

# What Drove Autocratization in Hungary under Victor Orban and North Macedonia under Nikola Gruevski?

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## ABSTRACT

The questions of what makes democracy work, its stability, sustainability and proliferation, have been at the forefront of inquiries in social and political science, especially after the Second World War. Traditionally, the hurdles of establishing stable and lasting democratic regimes in Latin America, post-communist Europe and Asia, Africa, and even the Middle East have drawn the attention of countless social and political scientists, philosophers, analysts and intellectuals. Lately, however, questions about democratic fragility have also been raised in the regions where democracy has been taken for granted and has long been considered irreversible—in the Euro-Atlantic world. Hungary as the most exemplary case has been the champion of autocratization, but with the rise of populist, anti-immigration politics, coupled with illiberal and nativist ideas in several Western European countries and the United States, the questions of democratic stability and sustainability are now gaining salience even in the old “bastions” of democracy.

This study looks at two cases of autocratization in formerly democratized political systems, Hungary under Viktor Orban and Macedonia (since 2019 North Macedonia) under Nikola Gruevski. The comparison of the two cases offers us insights that democracy can disintegrate in spite of differences in prior democratic consolidation. The most salient, underlying factor that set the stage for autocratization in both countries is primordializing nationalism, defined as a form of nativism grounded in the idea of the ancient, organic and inalienable rootedness of the nation in its perceived national homeland, regardless of whether the perceived national homeland matches the state boundaries or not. Both countries had strikingly converging autocratizing paths during the prime ministership of their populist-nationalist governments. While Hungary continued on its autocratizing path, North Macedonia has shifted gears and began re-democratizing after the fall of Nikola Gruevski’s regime.

**KEYWORDS:** *Hungary, North Macedonia, autocratization, nationalism, re-democratization*

## INTRODUCTION

The questions of what makes democracy work, its stability, sustainability and proliferation, have been at the forefront of inquiries in social and political science, especially after the Second World War. Traditionally, the hurdles of establishing stable and lasting democratic regimes in Latin America, post-communist Europe and Asia, Africa, and even the Middle East have drawn the attention of countless social and political scientists, philosophers, analysts and intellectuals. Lately, however, questions about democratic fragility have also been raised in the regions where democracy has been taken for granted and has long been considered irreversible—in Western Europe and the United States. With the rise of populist, anti-immigration politics, coupled with illiberal and nativist ideas in several Western European countries and the United States, the questions of democratic stability and sustainability are now gaining salience even in the old “bastions” of democracy. And even the famous political scientist and philosopher, Francis Fukuyama, who upon the collapse of the Berlin Wall announced the end of history and the victory of liberal democracy, recently retracted his assessment in resignation, stating: “Twenty-five years ago, I didn’t have a sense or a theory about how democracies can go backward, and I think they clearly can” (Tharoor, 2017). Another prolific democratic theorist and philosopher, Larry Diamond, who has otherwise been mostly optimistic about the overall prospect of democratization in the world, expressed serious concerns about the illiberal and undemocratic trends, including in the West, stating that “...the most worrisome dimension of the democratic recession has been the decline of democratic efficacy, energy, and self-confidence in the West, including the United States” (Diamond, 2015). Such concerns are increasingly echoed by discussions in the media and other public fora. In other words, the concern about the viability of democracy globally, including in the West, has become one of the central topics of discussion in public discourse. It is demanding a renewed and focused academic inquiry for the investigation of the most salient factors that are undermining democracy today.

This article addresses the process of what has commonly been termed as democratic backsliding, in two post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe—Hungary and North Macedonia. While it may be argued that new democracies are more susceptible to reversals (as has been readily established by analyses of Latin American democratic breakthroughs and collapses), the democratic reversals and even collapses in post-communist Europe run contrary to most theoretical assumptions. This is especially true for one of the cases analyzed in this study, Hungary, as a member of the European Union and as a country hailed in the 1990s and early 2000s as a prime example of how democracy can be developed and consolidated. With membership in the European Union, it has been believed that the democratic fate of the new members has been ensured. In fact, democratic collapses within the European Union are still unimaginable and the European Union bodies do not formally treat Hungary as an authoritarian state. The other case, North Macedonia, has not been considered as consolidated as Hungary during its democratization process and has not yet become a member of the European Union, but its democratic collapse during Nikola Gruevski’s regime also provides important evidence about the institutional and extra-institutional processes that occur during the process of democratic collapse. The comparison of both countries provides compelling evidence supporting the assumption that democracy can seriously deteriorate and even disintegrate in spite of differences in the levels of prior democratic consolidation. Such insight can be of tremendous importance in analyses that tackle democratic deterioration in democracies today, including the old bastions of democracy.

This analysis offers an argument about the logic of popularly supported autocratization in formally democratic polities. I chose the term autocratization in place of terms commonly used today, such as democratic recession or democratic backsliding because autocratization provides a more complete theoretical and analytical conception—in this analysis it defines a process which transforms democracy into a particular kind of authoritarianism—competitive authoritarianism. Namely, a regime that skews the reasonably level playing field in favor of the incumbents, based on Levitsky and Way's (2010) definition, is defined as competitive authoritarian. This is so because electoral competition continues to exist, but it is not fair and thus electoral manipulation, unfair media access, the abuse of state resources and varying degrees of harassment and violence ensue as a result of the newly created uneven playing field. In full authoritarian regimes, there is no competition, while democracy is characterized by fair competition. Competitive authoritarian societies have real competition, but it is unfair (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Hence, it can be determined that a democracy becomes a competitive authoritarian regime when the indicators point to a vast and persistent deterioration of the reasonably level playing field between the incumbents and the challengers. In other words, if the incumbents systematically disrupt the reasonably level playing field in their favor, along with the abuse of state institutions, the judiciary, the media, civil society and business, in a span of two consecutive electoral processes, the regime will be considered to be establishing and/or consolidating a competitive authoritarian rule. The concept of autocratization can also be analytically applied to processes that do not necessarily cross the threshold of authoritarianism; likewise, it can be applied even to processes that go beyond competitive authoritarianisms. Autocratization is not a sudden democratic breakdown which can be pinpointed to a certain date due to certain historical events such as coups or military conflicts. It is a process that leads to a gradual disappearance of democratic standards in a society and eventually leads to a democratic breakdown. Although through an analysis of important indicators it can be determined when approximately a country has crossed the threshold and entered the spectrum of authoritarianisms, there is no single event or a single historical date that determines autocratization. There may be, however, be a critical juncture that triggers the change in a country's trajectory toward autocratization.

The central element of autocratization is the sustained disruption and the eventual dissolution of the reasonably level playing field between the incumbents and the opposition. It is important to note that the operational term is “reasonably level playing field,” not just a “level playing field,” because a perfect balance and equality in the competitive processes between incumbents and the opposition is impossible to delineate. Arguably, such perfect balance is not operationalizable even in long-standing western democracies. Thus, when we address a “reasonably level playing field” in the competitive political process, we need to be able to establish that the opposition has a fair chance of prevailing and winning the elections. It is when the opposition faces insurmountable hurdles in the competitive process, through the narrowing of the political field for its operation, that the disruption of the “reasonably level playing field” can be determined. This disruption can be observed along several institutional and extra-institutional indicators: the deterioration of judicial independence, the deterioration of legislative checks on executive power, the deterioration of the media landscape—suppression and the elimination of independent/critical media, and finally, the takeover of business by the ruling, authoritarian elites. These indicators can be observed through a qualitative and longitudinal analysis over a span of several election cycles. While temporary setbacks in one or several of these indicators might not always be positively established as a process of autocratization and can be remedied with an election cycle, autocratization is most certainly observable when these indicators, together, persistently point to the

systemic disruption of the reasonably level playing field between the incumbents and the opposition.

A qualitative assessment of the said indicators reveals that Hungary and North Macedonia entered autocratization and democracy in both was transformed into competitive authoritarianism. Importantly, autocratization is largely an incumbent-driven process, and not primarily a result of structural weaknesses in the institutional set-up. While structural conditions can play a role in certain institutional outcomes, they are not sufficient for the disruption and even dissolution of the reasonably level playing field in political competition. The latter is an important observation, because the prevailing wisdom in political science has been that presidential systems, especially in new democracies, are more amenable to reversals and democratic breakdowns. These cases demonstrate that autocratization can be equally possible in well-designed parliamentary systems, without the formal dismantling of the systems themselves. Both the Hungarian and Macedonian parliamentary systems were designed based on long-standing and successful parliamentary models in western Europe, as was the case with nearly all European post-communist countries. And yet, Hungary and North Macedonia autocratized, while other post-communist countries with the same type of parliamentary systems, did not. It has also been observed that other countries in the region of Central and Eastern Europe are showing signs of autocratization (primarily Poland), but observations lean toward the argument that those processes also seem unlikely to be a result of the structural underpinnings of the institutional system itself. Therefore, the question of what drives autocratization, when institutional weaknesses are not the primary factors, requires the examination of other structural conditions and the role of agency. The argument, thus, is not devoid of structural explanations, but the structural conditions are intertwined with factors of agency that serve as mechanisms driving the process. The most salient, underlying factor that set the stage for autocratization in both countries is primordializing nationalism, defined as a form of nativism grounded in the idea of the ancient, organic and inalienable rootedness of the nation in its perceived national homeland, regardless of whether the perceived national homeland matches the state boundaries or not.

### **WHY PRIMORDIALIZING NATIONALISM OFFERS A STRONGER EXPLANATORY POWER THAN OTHER COMMONLY INVESTIGATED FACTORS**

David Waldner and Ellen Lust (2018) provided a comprehensive survey of theories guiding the explanations of democratic transitions, including democratic backsliding and breakdowns. An important body of works that have guided inquiries about democratic breakdowns in the last two decades have centered on political-economic explanations. These explanations have isolated four distinct political economic variables: level of income, distribution of income, source of income and short-term macroeconomic performance, finding evidence for both endogenous and exogenous modernization influences (*ibid.*). According to some explanations, income levels affected the probability of democratic breakdown but not that of democratization; while according to others, rising levels of income have been linked with higher probabilities of transitions to democracy and lower probabilities of democratic breakdowns (*ibid.*). Yet, other explanations have focused on income inequality as the most salient factor influencing both transitions to democracy and democratic breakdowns. A number of works link democratic transitions and democratic survival to macroeconomic conditions, especially if the economy is rapidly growing or shrinking. Namely, it has been claimed that in new democracies rapid growth is associated with lower risks of authoritarian reversion, while high inflation significantly increases the risks of democratic breakdown (*ibid.*).

While political-economic variables had played an important role in the democratic development of Hungary and North Macedonia during the time of transition from communism and thereafter, the same factors do not seem to have played a decisive role in their autocratization. Also, while it is true that the world economic crisis played a role in Hungary, it cannot be determined that it was the crucial variable initiating autocratization. Likewise, in North Macedonia, political-economic factors have been important insofar as the authoritarian government exploited the rhetoric of “economic growth” for its legitimacy. But, if we look at the economic indicators in both countries before, during and after autocratization began, we will not find any particular evidence that the situation had drastically changed prior to autocratization, which could then be linked to processes thereafter.

For instance, before Orbán’s ascent to power in 2010, the Hungarian economy suffered some losses, especially in 2009, as a result of the world economic crisis. At the time, however, virtually all European countries experienced some economic decline, but only a few entered autocratization. The main economic indicators, however, do not point to a sudden economic collapse which could potentially be a direct cause of a subsequent autocratizing process. The GDP growth in Hungary declined in 2007 and 2008, but remained positive (0.4 per cent and 0.9 per cent respectively, compared to 3.9 per cent in 2006), and then sharply fell to negative 6.6 per cent in 2009. In 2010, after Orbán’s victory, GDP grew only slightly by 0.7 per cent, and then continued to slowly pick up during his time in office (The World Bank). During this same period, however, other indicators remained quite stable, which, again, does not point to a major economic crisis that could be a cause of a sudden change of course. Annual inflation remained the same throughout the period; unemployment did grow, but not drastically, from 7.8 per cent in 2008 to 10 per cent in 2009, and it remained at the same level during Orbán’s first term in office (10.2 per cent in 2013) (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the income share held by the lowest 20 per cent of the population was stable prior to Orbán’s ascent to power (8.7 per cent in 2006 to 8.9 per cent in 2009), but it began to decline during Orbán’s government to 7.6 per cent in 2014. Also, the GNI per capita was continually growing prior to Orbán’s ascent to power, from 17,290 USD in 2006 to 19,620 USD in 2009 and continued to grow with roughly the same pace during Orbán’s terms (*ibid.*). The sum of the indicators, thus, does not support the assumption that the political-economic factor is the main variable in autocratization.

Likewise, in North Macedonia, the economic indicators do not offer evidence that Gruevski’s ascent to power in 2006 and the subsequent autocratization are a result of economic factors. The annual GDP growth in the years prior to Gruevski’s ascent to power, in 2003, 2004 and 2005 were 2.2, 4.7 and 4.7 percent respectively and the inflation was also at a low level in the same period (between 1.7 per cent and 4.9 per cent). The GNI per capita was also growing from 6,420 USD in 2003 to 7,620 USD in 2005, and it continued to grow during Gruevski’s terms in office. The most problematic economic factor in North Macedonia, its unemployment, was the only indicator that could be linked to a high popular dissatisfaction with the governments, since it was between 36-37 per cent in 2003-2005 (The World Bank). Yet, this economic indicator has remained virtually the same throughout North Macedonia’s transition period after communism (35 per cent in 1995 to 36 per cent in 2003). Moreover, unemployment remained high during Gruevski’s terms of office until 2012 (31 per cent), and in 2013 it fell below 30 per cent for the first time in North Macedonia’s independence (*ibid.*). Then it continued to slowly decline, and it reached 23.7 per cent in 2016. While economic indicators do not point to strong evidence that can be linked to Gruevski’s ascent and subsequent autocratization, the declining unemployment rate could be potentially linked to Gruevski’s



popular support during his time in office. And yet, if this is the only economic indicator that should explain Gruevski's popularity and be a basis for a political-economic hypothesis of autocratization, it does not offer a strong enough explanatory power when combined with the other economic indicators. Hence, like in Hungary, the political-economic explanation for autocratization does not offer strong evidence for it being the primary variable.

Therefore, while there is insufficient evidence that autocratization is caused by economic factors, there is ample evidence that it is linked to primordializing nationalism. In Hungary, the critical juncture occurred in 2006, when the Socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány had delivered the notorious speech leaked to the public about lying to the Hungarians prior to the elections (The Guardian, 2006), the Hungarian political landscape changed profoundly with the rapid loss of support for liberal and left-wing politics and the gradual but steady strengthening of right-wing and far-right wing politics. This strengthening of far-right politics brought about the revival of Hungarian ethno-nationalism reminiscent of that before and during the Second World War, when the Hungarian political landscape was dominated by far-right pro-fascist parties. In the years prior to Fidesz's overwhelming parliamentary victory in 2010, extreme right-wing politics began dominating the public discourse, where campaigning against minorities, primarily the Roma population, as well as anti-Semitic sentiments, became normalized in the mainstream. These sentiments were coupled with the resurgence of nativist rhetoric grounded in historically revisionist ideas about pre-Trianon Hungary and the perceived injustices it had been suffering at the hands of the great European powers and its neighbors. Fidesz's victory in 2010, in 2014, in 2018, and in 2022, acquiring a two-thirds majority in parliament, brought an era of politics of extreme and exclusive ethno-nationalism and nativism. During this time, Fidesz's self-proclaimed Christian conservative politics moved further to the right, embracing populist and hardline ideologies and policies previously put forth by the far-right Jobbik party, as Fidesz has been competing to win over voters from the growing far-right Jobbik base.

The result of the years-long anti-Roma, and anti-Semitic rhetoric, further intensified with the European refugee crisis of 2015, solidified the primordialized form of nationalism seeking to establish and preserve an ethnically pure Hungary, with its Hungarian ethno-nation as its sovereign, rather than individual citizens of the country. The role of primordializing nationalism was not only to produce support for far-right, anti-immigrant and anti-minority sentiments, but to also delegitimize liberal values. It was also aimed at the opponents of such policies and rhetoric in the public discourse by stigmatizing dissent and labeling it as "treason." In Hungary's case, this campaign and even persecution of opponents was focused on the American billionaire of Hungarian descent, George Soros, who has been labeled as the enemy of the Hungarian people by associating all liberal values and "foreign meddling" to him personally and his foundations. The actions against opponents, seen as being supported by the Soros Foundation in Hungary, resulted in attempts to outlaw his foundation, and especially the esteemed Central European University in Budapest, founded by Soros. Ultimately, the primordialization of Hungarian nationalism produced popular support for the right and far right politics in the country of nearly 80 per cent by the end of 2017 (Byrne, 2017) and this support has continued to present.

Likewise, in North Macedonia primordializing nationalism began dominating the political discourse in relation to both internal and external perceived enemies. As in Hungary, ethno-nationalist and nativist public discourse centered on the notion of grave historical injustices inflicted on the nation in recent history and continuing to the present. The

injustices to the nation have been related to internal concessions to the large ethnic Albanian minority, through constitutional amendments in 2001 elevating the status of Albanians and their language in the country. These concessions were seen to be a result of foreign meddling, solidifying the perception that the Macedonians and their state were being under attack. This perception was continuously reinforced by external challenges to the Macedonian ethno-national identity. The Greek obstructions to Macedonia's name and identity ever since Macedonia's independence, and ultimately verified with its veto in 2008 against then Macedonia's integration in NATO and EU, brought to the forefront nativist discourses requiring the reaffirmation of the Macedonian nation. Although the primordializing narratives about modern Macedonians being the heirs of Alexander the Great have had their roots in nationalist ethno-romanticism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Macedonia as part of Yugoslavia and then as an independent state, but only as a marginal discourse, it was only with Gruevski's ascent to power that those narratives entered the mainstream and became a government policy.

More particularly, the 2001 inter-ethnic conflict between Macedonian security forces and Albanian militants, followed by the USA and EU brokered Ohrid Framework Agreement which elevated the status of Albanians, paved the way for the successful instrumentalization of primordializing Macedonian nationalism. The critical juncture leading to the comprehensive implementation of primordializing nationalist policies was the 2008 Greek veto against then Macedonia's western integration. In the following years, many primordialization measures were carried out, which according to the government were intended to strengthen the Macedonian national feeling. The measures included the sweeping renaming of public spaces, streets, buildings and erecting monuments to figures from Alexander the Great's Empire. Also, there was an ample use of ancient motifs in international tourism campaigns and peculiar events such as the reception of the royal family of the Hunza people from Pakistan (who are thought to have origins from Alexander the Great's army) by Prime Minister Gruevski and President Gjorge Ivanov, allotting them lands to construct a "royal palace." (MacDonald, 2008). From 2010, the government's massive new urbanization plan called "Skopje 2014", featured a gigantic statue of Alexander the Great at the main city square and massive makeover of the capital city in neoclassical and baroque styles. Gruevski's government had promoted a "New Macedonist" national narrative in an effort to reconstruct the existing Macedonian identity into an identity that would have deeper, ancient roots in history (Vangeli, 2009). Thus, this narrative that had been on the fringes before Gruevski's ascent to power, became a state-led ethno-national narrative during his reign.

Additionally, much like in Hungary, primordializing nationalism was not only used to strengthen nationalist sentiments in the population but was also directed against those who were perceived as enemies of the nation. Aside from the Albanian ethnic community's expanded rights which, according to this narrative, were seen as an inherent danger to the Macedonian nation, Macedonian opponents of primordializing policies were stigmatized as "traitors". The government-led public discourse accused American billionaire of Hungarian descent, George Soros, as being behind the "enemies of the nation," with his foundation "Open Society Institute," and his funding of non-governmental organizations promoting liberal values and human rights (Blazhevskva, 2017).

Thus, right-wing populism and the primordialization of nationalism in both Hungary and North Macedonia were enabled by critical junctures in these countries' political development, which occurred in 2006 and 2008 respectively. In the aftermath of those critical junctures, right-wing populist elites were able to reactivate, solidify and further incite ethno-nationalist and nativist feelings and attitudes in significant parts of the

population, and then to capitalize on them by winning overwhelming majorities in the respective national parliaments. Right-wing populism and the primordialization of nationalism had both similarities and differences in the two countries, due to structural and historical conditions. Right-wing political elites nonetheless employed these strategies as they engaged in nearly identical processes of autocratization through a construction of a single-pyramid system of power. Thus, the institutional change that facilitated state capture and autocratization in both countries was only carried out in the backdrop of primordialized nationalism. But primordialized nationalism was necessary for the authoritarian right-wing elites to embark on a deliberate and orchestrated enterprise. They had previously helped to resurrect and heighten ethno-nationalism and nativism, and then capitalized on it to win large majorities during the elections. Finally, these elites used the legitimacy provided by electoral victories to implement an agenda for subverting parliamentary democracy. They strengthened the informal institutions where political decisions could be made, while formal democratic parliamentary institutions served as proxies through which autocratic decision-making could be white-washed as “democratic.”

### **CONSOLIDATION OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN HUNGARY AND A NEW CRITICAL JUNCTURE IN NORTH MACEDONIA**

The comparison of autocratization in Hungary and North Macedonia from 2006-2008 until 2017 has revealed striking similarities. However, developments after the parliamentary elections in Hungary in April 2018 and the election of a new government in Macedonia in June 2017 signify divergent paths of both countries. Namely, the electoral results in Hungary reaffirmed Viktor Orbán as an absolute ruler in Hungary with his renewed two-third majority in parliament. In North Macedonia, on the other hand, VMRO-DPMNE and Gruevski lost power with the election of Social-Democratic opposition leader, Zoran Zaev, as Prime Minister of North Macedonia in June 2017. The election of Zaev as prime minister, however, came after a protracted crisis that began in 2015, nearly resulting in a civil conflict in April 2017 when VMRO-DPMNE supporters stormed the parliament in an attempt to stop the election of a new parliamentary speaker. The crisis began with Zaev’s release of a trove of wiretapped conversations carried out by the secret police for a period of at least eight years during Gruevski’s reign, revealing the depth and breadth of Gruevski’s authoritarian and criminal enterprise.

#### ***Orbán’s Continued Grip on Hungary and the Consolidation of Authoritarianism***

By the end of 2017, polls showed that Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party together with the far-right Jobbik held nearly 80 per cent of popular support, so his third electoral victory in April 2018 came as no surprise. Also, not surprisingly, his electoral campaign centered on primordializing nationalist narratives, which had proved successful in all of his previous electoral and other public campaigns. At his final rally in Székesfehérvár just a few days before the vote, Orbán vowed to protect Hungary from evil forces which meddled in Hungarian internal affairs and intended to harm Hungarian national interests: “The situation is that they want to take away our country,” Orbán exclaimed, alleging that the opposition was serving foreign powers and that there was “censorship” in place, referring to Facebook removing a campaign video from his Fidesz party (Bayer, 2018a). “Europe’s leaders together with a billionaire speculator don’t want to defend the borders, but want to bring in the migrants, that’s the truth,” he said, referring to his archenemy, liberal American billionaire of Hungarian descent, George Soros (ibid.). During the rally, he also referred to his past successes, declaring that he and his party had



won all the battles—referring to his efforts to do away with the International Monetary Fund, his efforts to tax banks and multinationals, to cut unemployment and to stop what he called the “first wave” of migration (*ibid.*). He even went as far as to talk about Hungary’s fight against the Ottoman Empire several centuries ago, exclaiming that such historic achievements must be preserved in order for Hungarians not to lose their place in the world (*ibid.*).

And indeed, after years of dominance, right-wing populism and primordialized nationalism, Orbán again won the elections with a landslide victory, winning 133 of 199 seats in the Hungarian parliament, acquiring a two-thirds supermajority on his own (Bayer, 2018b). He even improved his score in the popular vote, winning 49 per cent of the votes compared to 44 per cent in 2014 (*ibid.*). According to a statement by an anonymous Fidesz high-ranking politician, the anti-immigrant message was key to win the election: “It is simply the fear of migrants. Fidesz did a single-issue campaign and it was successful” (*ibid.*). The far-right Jobbik party, which since 2014 had become the second largest party in the Hungarian parliament, won 26 seats, also improving its score from the previous election by three seats (*ibid.*). The once ruling Socialist party came third with only 20 seats, in a coalition with a small liberal-leaning group (*ibid.*). All other parties won very few number of MPs. Soon after resuming power, Orbán’s government took steps to tighten the grip on civil society. According to government spokesman Zoltán Kovács, the government planned to close “loopholes” that allowed non-governmental organizations to meddle in politics (Bayer, 2018c). Ahead of the election the government had promised it would crack down on NGOs through its “Stop Soros” laws, named after the American billionaire George Soros. These laws would make it impossible for some civil society organizations to continue working in Hungary (*ibid.*). Orbán had also revealed that he would attempt control of the few remaining large media organizations in Hungary that had not been under his influence, such as the independent German-owned RTL television channel and the popular liberal online portal Index, which is owned by Orbán’s former best friend, now enemy Lajos Simicska (*ibid.*). In December 2017 in a television interview, he had stated that Hungarian media should be in national hands (*ibid.*). His party members have also declared that members of the judiciary would not be spared in Orbán’s third term, referring to current judges as “communists” (*ibid.*).

Just days after Orbán’s third victory, the European Parliament (EP) drafted a report calling on the EP to begin proceedings against Hungary for violating the Union’s core values (Bayer & De La Baume 2018). The Dutch Green MEP, Judith Sargentini, composed the text, raising concerns about the independence of the judiciary, corruption, freedom of expression, the rights of Roma and Jewish minorities and refugees, and other issues (*ibid.*). The proceedings could then trigger Article 7, which if enforced, could lead to Hungary losing its right to vote in the EU (*ibid.*). The Hungarian government responded by accusing the MEP of being part of Soros’ network and Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó called her investigation into the country “theater,” while a government spokesperson had referred to her report as the “Soros report” (*ibid.*). There had been criticisms and interventions from the European Union for Orbán’s anti-democratic governance; however, none of those criticisms or interventions in the preceding eight years had borne fruit. In fact, after every foreign criticism Orbán claimed to be a defender of the Hungarian nation and freedom in the face of foreign enemies, be it liberal values represented by American billionaire George Soros, or “Brussels’ meddling.”

Just a month after the victory Orbán reaffirmed his intentions to tighten the grip on the Hungarian civil society and the judiciary, as well as to continue “protecting Hungary” from internal and external enemies. In May 2018, a few days before assuming the

office as a Prime Minister, he stated in an interview that his task in the third term would be to “preserve Hungary’s security and Christian culture” (Wróbel, 2018). He also announced that one of the first laws that his government would pass would be a bill called “Stop Soros,” which would introduce a 25 per cent tax on foreign-funded NGOs that support migration, clearly targeting George Soros’ foundations (ibid.). And indeed, within days after this statement, the Soros Open Society Foundation in Hungary announced it would close its offices, after nearly 35 years of operations in the country. Patrick Gaspard, the president of Open Society Foundations, stated: “The government of Hungary has denigrated and misrepresented our work and repressed civil society for the sake of political gain, using tactics unprecedented in the history of the European Union... It has become impossible to protect the security of our operations and our staff in Hungary from arbitrary government interference” (Bayer, 2018d; Open Society Foundations, 2018). In another statement, the Open Society Foundation stated that the Hungarian government had spent over 100 million euros in public funds in the previous two years with an attempt to spread lies about the Foundation and its partners. According to the Foundation, Orbán’s hate campaign had included propaganda posters and billboards, invoking anti-Semitic imagery from the Second World War and a “national consultation” attacking George Soros, the founder and chair of the Open Society Foundations. Moreover, the Foundation claims that pro-government media had recently begun publishing false accusations about individual academics, civil society members, and the Foundations’ staff (ibid.).

Just days after Orbán’s third consecutive electoral victory in 2018, the European Parliament called for sanctions in response to Hungary’s violation of the Union’s core values. The process, however, could not proceed because Poland, which had been Hungary’s illiberal ally, announced that it would block any sanctions against Hungary (Reuters, 2018). Meanwhile, Hungary passed a new anti-LGBTQ+ law in June 2021 (Rankin, 2021), prompting the European Parliament to urge that the European Commission to bring legal action against it at the European Court of Justice (Rankin & Walker, 2021). The Hungarian government’s challenges to the EU continued into 2020, when the EU proposed a financial relief stimulus package to deal with the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. In November 2020, the EU decided to tie access to the long-term EU budget to mechanisms binding member-states to uphold the rule of law and democratic standards (Deutsche Welle, 2020). At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Fidesz-dominated Hungarian parliament voted to give Orbán extensive powers to rule by decree, without a term-limit (Thorpe, 2020). According to critics, such a decision would strengthen his authoritarian rule with consequences for human rights and freedom of speech. Although the rule by decree was formally abolished on 16 June 2020, NGOs critical of Orbán’s government jointly argued that this abolition was only an “optical illusion” and that the government still retained much more power than before the crisis (BBC, 2020). The inability of the EU to effect democratic change in Hungary is evident in the European Parliament’s statement of January 2020, acknowledging that the situation in that country had in fact worsened since article 7 was triggered, and calling on the Commission (to little avail) “[t]o use all tools at its disposal to prevent a serious breach of common values” (European Parliament, 2020).

This does not mean that all of Hungarian society has been supportive of autocratization, but that enough of the citizenry is supportive, is evident by Orbán’s reelection in early April 2022, when his Fidesz party won a majority of 53 per cent of the vote, against the opposition United for Hungary total of 35 per cent (Economist, 2022). Orbán’s continued attacks on institutions that support liberal-democratic values – such as civil society institutions and the opposition media – have provoked massive peaceful demonstrations

by his opponents and have also received international attention over the years. The government has responded by trying to control not only the institutions directly relevant for political power, but also educational and cultural institutions, such as theaters and museums. Orban announced his intention to focus on these domains after winning his third (post-2010) term in 2018, when he stated, “we must embed the political system in a cultural era” (Karasz, 2019). The fact that the opposition has been able to win the local elections in the capital, a first serious defeat of Orban’s Fidesz after nearly a decade of authoritarian rule both nationally and locally, shows that there is significant civic resilience to authoritarianism in Hungary. However, at the national level Orban’s rule has been so deeply institutionally entrenched through the series of autocratizing mechanisms, that any pro-democratic opposition faces obstacles that appear insurmountable.

Evidently, the authoritarian consolidation of power in Hungary after Orbán’s last two convincing electoral victories has been solidified. With the legislative changes he had carried out in his previous terms, as well as with the institutional and extra-institutional grip on society, it appears unlikely that autocratization in Hungary could be reversed. Moreover, Orban’s primordialized nationalist narratives have taken even more severe forms, as he stated during his annual address at Tusványos Summer University in Romania that “We [Hungarians] are not a mixed race... and we do not want to become a mixed race,” criticizing the immigration policies of Western European countries and Brussels (Euronews, 2022). Although a more drastic action on the part of the European Union, such as taking away Hungary’s vote within the bloc, might reverse some of Orbán’s hardline policies, it seems unlikely that his single-pyramid structure of power could be shaken, much less dismantled, in the foreseeable future, if the same structural conditions remain in place. What this means for the European Union itself and its democratic standards is a question that has yet to be analyzed and answered.

### ***A New Critical Juncture in North Macedonia and the demise of Gruevski’s government***

The situation in North Macedonia began changing in February 2015, when the then Social-Democratic opposition leader revealed that Gruevski’s government had been wiretapping more than 20,000 telephone numbers in the country for at least eight years (Marusic, 2015). He revealed that his party had been given recorded materials that contained hundreds of thousands of conversations, including conversations of himself and many other party members, journalists, businesspersons, and ordinary citizens. Importantly, the materials included a trove of conversations by government officials, including Gruevski himself, his first cousin Sasho Mijalkov (the chief of secret police), government ministers and VMRO-DPMNE party members. Zaev revealed that the wiretapping had been carried out by the Agency for Security and Counterintelligence (popularly dubbed the secret police) that had been run by Sasho Mijalkov since 2006. Interestingly, among the 20,000 wiretapped numbers only Gruevski’s and Mijalkov’s numbers were not listed, but their voices are heard in conversations when talking to ministers or party members whose numbers had been entered into the wiretapping system. Gruevski immediately denied the allegations saying that the wiretapping had been a conspiracy by a foreign intelligence service as an attempt to topple his government, accusing Zaev of high treason and swiftly imprisoning members of the counterintelligence agency that he suspected had given the materials to Zaev. Zaev began holding press conferences on a weekly basis that lasted until May 2015. At each press conference Zaev aired wiretapped materials, popularly dubbed “the bombs,” which revealed systematic abuse by senior officials in Gruevski’s government, possibly even including conspiracy to cover up a mur-

der. The sensational revelations provoked sustained protests and rising tension, setting North Macedonia up for a serious destabilization (Joseph and Vangelov, 2017).

The crisis began sharply deteriorating in May 2015 when Macedonian security forces attacked a suburb in the city of Kumanovo, where allegedly Albanian extremists from neighboring Kosovo had been hiding and preparing an invasion of Macedonia. In the weekend-long action, the Macedonian security forces lost eight members and dozens were wounded. In an attempt to prevent another serious security crisis which could easily spiral into an inter-ethnic conflict, the EU and the United States stepped in and required the four parliamentary parties to begin negotiations for the resolution of the crisis. The negotiations resulted in the Przino Agreement I and II, signed in June and July 2015 between Gruevski and the opposition, which created the Special Prosecutor's Office. According to the Agreement, Gruevski was forced to resign in January 2016 in anticipation of new elections three months later. Given his government's complete control of the judiciary at the time, Gruevski originally calculated, mistakenly, that he would easily influence the special prosecutor as well and that no court in Macedonia would accept evidence from illegal wiretaps. Failure to abide by the terms of the agreement, particularly regarding the conditions for free and fair elections, delayed the elections until December 2016. The elections in December 2016 were thus held under strong international monitoring and under rules requiring the formation of a caretaker government three months prior to the elections, so as Gruevski and his party would not be able to fully control the media and the security apparatus which had been important to him and his party in manipulating previous elections. This time Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE Party, although winning the elections by a very narrow margin, fell short of securing a majority in Parliament: the party won 51 seats versus 49 for Zaev's Social Democratic opposition in the 120-seat assembly. Gruevski also failed to form a coalition government, as Albanian parties rejected his reported demand to end the special prosecution (*ibid.*). With the support of ethnic Albanian parties, the Social-Democrats secured a slim majority of 63 MPs in the 120-seat parliament.

Gruevski then attempted to force new elections under the pretext that the political crisis had come to a dead-end after months of VMRO-DPMNE filibustering and not allowing the new majority to elect a speaker of Parliament. Since March 2017, Gruevski's ally, President Gjorge Ivanov, had denied Zaev the opportunity to form a government, escalating the crisis. The deadlock led to a violent confrontation on April 27, 2017. Zaev had succeeded in securing a vote for a new parliamentary speaker, an ethnic Albanian. Outraged that the new majority elected an Albanian speaker, VMRO-DPMNE supporters stormed the Parliament, beating opposition members (*ibid.*). It appeared that Gruevski's plan was to use President Gjorge Ivanov to declare a state of emergency, under which martial law would be imposed and new elections could be called, which Gruevski's party would control and win. This scenario prompted the US special envoy, Hoyt Yee, to fly into Macedonia and meet President Gjorge Ivanov on April 30 2017, pressing for the end to the constitutional crisis, by asking Ivanov to obey his constitutional obligations and grant the mandate to Zaev with the parliamentary majority to form a government (Marusic, 2017). The election of the parliament speaker, although unrecognized by VMRO-DPMNE, was verified and two weeks later Ivanov finally gave the mandate to Zaev to form a government. The government was elected in Parliament on June 1, 2017, with Zaev becoming Prime Minister, which ended the year-long crisis that nearly resulted in a civil conflict.

Zaev's government then immediately embarked on institutional reforms; however, since some of the crucial institutional reforms required a two-third majority in Parliament



or other parliamentary cooperation with the opposition, still controlled by Gruevski, the pace of reforms was slow and even blocked through VMRO-DPMNE's constant filibustering in Parliament. Zaev then focused his efforts on resolving long-standing disputes with the country's neighbors, primarily Greece and Bulgaria, in order to unblock Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration and secure Macedonia's stability. The conflict with Bulgaria over the questions of identity seemed to have been overcome by an Agreement on Good Neighborly Relations with Bulgaria which was signed by Prime Minister Zaev and Bulgaria's Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov in August 2017, allegedly securing Bulgaria's support for Macedonia's NATO and EU accession. The long-standing dispute over the Macedonian name and identity with Greece, which was the main reason for Macedonia's completely stalled NATO and EU accession, proved much more difficult to crack as the conflict had been going on for the previous 26 years. Nonetheless, in a year-long negotiation process Prime Minister Zaev and Greek Prime Minister Tsipras finally reached an agreement on June 17 2018, according to which Macedonia's new name would be North Macedonia, but the name of the language and people would remain Macedonian, meaning that the name change of the state would not impact the identity markers of its people and language (META, 2018). The rather complex agreement went through several phases of approval in both Macedonia and Greece. Macedonia organized a referendum in September the same year, falling short of securing a minimum turnout threshold of 50 per cent + 1 vote of the total number of voters—the Agreement was supported by 98 per cent of those who voted, but the turnout was only 37 per cent of the total number of voters, thus rendering the vote unsuccessful (Radio Free Europe, 2018). Nonetheless, Zaev's government, managed to assemble a two thirds majority in Parliament for the constitutional amendments on the name change, by winning over 8 opposition MPs in a process marred in controversy (Cvetanoski, 2019). After the narrow ratification in the Greek Parliament the Prespa Agreement entered into force, thus changing Macedonia's name to North Macedonia. Greece thus removed its veto on NATO and the EU, after which Macedonia received an invitation by the EU to start accession negotiations in June 2019, while in July 2018 NATO announced it would extend its invitation for Macedonia to become a full member, a process which was finalized in March 2020, when North Macedonia became NATO's thirtieth member. Western governments have praised Zaev's achievements within just a year of taking office, recognizing his democratic efforts and the democratic processes in Macedonia in general. The democratic credentials of the country began improving after the first year of the SDSM in power, seen in the reports by Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit and other indexes for assessing democratic standards. Moreover, North Macedonia has been one of the few countries in Europe in the said period whose democracy score has been improving.

Therefore, since the break with Gruevski's regime in 2017, North Macedonia embarked on a re-democratization path by pursuing judicial reforms, prosecuting the crimes of Gruevski's government and a resolute orientation to speed-up North Macedonia's accession to both NATO and the European Union. Many indictments were opened for high profile officials of the previous government by the Special Prosecution Office, including for Nikola Gruevski himself. Although the Special Prosecution Office was shut down in 2020 due to an extortion scandal involving its chief prosecutor, Katica, Janeva (Marusic, 2019), several high-ranking officials from Gruevski's government were convicted of crimes, including Gruevski himself. After his conviction was sustained by the Supreme Court, Gruevski fled the country and received asylum in Viktor Orban's Hungary (Ver-seck, 2018).

After the SDSM incurred serious losses during the local elections in October, 2021 Prime Minister Zoran Zaev resigned from his position as a prime minister and party leader.

Dimitar Kovacevski succeeded Zaev as both the party leader and Prime Minister, maintaining a slim parliamentary majority.

While accession to NATO after the Prespa Agreement with Greece ran smoothly, the second main pillar of Zaev's government agenda, accession to the EU, proved to be a much more difficult process that could potentially revert the successes achieved by his government in the years following the dismantling of Gruevski's regime. Despite the fact that the Friendship Treaty signed with Bulgaria in 2017, had appeared to have resolved the outstanding issues related to identity between the two countries, Bulgaria in 2019 began expressing dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Treaty by claiming that North Macedonia refused to accept Bulgaria's reading of the "common history" of the two nations. Then, in October 2019, a few months before the anticipated EU decision to open accession talks with North Macedonia, the Bulgarian government and Parliament issued documents (a governmental "Framework Position" and a parliamentary declaration) according to which Bulgaria would not support North Macedonia's EU membership unless North Macedonia accepted a list of demands, essentially admitting that its Macedonian people and language had been a communist invention and had been Bulgarian prior to 1944 (when the Macedonian republic was established as one of the six constituent republics of Yugoslavia).

Following these stated positions, Bulgaria lodged a veto in June 2020 for the opening of accession talks between the EU and North Macedonia, which was removed in July 2022 under the auspices of the French EU presidency. During the two years of the Bulgarian veto, the European Commission and individual EU member states opposed Bulgaria's attempts to include purely bilateral issues into the accession negotiation process for North Macedonia and the EU, since this would constitute a dangerous precedent. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, dramatically changed the geostrategic circumstances on the European continent, thus prompting the EU to offer the status of an EU candidate country to both Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, during the French EU presidency. This however, also required the EU's urgent attention in the Western Balkans, whose accession to the EU has been stalled for a prolonged period. Aside from Serbia and Montenegro which have been negotiating for membership for almost a decade, North Macedonia's and Albania's accession talks had been stalled due to the Bulgarian veto on North Macedonia. The EU sought to urgently show success in the Western Balkans after granting candidacy to Ukraine and Moldova, and thus the French presidency hastily proposed a "compromise" between Bulgaria and North Macedonia so that Bulgaria would remove its veto. The removal of the veto was conditioned on North Macedonia accepting an EU negotiation framework in which the Bulgarian demands would be part of Macedonia's negotiation process with the EU. According to experts, this precedent means that North Macedonia, unlike previous EU candidates, would focus much of its attention during the negotiation process on its bilateral issues with Bulgaria and its demands regarding the rewriting of the Macedonian history and satisfying Bulgaria's identity claims on the Macedonian people and language (Fouéré, 2022). Prime Minister Kovacevski and his government initially refused this French proposal for the negotiation framework (which was meanwhile accepted by the Bulgarian parliament), but within a few days the French presidency allegedly offered a modified proposal for the negotiation framework which purportedly addressed the Macedonian concerns. Although the initial French proposal was not officially released to the public, the modified proposal which was subsequently accepted by North Macedonia's government, differed very little from the original proposal, still containing the Bulgarian demands, particularly concerning a bilateral protocol where the Bulgarian demands have been listed and which would be part of the EU accession process (Taylor & Nikolov, 2022). Both the ne-

gotiation framework and the bilateral protocol condition North Macedonia's opening of accession talks with a change of North Macedonia's constitution to include the Bulgarian people in the constitution's preamble. This development spurred mass anti-government protests in July 2022, with the opposition parties, VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, vowing never to allow such constitutional changes. Also, VMRO-DPMNE vowed to organize a referendum on the EU negotiation framework and to demand changes to this framework, should it return to power in the next elections (early or regular) (Marusic, 2022).

According to a poll, as many as 73 per cent of ethnic Macedonians reject this EU negotiation framework, and only 15 per cent support it (Ivanovikj, 2022). If this percentage remains stable and if the anticipated referendum yields strong opposition to the current government course, it could signify the beginning of a protracted internal friction over North Macedonia's prospects to become an EU member, and more importantly, friction over the fulfillment of Bulgaria's demands related to questions over the origin of the Macedonian language and people. Such a protracted friction would likely lead to new inter-ethnic rifts, as the new indefinite stalling of North Macedonia's accession to the EU may antagonize the ethnic-Albanian minority. Questions of Macedonian identity and language are of little concern to ethnic Albanians in the country, thus while Albania will continue its path toward the EU, North Macedonia may lag behind burdened by Bulgarian demands in the process. Prior to the opening of accession talks for Albania in July 2022, both countries were considered by the EU as a group of acceding candidate countries whose path to full EU membership should be tied. After the removal of the Bulgarian veto, but with many conditions in place before the actual accession talks for North Macedonia could begin, Albania's EU negotiation framework opened the path for Albania's individual progress toward the EU. This essential separation of the two countries in their path to EU membership could motivate ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia to seek closer ties with Albania if the latter's progress toward EU membership becomes more palpable. In turn, this could dangerously exacerbate inter-ethnic friction, increase frustrations and nationalism among ethnic-Macedonians, and a return of VMRO-DPMNE as the leading party in the country. This development is eerily reminiscent of the 2008 Greek veto for Macedonia's NATO membership, after which Gruevski's government embarked on strengthening Macedonian nationalism through policies of "antiquization", in other words, primordializing nationalism measures as explained above.

Thus, years of progress and re-democratization can be in jeopardy due to exogenous shocks in Macedonian politics, namely, its potential long-term stalling of EU accession resulting from Bulgaria's identity demands. Much like the 2008 Greek veto signified a critical juncture and a turn in Macedonian politics toward autocratization, the new EU accession longer term delay can also lead to a similar process of heightened nationalism, inter-ethnic frictions and institutional autocratization. The series of endogenous and exogenous events that occurred after February 2015, when Zaev announced the "bombs," can be considered a new critical juncture which changed North Macedonia's trajectory toward re-democratization, as opposed to the stability of authoritarianism in Hungary, where endogenous and exogenous events seem to have helped Orbán consolidate his authoritarian grip on society. Likewise, the most recent exogenous shocks on North Macedonia and its political processes, could reverse the progress made in the five years following the collapse of Gruevski's regime and place North Macedonia on an autocratizing path seen during the reign of Nikola Gruevski's government.

## WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT THE CHALLENGES TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY ELSEWHERE

This analysis has compared the democratic collapse in two countries of Central and Eastern Europe and has outlined the underlying conditions that set the stage for such democratic collapse. It has argued that the commonly investigated economic factors are not the primary enabling or disabling factors in the democratic reversals in these countries. It has also explained how the specific underlying conditions and the role of agency shape the trajectory toward democratic collapse. It has argued that autocratization is an incumbent-driven process, but the role of exogenous intervening factors is also quite salient. Yet, this analysis does not offer a deterministic argument since contingency can change a particular trajectory, as seen in the developments in North Macedonia after the second critical juncture. However, identifying the type of underlying factors as well as the type of endogenous and exogenous shocks that shape the trajectory toward autocratization, can help us recognize the patterns in other parts of the world where such processes may be taking place. The concept of primordialized nationalism is not an isolated phenomenon that has transpired only Hungary and North Macedonia during the reign of Nikola Gruevski—it is rather a much more widespread phenomenon that is occurring in many different areas of the world, in various, locally contextualized forms. This type of nationalism, as detailed in this analysis, is not an entirely new phenomenon and has been occurring in previous historical contexts. What is new about this phenomenon is that it is now regaining salience in liberal democracies, including in long standing western liberal democracies, where liberal values, individual rights, the division of power and recognition of diversity have been at the core of democratic governance for most of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Primordialized nationalism runs contrary to such values; in fact, its collectivist and anti-individualist values, which place the primordialized view of the nation as the core value that needs to be defended and that should shape the political agenda, is the direct antipode of liberalism and its existence. Its domination in mainstream politics is thus incompatible with liberal democracy, if compatible with democracy at all.

These values are now challenged in highly democratically consolidated Western European countries, such as France, where the far-right movement, the National Rally of Marine le Pen, garnered 42 percent of the national vote during the presidential election in 2022. The patterns of anti-immigrant and primordialized nationalist narratives, that had been present in the French politics in the last several decades, began dominating the French mainstream discourse, garnering massive support, albeit not yet winning support. For the first time after the Second World War, a far-right movement, with quite similar anti-immigrant, nativist and primordialized nationalist agendas, has entered the German Bundestag. The party called Alternative for Germany, founded in 2013, garnered 13 percent of the votes at the June 2017 elections, and repeated that result in the 2021 federal elections. Since its creation, the party has promoted a primordialized nationalist discourse, focusing on anti-immigration and anti-Muslim agendas. The party's manifesto has declared that Islam does not belong in Germany and that Germany's Muslims are a big danger to "our state, our society and our system of values" (Vonberg and Schmidt, 2017). The same patterns seem quite palpable in many other European countries. In fact, support for far-right parties with primordialized nationalist agendas is higher than it has been at any time over the past 30 years (Tartar, 2017).

These parties have won 16 percent of the overall vote on average in the most recent parliamentary election in each country, up from 11 per cent a decade earlier and 5 per cent



in 1997 (*ibid.*). In the mainstream, aside from Hungary's Fidesz, Poland's Justice and Law Party that has been in power since 2015, has been implementing anti-democratic policies, primarily attacking the judiciary and other checks on executive power and it is a case showing the clearest signs of autocratization, as explained in this study. Similar parties have also had a remarkable success in Scandinavian countries where they have garnered over 20 percent of the vote and have entered the governments in some of these countries (*ibid.*). These parties are growing fastest in some of the Europe's most populous regions, such as already mentioned Germany, Poland and France, but also in the Netherlands (*ibid.*). Perhaps a sign of consolation is the sudden drop of support for the far-right UK Independent Party, which lost support following the Brexit vote in 2016. At the time it stood at around 13 per cent of popular support to plummet to less than two percent in the June 2017 snap election (*ibid.*), and to virtually disappear from the political scene in the 2019 election (BBC, 2019).

Finally, the electoral victory of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016, with his subsequent actions and policies, has raised questions about the irreversibility of American democracy. It has long been argued that, if anywhere, democracy should be safest in the world's greatest democracy that has invested much of its credibility and reputation in promoting democracy around the world. Problems with American democracy have been noted in prior accounts and studies, identifying oscillations in the quality of democratic governance in the United States. None of the accounts, however, have questioned the viability of American democracy or have even entertained a possibility of an American democratic collapse. During Donald Trump's term, however, serious commentators and political scientists have raised such questions. For instance, the reputable University of Berkley professor, Robert Reich, has claimed that Donald Trump was indeed an authoritarian president. His assertion is based on the definition of authoritarianism as a way of governing that values order and control over personal freedom and seeks to concentrate power in the hands of a single "strongman" (Reich, 2017). He offers several examples of why he believes Donald Trump to have been an authoritarian president. For instance, he claims that Trump had not followed the normal process in a constitutional democracy for disputing a judicial decision he dislikes – which is to appeal it to a higher court. He had also repeatedly assailed judges who rule against him and had "threatened to hobble the offending courts urging that the 9th Circuit (where many of these decisions have originated) be broken up" (*ibid.*). Reich also claimed that Trump had repeatedly disregarded legislative rules, such as, for instance, telling Mitch McConnell to use the "nuclear option" against the Senate filibuster so as to confirm Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court (*ibid.*). Trump had sought to intimidate the press, Reich believes, in order to eliminate criticism and consolidate power. He had been repeatedly assailing the media for publishing "fake news," and had been threatening with widening libel laws so that he could sue the press for stories he did not like. Furthermore, Trump had shown animosity for other branches of government with their own powers and responsibilities, by trying to force states and cities to report on illegal immigrants, even though that would violate the principle of federalism (*ibid.*). And finally, Trump's continuous anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric, before being elected as President and during his presidency, testified to a primordialized nationalist agenda, reminiscent of the agendas of far-right parties in European countries, and certainly reminiscent of Orbán's rhetoric and narratives. It is, thus, no coincidence that one of Trump's closest collaborators, his former campaign chief and White House adviser, Steve Bannon, called the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, a "hero" and "the most significant guy on the scene right now" (Horowitz 2018). And lastly, the culmination of Trump's authoritarian grip on power occurred after his electoral loss in the 2020 election, by claiming that the election results

had been doctored. He called on individual states to reject the electoral results, and when this was unsuccessful he then urged Vice President Mike Pence to reject the electoral votes in Congress (Schmidt, 2021). When this was also unsuccessful, he then urged his followers who had gathered in Washington DC to protest the election results to stop the verification of results in Congress by storming the Capitol (Cabral, 2022). According to many observers, this behavior has been reminiscent of authoritarian leaders' actions to organize coups when they did not like election results.

Last but not least, it is no secret that just like democracies cooperate, authoritarian regimes establish close relations as well. The support, meddling and influence of Vladimir Putin's Russia in other authoritarian regimes has been copiously attested, however autocratization is primarily driven by domestic conditions and actors. Once the conditions for autocratization prevail, they open up space for influence by other authoritarian regimes, with the strengthening of political and economic linkages. It is, thus, of utmost significance to focus the attention on domestic processes that drive primordialized forms of nationalism, what the main sources of such nationalism are and how to build capacities and mechanisms of societal resilience to these forms of nationalism.

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