature external autocracy promotion, which has to offer arguments that might help us understand the role of autocratic interference in democratic backsliding, but does not directly address this question.

I follow colleagues who have defined democratic backsliding as the piecemeal, incremental, and gradual dismantling of democratic institutions in democratic regimes carried out by government and state actors (for example Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018). The definition sets democratic backsliding apart from democratic breakdown – the abrupt and full-scale abandonment of democracy and introduction of an authoritarian regime. It focuses the scope of the analysis to backsliding in democracies, while related concepts such as Lührmann and Lindberg's (2019) autocratization trace gradual deterioration in all regimes. And it identifies the democratically elected government as the main culprit responsible for democratic backsliding.

Democratic backsliding is mainly homemade. It is clear, therefore, that research focuses on domestic explanations such as socio-economic conditions (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018), populism (Bauer and Becker 2020; Vachudova 2020; Weyland 2020; López and Luna 2021; Vachudova 2021), polarization (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Svolik 2018; Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021; Haggard and Kaufman 2021), political values and culture (Kwak et al. 2020; Welzel 2021b, 2021a), institutions (Dresden and M. M. Howard 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Gandhi 2019; O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2021; Haggard and Kaufman 2021) or political actors (Dawson and Hanley 2019; Bakke and Sitter 2022)

However, while not the primary cause, international factors might contribute to democratic backsliding (Waldner and Lust 2018; Hyde 2020; Diamond 2021), and a number of studies examine various international aspects – albeit fewer than those concentrating on domestic processes. For example, Akyuz and Hess (2018) describe developments in Turkey, including a shift in foreign policy away from EU and the West and towards Russia, China, and other authoritarian partners (see also G. Yilmaz and Eliküçük Yıldırım 2020). Bozóki and Hegedüs (2018) portray Hungary as an "externally constrained hybrid regime" (Bozóki and Hegedüs 2018, 1173) in which the EU constrains backsliding tendencies, but also sustains and legitimizes the regime. Buzogány (2017) argues that democratic backsliding in Hungary is "not inspired or supported by Vladimir Putin" (Buzogány 2017, 1307) but that Hungary is seeking cooperation with Russia (and vice versa) because of mutual interests.

While these studies compile important descriptive inference, some colleagues argue that backsliding might in fact be partially caused or facilitated by international level factors. Schlipphak and Treib (2017) argue that EU intervention can strengthen domestic backsliders in member countries because it can be presented and perceived as unwanted outside interference, creating a rally-around-the-flag effect. In an analysis of interwar Europe, Møller, Skaaning, and Tolstrup (2017) argue that democratic regression is thus brought about by a combination of authoritarian great-power hegemony and pro-authoritarian demonstration effects. Holesch and Kyriazi (2022) show that the close cooperation of Poland and

Hungary facilitates their mutual backsliding projects through learning, support, and legitimation. San and Akca (2021) demonstrate that Turkey's linkages to authoritarian regimes have undermined the democratizing effects of its strong Western linkage. Meyerrose (2020) argues that membership in international organizations supporting democracy promotion counter-intuitively makes backsliding more likely, because promotion efforts focus too much on executive and legislative elections. Hyde (2020) argues that in a changing international environment, support for democracy wanes and autocratic forces become stronger. Toettoe and Jiang (2022) show how linkages with China may lead to media self-censorship.

These studies draw attention to the international dimension of democratic backsliding. However, the effects of active autocratic interference on democratic institutions do not receive enough attention. Scholars highlight a variety of international level factors, including more systemic ones such as effects of globalisation or a generic international environment. A more focussed and more systematic analysis of autocratic interference, its origins and effects, and a discernible debate that develops that analysis, are as of yet missing. In addition, a number of design choices limit the amount of insight the studies can deliver. They are mostly single case studies; often conduct primarily descriptive analyses; focus on a small number of paradigmatic cases of backsliding, such as Turkey and Hungary; and overemphasize the role of a few notorious external autocratic patrons, particularly Russia and China.

I could find only one study addressing the role of active autocratic interference on democratic backsliding directly. Boduszyński and C. Li (2023) argue that political and economic support from autocratic actors like Russia, China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates strengthens authoritarian-leaning elites in the Balkans and provides them with "reverse leverage" (Boduszyński and C. Li 2023, 89) against Western democratic conditionality.

While explicit studies of autocratic interference and democratic backsliding are scarce, a number of related research fields can be probed for clues. I want to draw on four such debates: research on autocracy promotion; on foreign destabilisation policy; external election intervention; and disinformation campaigns. Neither of these fields addresses my question directly, but all can provide helpful concepts and approaches.

A large literature has examined the effects of external democracy promotion (Carothers 2010). Studies cover the broad range of instruments that democracy promoters apply. Authors come to ambiguous conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the various measures. The most dramatic among these, *military intervention* aiming for democratic regime change, has rarely proven effective (Peceny 1999; Mesquita and Downs 2006; Pickering and Peceny 2006). *Sanctions* – also punitive but using economic rather than military means – have a mixed record. While some authors find no effect of sanctions on democratisation (Peksen and Drury 2010; Grauvogel and Soest 2014), others are more optimistic. Particularly democratic sanctions – designed specifically to force democratic reform or punish human rights violations – have been shown to improve democratic quality (Soest and Wahman 2015). Similarly, studies on democratising effects of *aid* come to different conclusions, asserting that aid helps democratisation (Wright 2009; Dietrich and Wright 2015; Blodgett Bermeo 2016), that is does not (Knack 2004), or both (Kono and Montinola 2009). *Election monitoring,* potentially a new international norm (Hyde 2011; Kelley 2008, 2012), has been shown to reduce fraud and increase election quality (Hyde 2007, 2010) and reduce opposition boycotts (Kelley 2011) – but might also increase boycotts (Beaulieu and Hyde 2009) and harm governance (Simpser and Donno 2012). Research on the European Union has recently examined what the EU can do against democratic backsliding among its members (Iusmen 2015; Kelemen and Blauberger 2017; Sedelmeier 2017).

The literature on autocracy promotion (for an overview, see Yakouchyk 2019) examines external autocratic support for other autocracies. Studies on autocracy promotion examine how external support by autocratic sponsors – often Russia (Ambrosio 2007, 2016; Tolstrup 2009, 2013, 2015) or China (J. Bader 2015c, 2015b, 2015a; Noesselt 2021) or both (Koesel and Bunce 2013) – helps autocratic rulers to govern, or even stay in power (for a skeptical perspective, see Way 2015, 2016).

The instruments of autocracy promotion are manifold and include economic cooperation and financial support (Vanderhill 2014; J. Bader 2015c; Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2017), sanctions busting (Sejersen 2019), unconditional development aid (Blodgett Bermeo 2011, 2016; Hess and Aidoo 2019),

diplomatic backing, and supportive signalling (Tolstrup 2015; Tolstrup, Seeberg, and Glavind 2019), and peace-building (Billerbeck and Tansey 2019).

While the literature on autocracy promotion offers an interesting array of relevant concepts and mechanisms, it does not explicitly consider autocratic interference in democracies, and how it might contribute to democratic backsliding. To what extend do autocratic regimes interfere in backsliding democracies? Why do they interfere? And crucially, do their actions have an effect on the severity of backsliding? I will build on research on autocracy promotion to develop the concept and evaluate the effects of autocratic backsliding promotion.

The literature on foreign destabilization policy examines the mechanisms and effects of intentional external destabilization of the political and economic systems of other countries as a means of foreign policy. One of the main topics in this literature is US destabilisation of Latin American countries in the 1980s, often after they had left-leaning governments democratically elected (Dietz 1984; Merom 1990; Stahler-Sholk 1990; Petras 2015). But the literature also points to American foreign policy elsewhere, for example in South Africa, or the conflict between Turkey and Greece (Vryonis Jr 1997; Ncube 1984). It also features other actors, such as South Africa in the region (Ncube 1984), or Ethiopia in Somalia (Yihun 2014).

The debate more or less comes to halt in the 1990s. More recently – and more fitting – some studies have emerged on Russian destabilisation politics. For example, Maliukevičius (2015) examines Russia's disinformation campaign in Lithuania. Bajrovic, Garčević, and Kraemer (2018) show how the Kremlin stokes political and ethnic division to install a pro-Russian government in Montenegro.

The instruments of destabilisation that are discussed can be sorted into three groups: First, disruptive economic policy, such as sanctions and embargoes and trade wars. Second, covert intelligence operations supporting anti-regime forces, often promoting coups. And third, more recently attempts at destabilisation make use of disinformation campaigns.

The literature on foreign destabilisation can offer important insights on how democratic regimes are subverted. However, it only considers democratic backsliding in passing, and subsumes it as one possible form of destabilisation. Consequently, the literature does not form any theoretical arguments about the mechanisms of destabilisation on backsliding, and does not focus its empirical designs on these questions.

Research on foreign election intervention examines the role of interference in national elections by foreign governments – often but not exclusively autocratic governments. Studies on the effect of foreign election intervention fall into two categories: those that examine the effect on election outcomes, and those that consider the effect on public opinion in the recipient country. Great power election intervention has been shown to help the favoured party, sometimes shifting the election in their favour (Levin 2016, 2020). Russian election intervention can be distinguished into two waves – first in the post-Soviet neighbourhood where it served to bolster electoral autocratic rulers. Since 2014 Russia also intervenes in Western democracies, however with much fewer apparent effects (Way and Casey 2017). Foreign powers often intervene on behalf of national contenders with programmatic positions favourable to the sender (Bubeck and Marinov 2019). These partisan interventions polarise public opinion towards the sender, whereas process oriented interventions (e.g. to promote democratic institutions) moderate it (Corstange and Marinov 2012). Americans welcome partisan interventions for their own party, but are opposed to interventions in favour of the opposing party (Tomz and Weeks 2020). In 2014, Ukrainians were against Western election intervention, but less critical of Russian ones (Shulman and Bloom 2012). Foreign "side-taking" also influences attitudes toward economic cooperation with the sender (Bush and Prather 2020).

While these studies enhance our understanding of the role of foreign election intervention, particularly of autocratic regimes, they do not consider the effect on democratic backsliding. Even where the effect on the electoral success of a supported partisan actors is concerned, authors are often agnostic as to whether that actor has an anti-democratic agenda, and whether they could use the help to dismantle democratic institutions.

Finally, a recent strand of research examines the role of foreign disinformation campaigns in the age of digital communication. This research can build on long-standing line of scholarship on political

communication aimed at foreign publics, sometimes labelled public diplomacy, and often about US-American foreign communication during the Cold War (Cull 2008; Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009). More recent studies concentrate on online mass communication and warn that it might disrupt democratic institutions (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Landon-Murray, Mujkic, and Nussbaum 2019). Most scholars concentrate on domestic disinformation, or on its content and perception (Freelon and Wells 2020). Where international actors come into play, the focus is often on Russia and China. For example, Maliukevičius (2015) examines Russia's disinformation campaign in Lithuania. Curtis (2021) argues that China uses disinformation to project (Great) power, suppress dissent, and influence other actor's foreign policies. Similarly, Elswah and P. N. Howard (2020, 623) posit that Russian TV-channel Russia Today is "an instrument of state defence policy to meddle in the politics of other states". Russian outlets Sputnik and Russia Today in Germany have been shown to issue negative reports about refugees, particularly before elections, aligning with positions of the far-right party, *Alternative für Deutschland* (Elshehawy et al. 2022). Some scholars go as far as warning that foreign disinformation might result in political violence (Arayankalam and Krishnan 2021).

These studies provide important reference points, but do not address the connection of foreign disinformation and democratic backsliding directly. While many authors can show the effect of foreign communication on public opinion in the target country, the examined opinions are often those towards the sender or a specific issue topic. More far-reaching effects on democratic institutions are rarely taken into consideration.

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