

## **Online Appendix**

### **Democracy in Trouble: Democratic Resilience and Breakdown from 1900 to 2022**

#### **Elements in Political Economy**

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## 1 Additional Comments on Case Selection

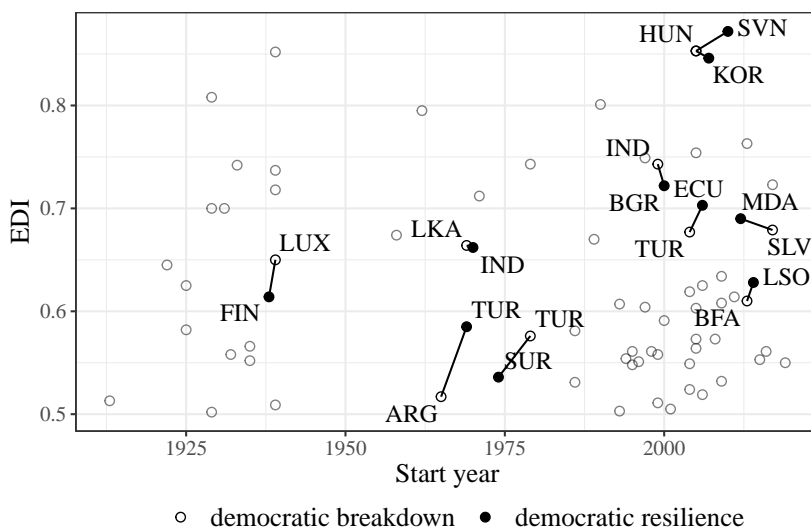
We use the Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset to identify periods when democracies experienced executive aggrandizement that contributed to substantial and sustained declines in the quality of democratic institutions and practices (Edgell et al., 2023; Maerz, Edgell, Wilson, Hellmeier, & Lindberg, 2023). The ERT data cover 1900 to 2022 (version 13) and delineate autocratization episodes in democracies (aka “democratic backsliding”). The ERT refers to these as “democratic regression”, but we use “democratic backsliding” here since it has become vernacular for both academics and policy-practitioners. We recognize that this choice may be controversial, especially among authors of the ERT (for example, see Wilson, Edgell, Sato, Boese-Schlosser, & Lindberg, 2024).

**Table 1** Summary of matches using all episodes

Democratic resilience			Democratic breakdown			Distance
Country	Years	EDI	Country	Years	EDI	
Finland (FIN)	1939-1940	0.61	Luxembourg (LUX)	1940-1940	0.65	0.04
Turkey (TUR)	1970-1971	0.58	Argentina (ARG)	1966-1966	0.52	0.08
India (IND)	1971-1975	0.66	Sri Lanka (LKA)	1970-1983	0.66	0.01
Suriname (SUR)	1975-1975	0.54	Turkey (TUR)	1980-1980	0.58	0.06
Bulgaria (BGR)	2001-2018	0.72	India (IND)	2000-2017	0.74	0.02
Ecuador (ECU)	2007-2013	0.70	Turkey (TUR)	2005-2013	0.68	0.03
South Korea (KOR)	2008-2014	0.85	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	0.02
Slovenia (SVN)	2011-2021	0.87	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	0.05
Moldova (MDA)	2013-2017	0.69	El Salvador (SLV)	2018-2021	0.68	0.04
Lesotho (LSO)	2015-2017	0.63	Burkina Faso (BFA)	2014-2015	0.61	0.02

Using the outcomes of these episodes and additional criteria for case selection, we match episodes where democracies survived executive aggrandizement with a most-similar case where democracy broke down. Our matching is based on the year the episode began and the initial EDI levels, as detailed in the main text. For transparency, here we report the full set of cases without our scope conditions for executive aggrandizement and also report results for alternative matching that accounts for GDP per capita and democratic experience.

The current version of the ERT contains ten episodes of democratic backsliding where democracies survived and 65 episodes where democracies broke down. For seventeen other episodes the outcome is as of yet unknown because the regime was still considered democratic but was also still experiencing autocratization in December 2022 or before a gap in the V-Dem coding. Table 1



**Figure 1** Autocratization episodes where democracy survived and their closest match where democracy broke down, 1900–2022. Matches based on start year and initial level on the EDI

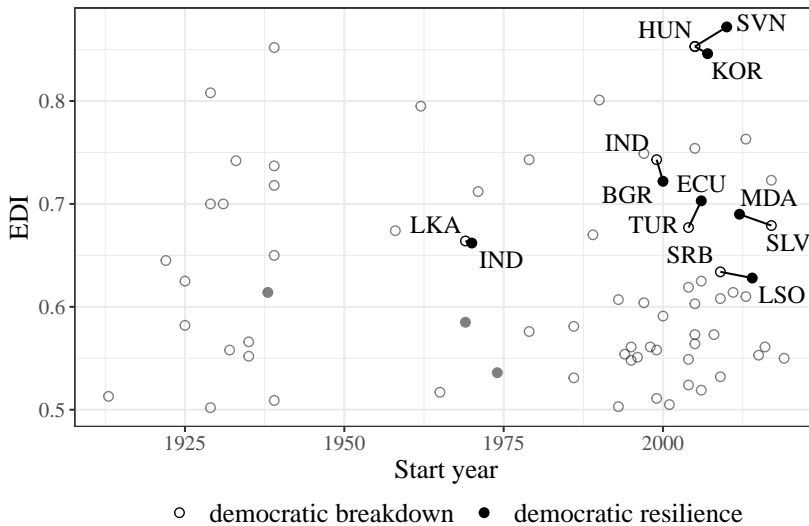
and Figure 1 below show the results when including all democratic backsliding episodes in the ERT.

Because we are interested in executive aggrandizement, we limited the sample to autocratization episodes in democracies lasting three or more years and where there was evidence of incumbent-driven backsliding. We excluded episodes of two years or less and those where there was evidence of an overt power grab at the start of the episode, such as through a military coup, breakdown in the legislature, or where elections were aborted at the national level. This resulted in the exclusion of forty episodes.

As shown in Table 2 and Figure 2, this results in the exclusion of three early autocratization episodes where democracy survived: Finland (1939–1940), Turkey (1970–1971), and Suriname (1975). None of these were associated with overt domestic power grabs, but all of them were shorter than three years. We discuss the historical details of these cases briefly alongside their closest matches based solely on the episode starting year and initial EDI values listed in Table 1. Finland and its closest match Luxembourg both occurred during WWII. Finland’s episode is associated with deteriorating conditions during the Winter

**Table 2** Summary of matches longer than two years, excluding power grabs

Democratic resilience			Democratic breakdown			Distance
Country	Years	EDI	Country	Years	EDI	
India (IND)	1971-1975	0.66	Sri Lanka (LKA)	1970-1983	0.66	0.01
Bulgaria (BGR)	2001-2018	0.72	India (IND)	2000-2017	0.74	0.02
Ecuador (ECU)	2007-2013	0.70	Turkey (TUR)	2005-2013	0.68	0.03
South Korea (KOR)	2008-2014	0.85	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	0.02
Slovenia (SVN)	2011-2021	0.87	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	0.05
Moldova (MDA)	2013-2017	0.69	El Salvador (SLV)	2018-2021	0.68	0.04
Lesotho (LSO)	2015-2017	0.63	Serbia (SRB)	2010-2014	0.63	0.04



**Figure 2** Matched cases of executive aggrandizement with power grabs and episodes shorter than three years excluded. Matches based on start year and initial level on the EDI

War with the Soviet Union, while Luxembourg’s brief episode is solely driven by annexation by Nazi Germany. Turkey’s episode in 1970-1971 was largely driven by domestic unrest and a military coup by memorandum, while Argentina’s 1966 episode is also attributable to a military coup. Suriname’s episode in 1975 coincided with its independence from the Netherlands and Turkey’s 1980 episode was a coup. While beyond the scope of this study, future research might

investigate why some democracies appear resilient despite experiencing foreign invasions and military coups, such as by looking into cases like Finland versus Luxembourg and Turkey versus Argentina.

We also excluded 37 potential matches where democracy broke down – all of which, again, lasted less than three years. Nine of these experienced a coup at the beginning of the episode and another eleven experienced a breakdown in the legislature or executive elections calendar, which we use as a signal of autogolpe or other overt power grabs. For reference, the excluded potential matches are listed in Table 3.

In addition, after investigating the cases of Moldova and Lesotho – we decided to exclude these cases. As summarized in the next section, Moldova’s experience is best characterized as state capture by oligarchic forces between 2013 and 2017 (also see Laebens & Lührmann, 2021). Meanwhile, Lesotho’s episode corresponds with an attempted autogolpe followed by an attempted military coup, making it a poor fit for our definition of executive aggrandizement. The crisis was averted only after foreign intervention from regional partners.

**Table 3** Excluded potential matches

country	years	country	years
Belgium (BEL)	1914-1914	Armenia (ARM)	1994-1995
Poland (POL)	1926-1926	Belarus (BLR)	1995-1996
Lithuania (LTU)	1926-1927	Niger (NER)	1996-1996
Argentina (ARG)	1930-1930	Malawi (MWI)	1999-2000
Uruguay (URY)	1933-1933	Fiji (FJI)	2000-2000
Latvia (LVA)	1934-1934	Solomon Isles (SLB)	2000-2000
Spain (ESP)	1936-1937	Bangladesh (BGD)	2002-2002
Netherlands (NLD)	1940-1940	Sri Lanka (LKA)	2005-2005
Belgium (BEL)	1940-1940	Thailand (THA)	2005-2006
Luxembourg (LUX)	1940-1940	Nicaragua (NIC)	2006-2007
Norway (NOR)	1940-1940	Palestine (PSE)	2006-2007
Malta (MLT)	1959-1959	P.N. Guinea (PNG)	2007-2007
Argentina (ARG)	1966-1966	Niger (NER)	2009-2009
Chile (CHL)	1972-1973	Ukraine (UKR)	2010-2010
Suriname (SUR)	1980-1980	Maldives (MDV)	2012-2013
Turkey (TUR)	1980-1980	Burkina Faso (BFA)	2014-2015
Fiji (FJI)	1987-1987	Benin (BEN)	2018-2019
Estonia (EST)	1991-1992	Ivory Coast (CIV)	2020-2020
Lesotho (LSO)	1994-1994		

For parsimony, we use the EDI at the beginning of the episode as an overall

measure of democracy; however, countries with similar aggregate democracy scores may exhibit differences in their democratic institutions and practices. The EDI is comprised of four mid-level indices calculated from 44 indicators, reflecting a multifaceted definition of democracy based on Dahl (1971). This allows us to assess the similarities in our cases across lower-level indicators.<sup>1</sup>

Here we focus on twenty-three indicators that make up indices for clean elections, freedom of association, freedom of expression, and access to alternative sources of information. These indicators come from the annual V-Dem expert survey. We use the measurement model versions and their uncertainty boundaries, which take an approximate z-score distribution (roughly from -4 to 4).

We exclude suffrage because all of our cases had full suffrage at the start of the episode. We also exclude the elected officials index, which includes twenty fact-based variables coded by researchers at the V-Dem Institute. Many of these indicators capture various aspects of elected officials that are not directly related to democracy. According to the V-Dem Codebook, the elected officials index is primarily for aggregation and “should not necessarily be interpreted as an important element of democracy in its own right” (Coppedge et al., 2023a, 49).

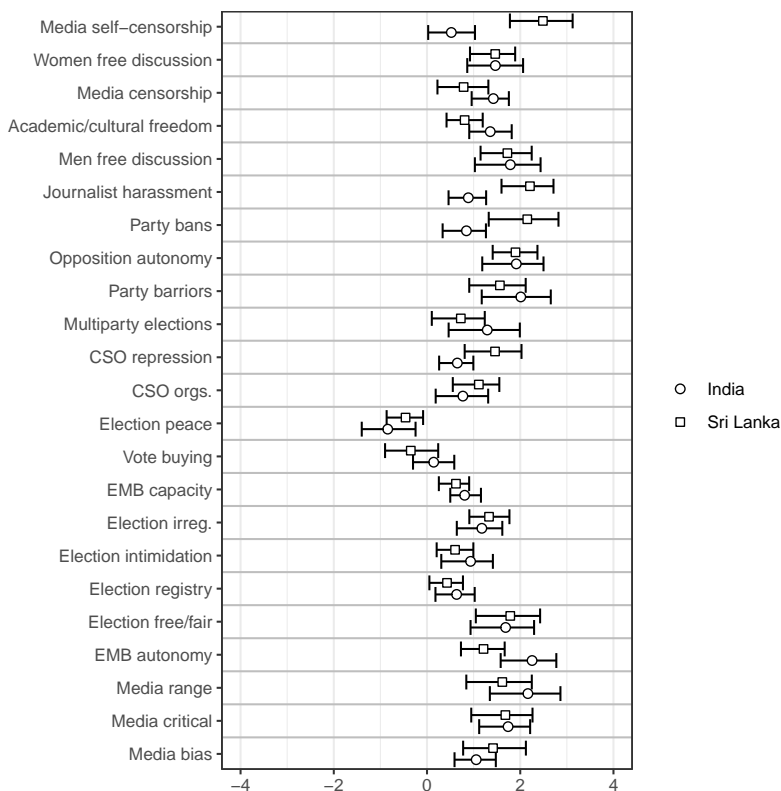
Figures 3 to 7 show the values for each of the twenty-three indicators and their uncertainty boundaries for the year prior to the episode for each of our pairs of cases. In each graph, the democracy that survived is represented by a circle, and the democracy that broke down is represented by a square. Across most of the indicators for most of the cases, the starting values are fairly similar and the uncertainty boundaries overlap - suggesting there is no significant difference.

For indicators where differences are observed, no clearly discernable pattern emerges that would lead us to question our case selection. Ecuador (2006) and Turkey (2004) appear to be the most different among our matches - with eight indicators showing no overlap in the uncertainty boundaries and seven of these being higher for Ecuador, the case that survived. Still, these two cases shared similar values on over 65% of the indicators. South Korea and Slovenia overlap with Hungary on all but two indicators each, followed by India and Sri Lanka, which overlap with all but three indicators. The most common indicator where the cases disagreed is CSO repression – with two democracies that survived starting with higher values (Bulgaria and Ecuador) and one starting with lower values (South Korea) than their matches. Discussion for women, academic and cultural freedom, and CSO organizations saw higher values for two democracies that survived when compared to their matches. Media censorship, opposition autonomy, multiparty elections, EMB capacity, election intimidation, election

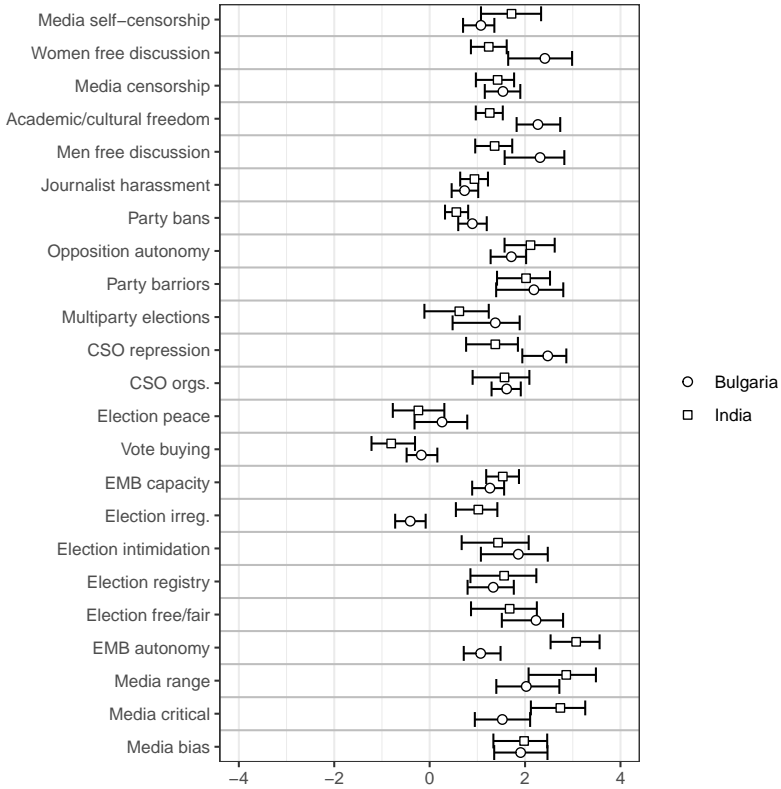
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<sup>1</sup>We thank the anonymous reviewer for suggesting that we include this analysis.

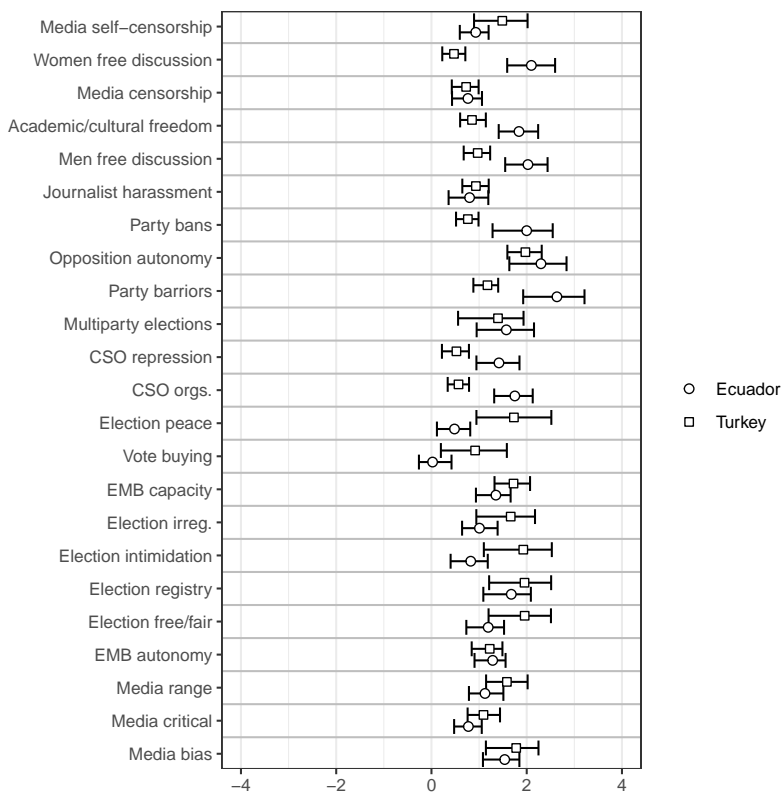
registry, free and fair elections, and media range of perspectives all fell within the uncertainty ranges for each pair of cases.



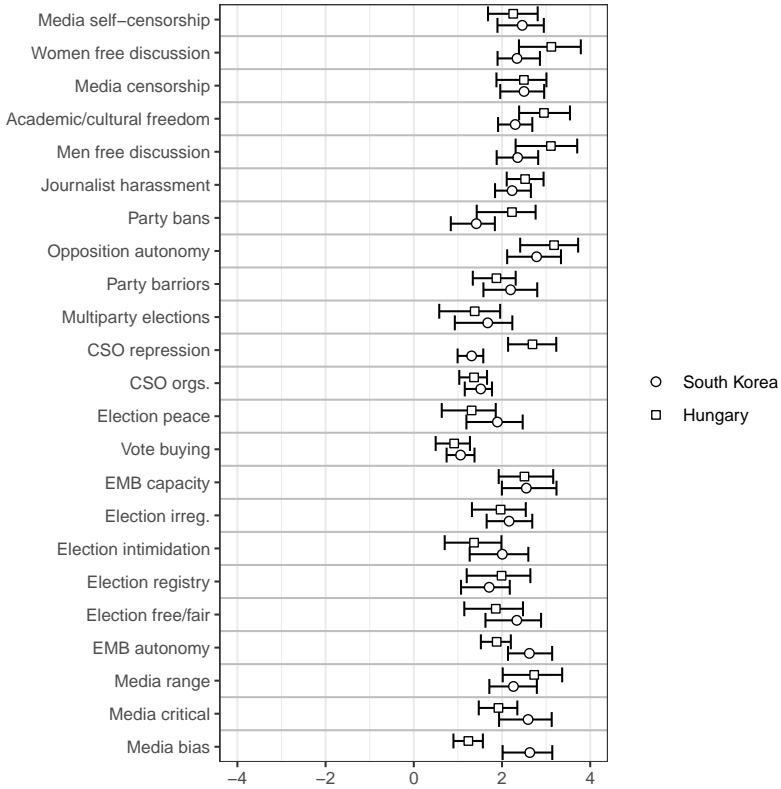
**Figure 3** India (1970) and Sri Lanka (1969): estimates and uncertainty boundaries for selected indicators from the EDI.



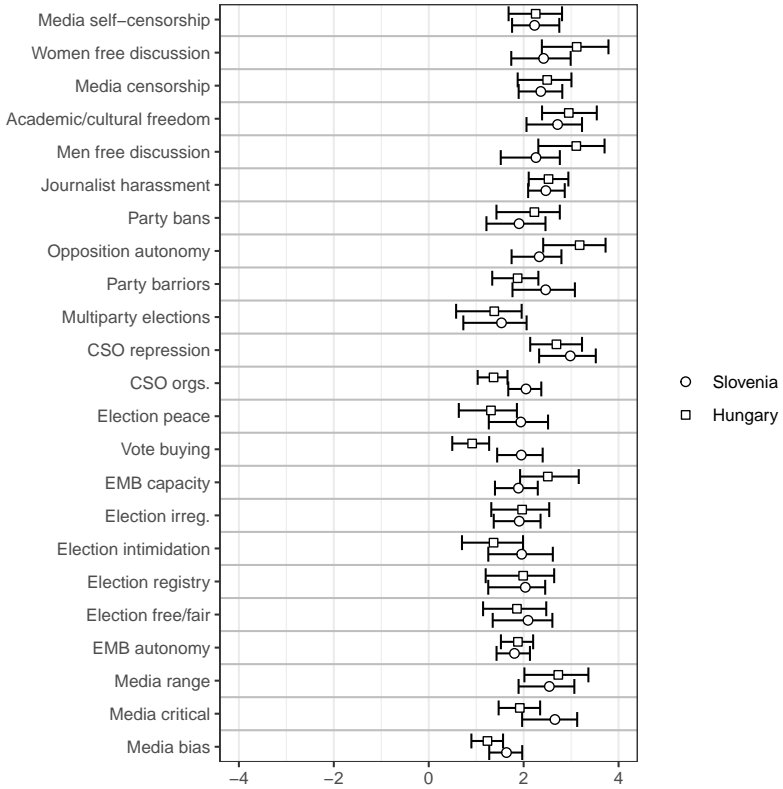
**Figure 4** Bulgaria (2000) and India (1999): estimates and uncertainty boundaries for selected indicators from the EDI.



**Figure 5** Ecuador (2006) and Turkey (2004): estimates and uncertainty boundaries for selected indicators from the EDI.



**Figure 6** South Korea (2007) and Hungary (2005): estimates and uncertainty boundaries for selected indicators from the EDI.



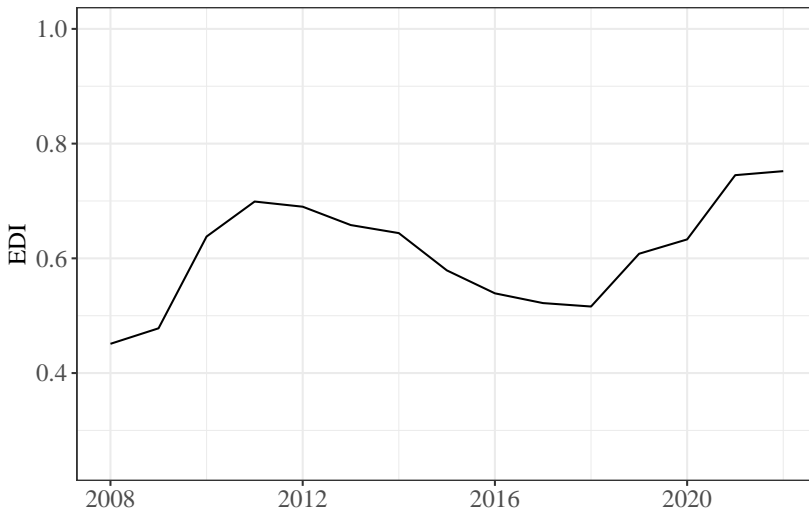
**Figure 7** Slovenia (2010) and Hungary (2005): estimates and uncertainty boundaries for selected indicators from the EDI.

## 2 Case Narratives for Excluded Episodes

### 2.1 Moldova (2013–2017)

#### 2.1.1 Rationale for Exclusion

The historical record for Moldova from 2013–2017 suggests that the episode deviates from our definition of executive aggrandizement. An incumbent executive does not appear to have attempted to deliberately erode democratic institutions to consolidate power. Instead, as detailed below, the episode is characterized by state capture by oligarchic politicians that ultimately ended after a billion-dollar corruption scandal broke. While the nature of the end of the episode is similar to other cases in our analysis (South Korea and India), we omit it from the main results because of the core differences in the nature of autocratization.



**Figure 8** Electoral democracy in Moldova, 2008–2022

### *2.1.2 Background: Leading Up to the Episode*

Prior to the episode, the political situation in Moldova was contentious. Parliamentary elections on April 2009 resulted in the Communist Party (PCRM) winning 60 of 101 seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2009a). However, election observers claimed there were issues with the electoral process, including “flaws in voter lists, intimidation and harassment of opposition parties, and media bias” (Freedom House, 2013, 468). The EU election observation mission suggested that the PCRM “tried to dominate the elections’ results by raising the threshold” from four to six percent, making it more difficult for smaller parties to access parliament (Mikko, 2009, 3). At that time, the Moldovan parliament elected the country’s president based on a three-fifths majority vote (Zinets & Prentice, 2016). After the opposition blocked the election of the PCRM candidate, a second parliamentary election occurred in July 2009 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2009b). Similar concerns about the integrity of the election surfaced but again did not materially affect the outcome (Freedom House, 2013). Afterward, some members of the PCRM defected to create a new majority coalition called the Alliance for European Integration (AIE).

Despite the new arrangement and only one candidate standing for the position, parliament failed to elect a new president. This prompted the government to introduce a bill that would lower the requirement for electing presidents to a simple majority (50+1) vote; however, members of the ruling coalition rejected this proposal in favor of a referendum that would introduce a direct vote for presidents. While direct voting was widely supported in the September 2010 referendum, it failed to attain the required one-third voter turnout to pass. Ultimately, this forced a third parliamentary election in November 2010 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2010). Election observers reported substantial progress in the electoral process during this election, including the lowering of the electoral threshold to two percent, allowing pre-electoral coalitions, and removal of restrictions on dual citizenship (Freedom House, 2011; Macovei, 2010).

Although the process for parliamentary elections improved from 2009 to 2010, subsequent events harmed democratic conditions, eventually bringing about the onset of the episode. The new parliament still had difficulties electing a president, and the AIE and PCRM experienced “internal feuding” and defections over the next two years (Freedom House, 2013). Parliament finally elected Nicolae Timofti as president in March 2012, but this was met with a four-month boycott by the PCRM due to a lack of “constitutional legitimacy” (Freedom House, 2013, 468).

### *2.1.3 The Autocratization Episode*

The start of the episode coincides with the surfacing of a hunting scandal in early 2013. Several members of the judiciary participated in an illegal hunting trip on a nature reserve in December 2012 that resulted in the shooting death of a businessman (Tanas, 2013). An activist broke the news in early 2013, prompting the prosecutor general, among those on the trip, to resign amidst accusations that he covered up the incident (Radio Free Europe, 2013). The “Huntgate” scandal shook up the parties in parliament and ultimately “revealed major weaknesses in Moldova’s democratic institutions, including the politicization of law enforcement and judicial bodies and the manipulation of major laws for partisan ends” (Freedom House, 2014, 469).

Divisions between parties remained high ahead of the November 2014 parliamentary elections, which occurred against the backdrop of the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Several parties pushed for a stronger relationship with the EU, while others advocated closer relations with Russia. The courts upheld a ban on the pro-Russian Patria Party just days before the election on the grounds that it obtained foreign funding (Radio Free Europe, 2014). Observers voiced concerns over the election’s fairness, but the Constitutional Court ultimately approved the results (Freedom House, 2015). In particular, the U.S. Department of State noted problems with corruption within the judiciary and the Ministry of Justice’s decision not to enforce a court ruling that banned the Communist Reform Party, which the PCRM claimed was formed to dilute its votes (State Department, 2015).

By late 2014, attention shifted to a massive banking scandal that prompted a political and economic crisis. Shortly before the November 2014 election, the Moldovan government secretly bailed out three major banks in financial trouble due to corrupt lending practices. That same month, sacks of documents from the banks were burned or deleted in a massive cover-up effort by the mastermind Illan Shor (Higgins, 2015). In May 2015, the Parliament’s speaker Andrian Candu leaked an independent report prepared by the U.S.-based company Kroll, detailing the extent of the conspiracy to rob Moldova’s banks of more than one billion dollars, one-eighth of the country’s annual economic output (Coalson & Barbarosie, 2015). This prompted a wave of anti-government protests that eventually led to the collapse of the pro-EU government (Hervey, 2015). Several high-ranking public figures were implicated in the scheme – including former Prime Minister Vlad Filat. The fallout from the scandal, coupled with continued fighting between and within parties, greatly contributed to political instability over the next year.

### *2.1.4 The End of the Episode*

In the final two years of the episode, the government pursued corruption investigations, and the “political situation stabilized somewhat” (Freedom House, 2017). Former Prime Minister, Vlad Filat, was sentenced to nine years in prison for his involvement in the banking scandal (Tanas, 2016). Protestors continued to demand political reforms throughout 2016, scoring a major victory when the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of direct presidential elections (Zinets & Prentice, 2016). As a result, Moldovans voted for president for the first time in twenty years in November 2016. Observers claimed that the election – which brought to power Socialist leader Igor Dodon – was credible with only a few issues. Government corruption still remains a concern, but the electoral progress and general respect for “rights of assembly, speech, and religion” ended the autocratization episode in 2017 (Freedom House, 2017).

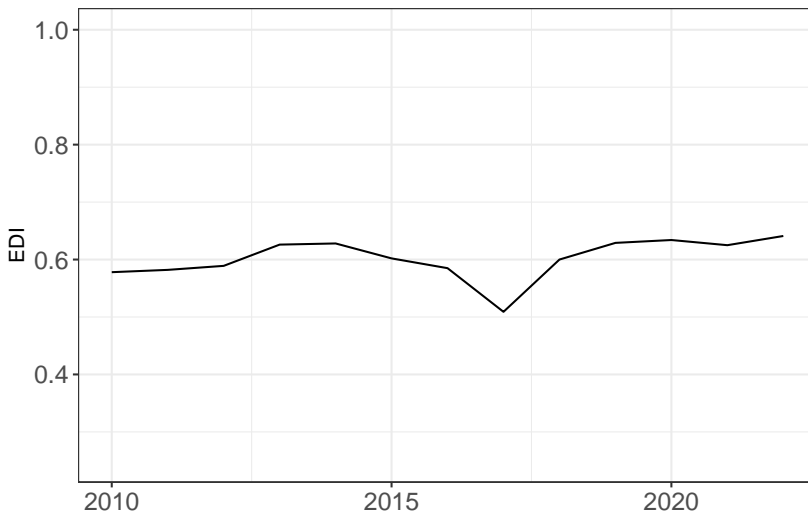
### *2.1.5 Insights from this Case*

Moldova’s experience from 2013 to 2017 represents a case of state capture by corrupt politicians. This largely reflects enduring legacies of weak institutions and corruption leftover from the Soviet era. Indirectly elected by a parliamentary super-majority, Moldovan presidents were more beholden to other elites than the populace. Indeed, the decision to adopt the parliamentary system for electing presidents occurred during an earlier period that might well be considered executive aggrandizement (Roper, 2008). This system ensured that executive power rested within a smaller elite coalition. However, this produced uncertainty and instability in the government. For example, even when the PCRM controlled a very large proportion of the seats in 2009, they were unable to elect a president because they lacked support from other parties. In addition, corruption within the judicial sector meant politicians faced little horizontal oversight. This environment enabled one of the world’s largest corruption scandals, which led to widespread protests and the eventual reform of the system back to a direct presidential vote that permits greater vertical accountability. Thus, similar to the main case studies in this Element, corruption led to protests that eventually prompted institutional reforms and a change in government. A combination of hubris-induced mistakes and collective action from ordinary Moldovans eventually saved democracy in this case.

## 2.2 Lesotho (2015–2017)

### 2.2.1 Rationale for Exclusion

We excluded this case because the events surrounding the start of the episode show it does not meet the criteria for a case of executive aggrandizement. Instead, the case involves an attempt by the executive to stage an autogolpe and a failed attempt by the military to stage a coup d'état. As a result of this, parliament was suspended for several months, and foreign intervention was necessary to quell the political instability. Much of the episode is characterized by infighting between the incumbent party, opposition, and military.



**Figure 9** Electoral democracy in Lesotho, 2010–2022

### 2.2.2 Background: Leading Up to the Episode

Despite holding regular multiparty elections from 1993 onward, Lesotho's democracy remains fragile due to intra-elite conflicts often resulting in regional diplomatic and military interventions (Weisfelder, 2015). From 1998 to 2012, the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) dominated parliamentary elections under the leadership of Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili (Freedom House,

2014). However, elite splits just months before the 2012 election prompted Mosisili to leave the LCD to form a rival party, the Democratic Congress (DC). While the DC claimed the largest number of seats in the May 2012 election, Thomas Thabane became Prime Minister after his All Basotho Convention (ABC) successfully formed a majority coalition with the remaining LCD and Basotho National Party (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012).

### *2.2.3 The Autocratization Episode*

The autocratization episode officially began in 2015 amid continued political instability following a failed attempted autogolpe and coup in 2014. For his first two years in office, Thabane's coalition was "plagued with instability," barely holding onto a slim majority with members expressing resentment over his "authoritarian style" (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014). This came to a head in June 2014, when Thabane suspended parliament to prevent a vote of no confidence led by his Deputy Prime Minister Metsing and the LCD (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014; Lesotho Times, 2014c). Two months later, Thabane announced that he was replacing Lieutenant General Tlali Kamoli, leader of the Lesotho Defense Forces (LDF), with Lieutenant General Maaparankoe Mahao. However, Kamoli refused to step aside, and after security forces seized buildings and radio stations on 30 August 2014 (Lesotho Times, 2014b), Thabane fled to South Africa, claiming he had been the victim of a military coup (Powell, 2014).

Within a few days, an emergency meeting brokered by the regional bloc, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), facilitated Thabane's return to Lesotho under the guard of South African police (VOA News, 2014). However, the crisis continued when Thabane refused to re-open parliament until Kamoli was brought to justice (Cottley, 2014). The SADC eventually brokered a deal that led to the resumption of parliament in October 2014 (Lesotho Times, 2014a). The SADC helped organize snap parliamentary elections in February 2015, which returned Pakalitha Mosisili to power. Mosisili promptly reinstated Lieutenant General Kamoli as the leader of the LDF.

Thereafter, the episode is largely driven by the LDF's repression of opposition and the media. In May 2015, Thabane and other opposition leaders fled to South Africa, "alleging that elements with the LDF were plotting to kill them" (Freedom House, 2016, 396). The following month, LDF soldiers shot and killed Lieutenant General Mahao in his home village (Brock, 2015). The defense minister claimed the incident was part of an "operation to arrest [Mahao] on charges of mutiny" (Freedom House, 2017, 301). Lieutenant General Kamoli finally retired in November of 2016 after many saw him as the "primary instigator

of the country's security challenges" (Freedom House, 2017, 301).

Several other politically motivated assassinations and assassination attempts occurred during the episode (Freedom House, 2017). In June 2016, the daughter of a lawmaker from the ABC party was shot and killed. Then in October, the chief editor of Lesotho Times survived an assassination attempt despite being shot four times. This attempt came after the publication of an article stating the government offered Kamoli a large sum of money to retire as head of the LDF (State Department, 2016). Police detained the reporter, editor, and publisher, charging the latter with criminal defamation. After the attempted assassination of the editor, the reporter fled the country (Amnesty International, 2017).

#### *2.2.4 End of the Episode*

Like his predecessor, Mosisili ruled over an unstable coalition from 2015 to 2017, largely formed based on the desire to remove an unpopular leader from power. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that he eventually met a similar fate. In early 2017, several members of the DC – including Deputy Prime Minister Monyake Moleleki – defected to join the ABC. Afterward, Thabane led a coalition vote of no confidence against Mosisili. While some wanted to appoint Moleleki as the new prime minister, Mosisili had the ceremonial king dissolve the parliament and call for fresh elections (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017). Mosisili likely hoped that snap elections in June 2017 would restore him to power. Somewhat ironically, however, Thomas Thabane's ABC emerged victorious and he became Prime Minister again. Observers report that the elections were generally free and fair (Freedom House, 2018).

Afterward, SADC-led reform efforts led to a reining in of the military and greater political freedom. Since July 2018, SADC has been working with Lesotho officials on security sector reform efforts "intended to end the upheavals and instability that has plagued the military for years, in addition to addressing the human rights violations committed by the LDF" (Freedom House, 2019, 619). Kamoli, along with eight others, were put on trial for the 2015 murder of Mahao. In 2019, the National Assembly of Lesotho established the National Reforms Authority to implement SADC-backed political reforms aimed at reducing future instability and improving democracy (Freedom House, 2020). Meanwhile, the "godfather of Lesotho politics", Pakalitha Mosisili announced his retirement from public life in February 2019, paving the way for a new generation of leaders that may or may not continue to cultivate the "deep entanglement between the security forces and the elite political class" (Aerni-flessner & Fogelman, 2019).

### *2.2.5 Insights from this Case*

Lesotho's experience from 2015 to 2017 illustrates the potentially important role of international, particularly regional actors, in thwarting attempted power grabs by civilian and military leaders. SADC was crucial in restoring order and avoiding a possible complete collapse of Lesotho's democracy after Thabane's attempted autogolpe and Kamoli's attempted coup in 2014. However, elections that led to turnover failed to alleviate repression by security forces and the episode continued with several years of elite infighting punctuated by high-profile assassinations. SADC eventually succeeded in encouraging more meaningful reforms.

Yet, Lesotho's democracy remains precariously unstable due to personal politics and militarism. In June 2017, two days before Thabane was sworn in for a second term, his estranged wife was murdered. Evidence suggests that Thabane and his soon-to-be second wife, Maesaiah Thabane, orchestrated the murder so that she could become the first lady (Chutel & Peltier, 2020). In March 2020, facing a possible no-confidence vote and charges for his late wife's death, Thabane used the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to suspend parliament for three months; however, the courts overturned this decision the following month (Freedom House, 2021). In response, Thabane deployed military units to confront "rouge elements" in the capital city (Mohloboli, 2020), likely as a show of strength to prevent any possible coup attempt as in 2014. Thabane eventually resigned in May 2020 (Chutel & Peltier, 2020).

In 2022, prosecutors dropped all charges against Thabane and his second wife "due to the inability to locate critical witnesses" (Mohloboli, 2022). At least one witness for the trial against the Thabanes was killed under suspicious circumstances while others experienced intimidation and harassment forcing them to flee the country (Amnesty International, 2020). This suggests that a culture of impunity for elite excesses, largely supported by the security forces, continues to undermine democratic progress despite international efforts and a changing of the guard. In turn, Lesotho's fragile democracy is strangely characterized by the "politics of stasis" punctuated by occasional crises (Aerni-flessner & Fogelman, 2019).

### 3 Alternative Matching

We also looked into matching with additional criteria, namely age of democracy, democratic experience, and GDP per capita.<sup>2</sup>

#### 3.1 Democracy age

**Table 4** Summary of matches including democratic age

Democratic resilience				Democratic breakdown				Distance
Country	Years	EDI	Age	Country	Years	EDI	Age	
India (IND)	1971-1975	0.66	19	Sri Lanka (LKA)	1970-1983	0.66	22	0.05
Bulgaria (BGR)	2001-2018	0.72	11	Turkey (TUR)	2005-2013	0.68	15	0.08
Ecuador (ECU)	2007-2013	0.70	27	Bolivia (BOL)	2006-2019	0.75	20	0.12
South Korea (KOR)	2008-2014	0.85	20	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	16	0.06
Slovenia (SVN)	2011-2021	0.87	21	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	16	0.09

Using the start and end dates for regimes in the ERT, we first re-examined the matching for age of democracy prior at the start of the episode. These results are presented in Table 4. While the matches for India (1971–1975), South Korea (2008–2014), and Slovenia (2011–2021) remain the same, Bulgaria (2001–2018) is more similar to Turkey (2005–2013) and Ecuador (2007–2013) is more similar to Bolivia (2006–2019) when democratic age is included.

#### 3.2 Democratic experience

**Table 5** Summary of matches including democratic age and stock

Democratic resilience				Democratic breakdown				Distance
Country	Years	EDI	Stock	Country	Years	EDI	Stock	
India (IND)	1971-1975	0.66	0.19	Sri Lanka (LKA)	1970-1983	0.66	0.22	0.06
Bulgaria (BGR)	2001-2018	0.72	0.19	Turkey (TUR)	2005-2013	0.68	0.24	0.10
Ecuador (ECU)	2007-2013	0.70	0.32	Bolivia (BOL)	2006-2019	0.75	0.26	0.14
South Korea (KOR)	2008-2014	0.85	0.22	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	0.27	0.08
Slovenia (SVN)	2011-2021	0.87	0.26	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	0.27	0.09

Democracies with a similar age may, nonetheless, have different experiences depending on the quality of democracy. Gerring, Bond, Barndt, and Moreno

<sup>2</sup>We are thankful to the series editor, David Stasavage, for recommending we run these additional matching tests.

(2005) propose a measure of democratic stock, which is the cumulative weighted sum of past values of democracy levels depreciated so that more proximate experiences are weighed more heavily than ones further back in the past. To measure democratic stock, then, we use the V-Dem EDI with a one percent depreciation rate (Edgell, Wilson, Boese, & Grahn, 2020). With this additional parameter, the results reported in Table 5 remain the same when matching based on democratic age, the year the episode began, and the initial EDI value.

### 3.3 Economic development

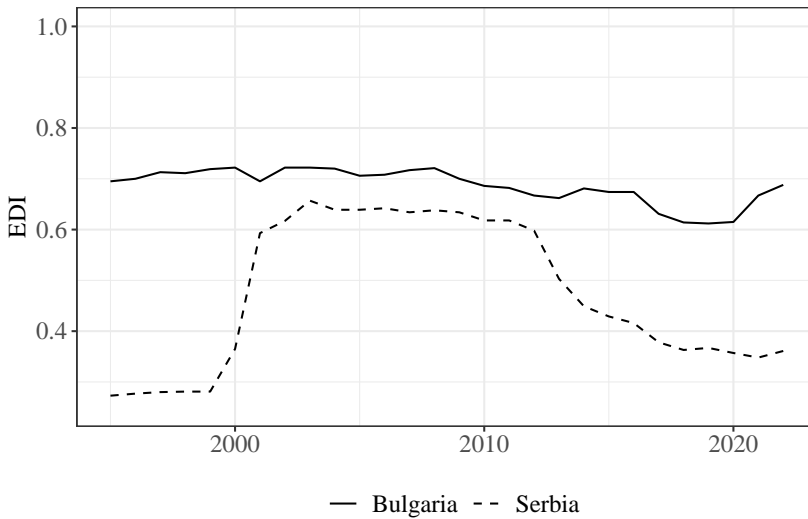
**Table 6** Summary of matches including democratic age, stock, and GDP

Democratic resilience				Democratic breakdown				Distance
Country	Years	EDI	GDP	Country	Years	EDI	GDP	
India (IND)	1971-1975	0.66	1.38	Sri Lanka (LKA)	1970-1983	0.66	2.44	0.07
Bulgaria (BGR)	2001-2018	0.72	9.10	Serbia (SRB)	2010-2014	0.63	11.34	0.14
Ecuador (ECU)	2007-2013	0.70	8.11	Bolivia (BOL)	2006-2019	0.75	3.73	0.18
South Korea (KOR)	2008-2014	0.85	31.52	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	18.75	0.36
Slovenia (SVN)	2011-2021	0.87	29.59	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	18.75	0.31

Finally, extensive literature cites the importance of development for democratization and democratic survival (e.g. Lipset, 1959; Przeworski & Limongi, 1997). Therefore, we also matched GDP per capita, in addition to the starting EDI, the year the episode began, democracy age, and democratic stock. To measure GDP per capita, we use data from Fariss, Anders, Markowitz, and Barnum (2022) as provided in the V-Dem data (Coppedge et al., 2023b). These results are reported in Table 6. Bulgaria is matched with Serbia (2010-2014) when GDP per capita is included in the matching model, while Ecuador (2007–2013) remains matched with Bolivia (2006–2019). Based on these results, we analyzed the cases of Serbia and Bolivia and discuss the implications of the alternative matches for our findings.

#### 3.4 Serbia (2010–2014)

In this section, we provide a case narrative of Serbia’s episode from 2010-2014, which ultimately led to a democratic breakdown. This episode became the closest match for Bulgaria (2006–2019) when we introduced GDP per capita into the matching model.



**Figure 10** Electoral democracy in Bulgaria and Serbia, 1995–2022

### 3.4.1 Background: Leading Up to the Episode

Unlike the other post-communist states analyzed in this Element, political hardliners dominated Serbia's transition from communism. By the late 1980s, the “weakening and disappearance of socialism’s ideological sovereignty raised perforce fundamental and profound questions about Yugoslavia’s existence as a state” (Pescic, 1998). In Slovenia, this resulted in a victory for reformists who oversaw the country’s gradual transition to democracy. By contrast, in Serbia, nationalists led by Slobodan Milošević seized power in 1987. Thereafter, “a partly orchestrated but mostly spontaneous cult began to develop around” Milošević who “reinvigorated the party by forcing it to embrace nationalism” (Djilas, 1993, 83;87).

Although multi-party elections were introduced in 1990, these were hardly free and fair. Milošević combined nationalist rhetoric with control over state media, financial institutions, and security apparatus to remain in power for the next twenty years (Freedom House, 2010). Milošević was able to evade pressure for democratization and establish a competitive authoritarian regime largely because Western powers viewed him as pivotal for restoring stability to the Balkans; however, Western support evaporated in the late 1990s due

to the atrocities committed by the Serbian military in Kosovo, prompting a NATO intervention (Castaldo, 2022). Dubbed the “Butcher of the Balkans”, Milošević was a central figure in the wars that tore apart Yugoslavia and became the first sitting head of state indicted for war crimes in 1999 (CNN, 1999). After opposition parties formed an 18-member coalition – Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) – Milošević attempted to rig the September 2000 elections. An independent parallel vote tabulation revealed the attempted fraud, leading to mass demonstrations in Belgrade and ultimately forcing Milošević to concede in October 2000 (McFaul, 2005).

In the post-Milošević era, Serbia underwent substantial political liberalization from 2001 to 2003, resulting in a democratic transition. However, the legacy of Milošević continued to haunt the country. In 2003, “organized crime groups allied with Milosevic-era security structures” assassinated pro-reformist Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic (Freedom House, 2008, 617). The far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS) won the most seats in the 2003 and 2007 elections, but democratic parties managed to form coalition governments, preventing ultranationalists from returning to power (Freedom House, 2008). Meanwhile, the SRS presidential candidate, Tomislav Nikolić, won the most votes in the 2003 presidential election – but the poll was invalidated because of insufficient voter turnout.<sup>3</sup> Nikolić also advanced to the second round in 2004 and 2008, only to lose to the Democratic Party (DP) candidate, Boris Tadić.

The electoral failures and disagreements over joining the EU prompted Aleksandar Vučić to co-found the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) with Tomislav Nikolić in 2008. Vučić joined the SRS in the early 1990s; before that, he was Milosevic’s Minister of Information from 1998 to 2000, during which he oversaw a serious deterioration in press freedoms (Freedom House, 2000). Vučić helped pass a draconian law in the late 1990s – known as the “Vučić Decree” (Bilefsky, 2014) – that required the media “to prove to the court that they were not guilty rather than the other way around” (Pavlović, 2020a, 26). After 2008, Vučić attempted to rebrand himself as a moderate conservative, hoping to expand his new party’s support base (Bakic, 2013).

### *3.4.2 The Autocratization Episode*

An initial decline from 0.634 to 0.618 on the V-Dem EDI marks the beginning of the episode in 2010. That same year, the Serbian government banned a major gay pride event in Belgrade, citing national security concerns because the police

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<sup>3</sup>At that time, Serbian law required at least 50 plus one percent turnout for a presidential poll to be valid.

lacked sufficient resources to protect the participants. The previous years' parade had seen major violence from far-right extremists (Freedom House, 2011). A controversial judicial reappointment procedure also went into effect around this time, leading to a backlog of over 3 million cases before being repealed in 2012 (Freedom House, 2013). The SNS proved to be a formidable opposition party. In February 2011, it launched a series of anti-government protests calling for early elections due to alleged corruption surrounding a privatization program.

However, as shown in Figure 10, the decline in democracy was gradual and almost unnoticeable until 2012-2014, when the SNS took control of the government. In the 2012 early elections, Nikolić finally won the presidential election, an SNS-led coalition took control of parliament, and Vučić became the deputy prime minister in the new coalition government. The 2012 elections also saw a high number of invalidated ballots, many of which can be tied to a deliberate and semi-coordinated protest campaign driven by discontent with the government corruption and the functioning of Serbia's democratic institutions (Obradović-Wochnik & Wochnik, 2014). In 2014, Nikolić called for snap elections, seeking to secure a larger and renewed mandate. The poll resulted in a landslide victory for the SNS. Vučić ascended to the premiership, heading a coalition government that held an unprecedented 80% of the legislative seats (Castaldo, 2022). That same year, Serbia's democracy broke down.

What drove the substantial downward trend in Serbia's democracy scores from 2012 to 2014? During this period, Freedom House scores remain rather constant, with the annual report being rather optimistic about the country's progress in political and economic reforms toward EU accession (Freedom House, 2013, 2014, 2015). In 2014, the SNS government even allowed the gay pride event to go on for the first time since 2010. Likewise, the RSF report on media freedom showed improving rankings during this period, from 85 in 2010 to 54 in 2014 (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). As a result, some scholars have argued that Serbia is a "clear success story" for EU efforts to establish "effective and democratic governance in the Western Balkans" (Börzel & Grimm, 2018, 123).

Yet, Serbia's electoral integrity and media freedoms faced several challenges during this period. As Pavlović (2020b, 20) explains, "When the younger generation of the Milošević-era politicians returned to office in 2012, they found weak institutions and unrestrained access to public funds and rents. They used this opportunity to abuse public funds for their private gain, but to be able to do this they had to block access to the opposition (former incumbents) and prevent their return to office." While voters had a "genuine choice," election observers expressed concerns over "credible reports about cases of intimidation of voters" and the politicization of media (OSCE, 2014, 1). Media outlets critical of

Vučić faced intimidation or were shut down. A 2014 finance reform left the state-owned media underfunded and vulnerable to political influence, allowing the government to curtail criticism and provide disproportionate coverage for SNS candidates (Castaldo, 2020). During this time, scholars also warned of “judicial irrelevance” given the failure of the Serbian Constitutional Court to emerge as a veto player, instead taking a “play-it-safe strategy” for controversial political cases (Beširević, 2014, 954).

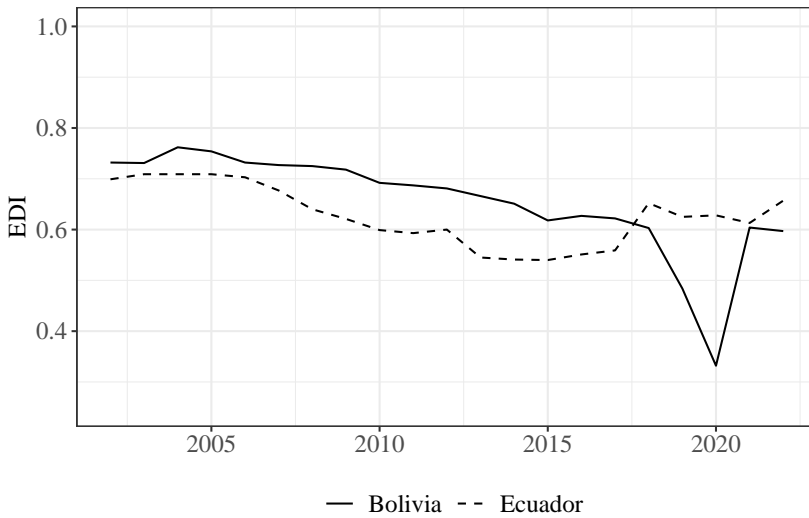
### *3.4.3 End of the Episode*

Vučić’s leadership has undoubtedly hollowed out Serbia’s nascent democracy (Pavlović, 2020a), even if scholars disagree on the exact moment of democratic breakdown (e.g., Bieber, 2018; Börzel & Grimm, 2018; Castaldo, 2022). While the V-Dem Regimes of the World rates Serbia as an “ambiguous electoral autocracy” in 2014, this case is coded as an unambiguous electoral autocracy from 2015 onward (Coppedge et al., 2023b). Accordingly, the ERT classifies this case as a democratic breakdown in 2014. Meanwhile, Freedom House (2019) downgraded Serbia to “partly free” in 2019.

These ratings reflect Vučić’s continued efforts to undermine Serbia’s democratic institutions, as illustrated by the V-Dem EDI scores in Figure 10. In 2017, Vučić effectively orchestrated a “collapse of the separation of powers” (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021) by winning the presidential elections. Since then, his party has held a firm grasp on power, continuing to undermine media freedom and judicial independence through intimidation and corruption (Freedom House, 2023). As of this writing, Vučić has openly stated he will not attempt to circumvent term limits to seek another term as president, and in May 2023, Vučić stepped down as leader of the SNS. However, Vučić has also launched a new intra-party political movement with support from the SNS, called the People’s Movement for the State. There are no constitutional provisions barring him from returning to the prime minister position as leader of this movement à la Vladimir Putin (Popović, 2023).

## 3.5 Bolivia (2006–2019)

In this section, we provide a case narrative of Bolivia’s episode from 2006–2019, which ultimately led to a democratic breakdown. This episode became the closest match for Ecuador (2007–2013) for models including democratic age, democratic experience, and GDP per capita.



**Figure 11** Electoral democracy in Ecuador and Bolivia, 2002–2022

### 3.5.1 Background: Leading Up to the Episode

Like Ecuador (and Turkey), Bolivia has had a tumultuous history of military intervention in politics, and its transition to democracy in the mid-1980s occurred after a period of violent instability. Bolivia had over six coup attempts between 1980 and 1984, three of which were successful (Albrecht, Koehler, & Schutz, 2022). Thereafter, Bolivia underwent a “silent revolution” under the leadership of President Víctor Paz Estenssoro (1985–89) (Mayorga, 1997). The case is best described as a “pacted transition” (Slater & Simmons, 2013), similar to the “reforma” processes described elsewhere in Latin America and Eastern Europe during the third wave of democratization (Linz, 1978; Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Before the backsliding episode, Bolivia experienced several political and economic crises that weakened public support for the political parties and gave rise to an anti-establishment discourse (Lehoucq, 2008; Stoyan, 2020). Further, the indigenous population and individuals from lower-income classes grew increasingly disillusioned with the political system due to their limited representation and political power (Anria, 2016). During Hugo Banzer’s term (1997–2002), Bolivia saw an average of 28 protests (or one per day) each month (Lehoucq, 2008). Pressure from below hit a boiling point when mass protests

over the privatization and exploitation of Bolivia's natural resources turned violent in 2003, prompting the resignation of President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. Vice President Carlos Mesa became the new president; however, his time in office was also short-lived. Continued protests and political conflicts forced him to resign in 2005 (Freedom House, 2006). Mesa's resignation led the government to hold early elections later that year.

Evo Morales, the head of the left-wing Movement for Socialism (MAS), emerged as the opposition's front-runner for the 2005 presidential election. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Morales was the leader of a major organization representing coca growers, most of whom were poor indigenous farmers (Harten, 2011; Van Cott, 2003). He also served one term in Congress after winning a seat in 1997. During this period, Morales gained popularity due to his staunch opposition to the government's violent crackdown on coca amid the US-supported "war on drugs" (Brienen, 2016, 78-79). Ahead of the 2005 elections, Morales campaigned as an anti-establishment politician, promising to empower indigenous groups and enact extensive reforms to address the political and economic crises plaguing the country (Brienen, 2016; Harten, 2011). In 2005, Morales made Bolivian history as the first indigenous president and the first presidential candidate to secure an outright majority of the vote in the first round (Hicks, Maldonado, Piper, & Goytia Rios, 2018). The MAS also won several seats in the upper house of Congress and a slight majority in the lower house (Anria, 2016).

### *3.5.2 The Autocratization Episode*

The autocratization episode began in 2006 after Morales took office and started pursuing radical changes to "refound the country" (Harten, 2011, 179). During his first year in office, Morales began the process of replacing the constitution. Elections for a Constituent Assembly gave the MAS a majority but not enough seats to act unilaterally without some support from opposition members (Hammond, 2011). The entire process was cumbersome, from establishing the voting rules to finalizing and approving the new constitution. Conflicts between the MAS and opposition parties were frequent and sparked sometimes violent protests from civil society movements (Freedom House, 2009; Hammond, 2011). Morales and the MAS attempted to circumvent the rules for passing the new constitution on several occasions but the Electoral Court prevented them from doing so (Harten, 2011; Verdugo, 2019). After additional negotiations, the country finally adopted a new constitution in 2009.

The strong pushback from the opposition prevented Morales from amassing

a substantial amount of power through the new constitution. However, he was able to successfully expand constitutional rights for indigenous people and alter some aspects of the electoral system to his benefit (Alpert, Centellas, & Singer, 2010; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Harten, 2011). Morales used the new constitution as a symbol of his anti-establishment position, which helped bolster his support among the public. As a result, voters affirmed their satisfaction with Morales' government in the 2009 elections, with Morales maintaining his position as the president and the MAS gaining more than two-thirds of the seats in Congress (Hicks et al., 2018).

The legislative supermajority and broad support among the electorate enabled Morales to consolidate his power more efficiently moving forward (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Lehoucq, 2020). Thereafter, attacks on democracy under Morales aimed at undermining the judiciary and limiting mass media and civil society. To weaken the judiciary, Morales forced disloyal judges out of office by launching criminal investigations, attempting impeachments, and reducing judicial salaries (Sánchez-Sibony, 2021). Morales filled these vacancies with MAS loyalists. In 2007, the opposition in the Senate appealed to the Constitutional Tribunal (TC) to prevent Morales from unconstitutionally appointing new Supreme Court justices through a decree. However, Morales initiated impeachment proceedings against the disloyal judges in the TC to force them out of office. The government then left the vacancies open, essentially making the TC inoperable since it did not have the required number of justices to operate (Castagnola & Pérez-Liñán, 2011).

Morales used a variety of tactics to weaken and control the media. For example, he delegitimized critical media sources by publicly associating them with the unpopular political elites in power before his presidency (Kitzberger, 2012). Additionally, Morales used state resources to help fund his pro-government propaganda and create an uneven electoral playing field (Sánchez-Sibony, 2021). Finally, Morales resorted to verbal attacks and arbitrary use of defamation laws to punish and silence critical journalists (Freedom House, 2015; Sánchez-Sibony, 2021).

Civil society presented a particularly complicated situation for Morales. Support from this arena played a crucial role in legitimizing his dismantling of democracy, as he could claim he was carrying out the will of the electorate in creating a new political order (Guachalla, Hummel, Handlin, & Smith, 2021). Thus, Morales had to carefully orchestrate his attempts to weaken the freedoms and influence of civil society without losing their critical support. He primarily accomplished this by co-opting movement leaders with financial incentives and creating parallel pro-government organizations to fragment the existing groups.

Overall, Morales was able to erode democracy and remain in power with

broad public support for three election cycles. However, the situation began to shift in 2016 when he held a constitutional referendum that would allow him to seek another term in office. The 2009 constitution limited presidents to two terms, which Morales already fulfilled when he was elected in 2009 and 2014 (in addition to his original election in 2006 under the old constitution). Voters narrowly rejected the referendum, but Morales appealed to the Constitutional Tribunal, which overturned the results (Lehoucq, 2020). While this decision allowed him to run again in the next election, Morales's willingness to go against the electorate substantially weakened popular support for his administration.

### *3.5.3 End of the Episode*

According to the ERT, Bolivia's democracy broke down in 2019. Morales appeared to have won the presidential election, but the Organization of American States (OAS) expressed concerns about potential fraud (OAS, 2019). In response, widespread protests against Morales erupted, and the military advised him to step down (Lehoucq, 2020). Without support from the security forces, civil society, or previous political allies, Morales and many others in his administration resigned on 10 November 2019, claiming that they were the victims of a coup (Londoño, 2019). The actions of Morales during his time in office and the actions of the subsequent interim government seriously undermined Bolivia's democratic experiment.

After Morales' removal from office, Bolivia experienced a year-long crisis. As a result of the power vacuum, Jeanine Áñez – the second vice president of the Senate, a largely ceremonial position – claimed presidential powers citing the line of succession in the constitution. The claim was controversial because Áñez had not run for re-election in the 2019 poll and was set to retire in January 2020. Furthermore, she came from a small regional party that had earned less than four percent of the vote.

The opposition in Congress was able to broker a deal with the majority MAS lawmakers to accept Áñez as interim president in exchange for allowing Morales and his associates to flee into exile. However, after Morales had safely left for Mexico, the MAS lawmakers boycotted Áñez's swearing-in ceremony. Citing a Supreme Court ruling, Áñez unilaterally declared herself interim president and was sworn in on 12 November 2019 (Kurmanaev & Castillo, 2019).

The source of the democratic breakdown in Bolivia is further complicated by scientific investigations showing flaws in the OAS calculations of fraud in the 2019 poll. In June 2020, researchers from MIT wrote in the *Monkey Cage* that they found no statistically significant evidence of fraud based on their forensic

audit of the election results (Curiel & Williams, 2020). According to emails obtained by the Intercept, the MIT researchers faced pressure from the U.S. Department of Justice, suggesting the Trump administration was involved in the Añez government's criminal investigation against Morales (Klippenstein & Grim, 2021). In a separate study, Idrobo, Kronick, and Rodríguez (2022, 2022) found evidence that "the allegedly suspicious shift in late-counted votes was actually an artifact of methodological and coding errors on the part of electoral observers." While neither set of researchers claims the poll was entirely free and fair, their findings suggest that the OAS statement that emboldened opposition protests and eventually led to Morales's resignation was flawed.

Thereafter, the Añez interim government used the COVID-19 pandemic to postpone elections and violently repress protestors throughout 2020, leading to further autocratization after the ERT codes a democratic breakdown in 2019. Añez finally agreed to allow elections in October 2020, resulting in power shifting back to the MAS under the leadership of the former finance minister Luis Arce. The MAS was able to secure this surprising comeback largely by distancing itself from Morales. In November 2020, when Morales returned to Bolivia after a year in exile, none of the main MAS leaders in government were there to greet him (Trigo & Kurmanaev, 2020). Since then, Bolivia's democracy has rebounded to 2018 levels but has not recovered sufficiently to be considered a case of re-democratization. A recent court ruling sentencing Añez to ten years in prison for her power grab in 2019 has raised concerns about the continued politicization of the courts (Janetsky & Trigo, 2022). Añez, who spent fifteen months in pre-trial detention, has filed an appeal as of this writing. Meanwhile, the attorney general announced their intent to pursue genocide charges with a possible thirty year sentence in October 2023 (Ramos, 2023).

### 3.6 Implications of alternative matches

The analysis based on alternative matches suggests further support for our main conclusions. First, we continue to find core differences in the style of populism employed by leaders who ultimately failed to dismantle democracy when compared to those cases where democracy broke down. In Ecuador, Correa employed a technocratic populist style. In Bulgaria, Borisov avoided the inflammatory rhetoric found in other Eastern European countries. By contrast, Erdoğan engaged in Islamist rhetoric and used anti-Kurdish sentiments to drum up fear and support. Meanwhile, Morales ascended to power through direct popular appeals to the indigenous population, claiming to be an anti-establishment politician aiming to remake Bolivia. In Serbia, Vučić

attempted to distance himself from his far-right nationalist past and brand his new party as a moderate, pro-European force, but his rhetoric echoes the Serbian nationalist appeals of his predecessors. Thus, ethnopopulism remains a common denominator among cases that broke down, while more centrist populist appeals are present in cases that survived.

We also continue to see evidence that democratic survival often occurs by mistake. In Serbia and Turkey, leaders remain in power after forcing a democratic breakdown. Although Vučić has publicly stated he has no intention of running for a third term in the presidential office, he has also launched a new “movement” and may be eyeing the premiership again. Both leaders have been able to manage crises so far. In Bolivia, Evo Morales made major blunders toward the end of his administration that ultimately cost him power – including forcing the courts to let him run for another term despite strong electoral opposition. While the extent to which fraud played a role in the 2019 election remains questionable, the subsequent government under Áñez continued to engage in executive aggrandizement before being defeated, raising the possibility of democracy bouncing back in the long run. Thus, this case illustrates how blunders may not always help democracy turn around in the short run, especially when the replacement is also not committed to democracy (see also the case of Sri Lanka in the main text).

## 4 Adjusting the Thresholds for Episodes

The thresholds used to construct the ERT have important implications for the cases we selected, and alternative thresholds might produce different results. In particular, some might find that the 0.01 threshold for starting and continuing an episode is too low, leading to episodes like Hungary and India beginning earlier than one might expect. Others might contend that the 0.10 threshold for total decline is too high. Lowering this threshold would allow us to capture more subtle changes and more episodes where democracies survived. We address these two issues in this section.<sup>4</sup>

### 4.1 Raising the threshold for *start\_incl*

The ERT uses the parameter *start\_incl* to determine the start of episodes and the annual change necessary at least every five years for the episode to continue. Raising this threshold could produce more face valid episodes by

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<sup>4</sup>We thank the anonymous reviewer for suggesting that we implement these additional tests.

ruling out years where more subtle changes occurred that may or may not have simply been noise in the expert coded data. Such a threshold may make the dates for episodes like Hungary and India under Modi appear more face valid for readers who think these episodes began too early. Nevertheless, if we set a higher threshold for *start\_incl*, we will miss out on earlier, more subtle changes - which tend to be the norm for contemporary autocratization episodes. By raising this threshold, we also set a more demanding value for annual changes at least every five years.

For example, if we raise the *start\_incl* parameter to 0.05 (similar to Lott, Croissant, & Trinn, 2023), we arrive at 66 episodes of autocratization in democracies. Forty-three of the resulting episodes lasted just a single year, and the longest episodes were just five years. Hungary under Orban is classified as autocratization from 2014 and India under Modi is classified from 2015. While some might argue that the India case is more face valid starting in 2015, few would say the same about Hungary. As discussed in the manuscript, Fidesz became increasingly radicalized after the 2006 parliamentary elections, and once it gained power in 2010, it went about systematically altering Hungary's institutions while also undermining basic democratic rights. If the episode were to start in 2015, we would miss the Fundamental Law of Hungary - the constitution Fidesz hastily adopted in early 2011 without input from the opposition or the public. Likewise, if we use 0.05 as the *start\_incl* parameter, Turkey under Erdoğan is only autocratizing for one year in 2008, and another well-known case, Venezuela under Chavez, is only autocratizing from 1999 to 2000. Because of this, Turkey and Venezuela become coded as democratic resilience because they did not break down during these episodes (despite breakdowns occurring thereafter). Again, this hardly seems face valid.

## 4.2 Lowering the threshold for *cum\_incl*

Laebens and Lührmann (2021) use 0.05 as the threshold for overall decline in autocratization episodes. When we apply this threshold using the ERT package's parameter options for *cum\_incl*, the number of autocratization episodes in democracies increases from 92 to 136. Forty-five of these meet our criteria for executive aggrandizement as outlined in the main text, of which 15 survived and 30 broke down. Table 7 and Figure 12 summarize the results when we reconstruct our matching using this sample of episodes. As discussed in the main text, we eliminated Moldova and Lesotho after evaluating the evidence in these cases (see the case narratives above for more details). Our original five episodes of democratic resilience remain - in addition to eight new episodes. The earliest

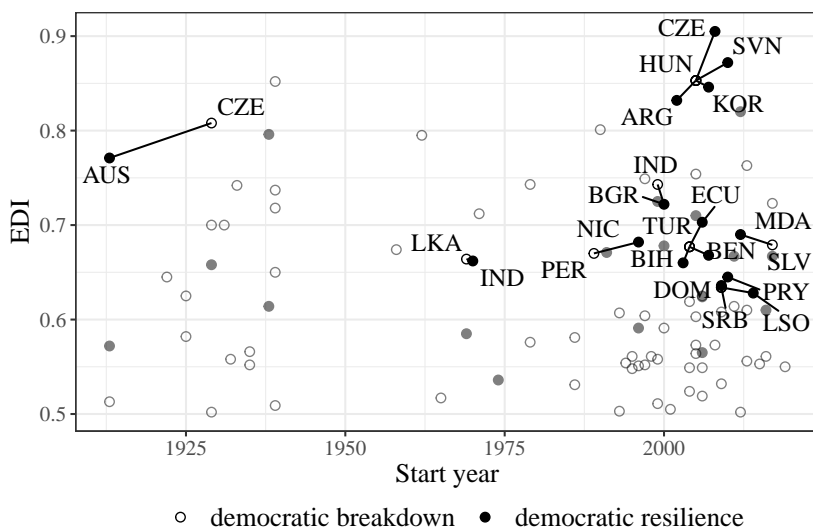
of these is Australia from 1914-1917. We also pick up on a few episodes in Latin America, including Nicaragua (1997-1999), Argentina (2003-2009), the Dominican Republic (2010-2017), and Paraguay (2011-2015). Finally, we have potential episodes in Bosnia-Herzegovina (2004-2007), Benin (2008-2011), and Czechia (2009-2021).

**Table 7** Possible matches using 0.05 threshold for overall change.

Democratic resilience			Democratic breakdown			Distance
Country	Years	EDI	Country	Years	EDI	
Australia (AUS)	1914-1917	0.77	Czechia (CZE)	1930-1939	0.81	0.14
India (IND)	1971-1975	0.66	Sri Lanka (LKA)	1970-1983	0.66	0.01
Nicaragua (NIC)	1997-1999	0.68	Peru (PER)	1990-1992	0.67	0.06
Bulgaria (BGR)	2001-2018	0.72	India (IND)	2000-2017	0.74	0.02
Argentina (ARG)	2003-2009	0.83	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	0.03
Bosnia-Herzegovina (BIH)	2004-2007	0.66	Turkey (TUR)	2005-2013	0.68	0.02
Ecuador (ECU)	2007-2013	0.70	Turkey (TUR)	2005-2013	0.68	0.03
Benin (BEN)	2008-2011	0.67	Turkey (TUR)	2005-2013	0.68	0.03
S. Korea (KOR)	2008-2014	0.85	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	0.02
Czechia (CZE)	2009-2021	0.91	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	0.06
Dominican Rep. (DOM)	2010-2017	0.64	Serbia (SRB)	2010-2014	0.63	0.00
Paraguay (PRY)	2011-2015	0.65	Serbia (SRB)	2010-2014	0.63	0.01
Slovenia (SVN)	2011-2021	0.87	Hungary (HUN)	2006-2018	0.85	0.05
Moldova (MDA)	2013-2017	0.69	El Salvador (SLV)	2018-2021	0.68	0.04
Lesotho (LSO)	2015-2017	0.63	Burkina Faso (BFA)	2014-2015	0.61	0.02

At the same time, a lower threshold may introduce more false positives due to noise in the V-Dem expert-coded data. For this reason, some scholars suggest limiting the sample to episodes to significant declines, operationalized based on the uncertainty intervals for the EDI from the pre-episode year (e.g. Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Lott, 2023; Pelke & Croissant, 2021).

As discussed in the main text, only twelve episodes fall within the uncertainty interval using the default ERT coding rules, and five of these were ongoing in 2022, meaning their total decline could eventually become significant. Our criteria for establishing executive aggrandizement eliminates most of these non-significant episodes. Bulgaria (2001-2018) remains in our sample despite the uncertainty boundaries of its lowest EDI value and its pre-episode EDI overlapping by about 0.022. Our qualitative analysis in the main text shows evidence of substantial backsliding, particularly concerning media freedoms and rule of law. While not significant based on the uncertainty boundaries, the case experienced an overall decline in the EDI from 0.722 in 2000 to 0.614 in 2018, a fifteen percent drop. Our original sample of possible matches also included



**Figure 12** Possible matches using 0.05 threshold for overall change. Matched based on minimum Euclidian distance for starting year and starting value on the EDI. Also shown (in lighter shading) are all other episodes of autocratization in democracies.

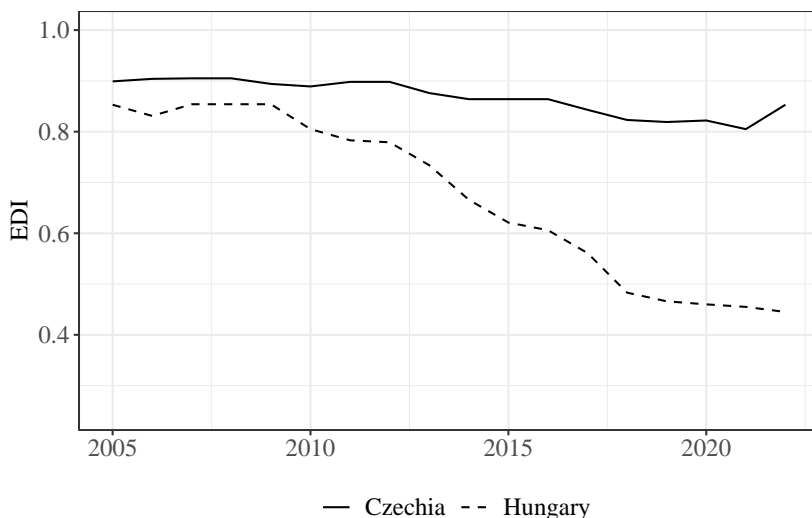
episodes in the Philippines (2001-2004) and Dominican Republic (1987-1990) that were insignificant; however, these episodes did match our primary cases. If we were to exclude Bulgaria from our analysis, our findings about the process of executive aggrandizement and the factors potentially affecting its outcome would remain consistent; however, we would miss out on the opportunity for within- and between-case comparisons for India.

With the inclusion threshold reduced to 0.05, 80 of 136 autocratization episodes in democracies have overlapping uncertainty boundaries with the pre-episode value at the end of the episode. Thus, as one would expect, a lower threshold for inclusion produces far more episodes where the total change is insignificant.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, we get just three new significant episodes by reducing the inclusion threshold. Among them (reported in Table 7 and Figure 12), only Czechia (2009-2021) is resilient. This case is also very close to the original 0.10 threshold when rounded to the third decimal place (0.905 to 0.805). After investigating the Czechia case further, we found that it is best

<sup>5</sup>This makes sense, given that the average width of the uncertainty interval is about 0.05.

classified as an erosion in the party system followed by a failed attempt at oligarchic state capture. Below we provide a brief explanation of the episode for reference. Future research might help uncover the sources of the substantial declines observed in the V-Dem EDI for this case.

### 4.3 Czechia (2009–2021)



**Figure 13** Electoral democracy in Czechia and Hungary, 2005–2022

#### 4.3.1 Background: Leading into the Episode

Czechoslovakia was established in 1918 following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The country fell under communist rule after World War II, which persisted until the Velvet Revolution toppled the government in 1989. Four years later, the federation dissolved, creating the Czech Republic (Czechia) and Slovakia. Vaclav Klaus of the center-right Civic Democratic Party (ODS) became Czechia's first prime minister. Before this post, Klaus had served as the finance minister in Czechoslovakia. Klaus remained the prime minister until 1997, when he resigned after facing corruption allegations (Freedom House,

2006). After Klaus's resignation as prime minister, political power shifted to center-left parties.

Leading into the episode, the Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) had been in control since 1998, but faced waning popularity due to corruption allegations against Prime Minister Stanislav Gross. This led to growing competition from the center-right opposition and government instability (Freedom House, 2007). The 2006 elections were so close that it took seven months to form a new government. The center-right Civic Democracy Party (ODS) emerged as the head of the new government under Prime Minister Topolánek; however, this government lasted just two years.

#### *4.3.2 The Autocratization Episode*

The episode begins in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which exacerbated the public's waning "satisfaction with the political situation and in political institutions" (Havlík & Hloušek, 2014, 555). In March 2009, Prime Minister Topolánek's government fell to a vote of no confidence, prompting President Vaclav Klaus, to appoint a caretaker government. Klaus attempted to schedule early elections two months later but was unable to do so after the Constitutional Court sided with a deputy of the parliament who "argued that snap elections would violate his right to serve a full term" (Freedom House, 2010, 186).

Growing public resentment toward CSSD and ODS paved the way for new parties to enter the parliament in the 2010 elections. While the CSSD and ODS retained a large portion of seats, the populist Public Affairs Party (VV) won enough votes to enter parliament in the 2010 election. Their victory signaled the "weakened position of the established political parties" (Havlík & Hloušek, 2014, 553). The VV was formed in 2002 but did not gain enough votes to enter parliament before 2010. Though initially declaring itself a center-right party, the VV abandoned an ideological label and staged a populist campaign focused on fighting corruption (Havlík & Hloušek, 2014). However, after one of the VV's elites was convicted on bribery charges in 2012, the party's popularity suffered.

Several other "high-profile corruption scandals" emerged in 2012 and 2013, involving a variety of political elites, including President Vaclav Klaus, an aide to the prime minister, and several members of parliament (Freedom House, 2014). Prime Minister Petr Nečas (ODS leader) resigned due to his involvement in one of the scandals that surfaced in 2013. Before his resignation, the country held its first-ever direct presidential election, which resulted in a victory for the

former prime minister Milos Zeman from the center-left Party of Civic Rights-Zemanovci (SPOZ) (Freedom House, 2014). Zeman appointed a replacement prime minister after Necas resigned but controversially chose a political ally rather than someone from the ruling government. This caretaker government fell to a vote of no confidence just a few months later, and new elections occurred in October 2013 (Freedom House, 2014). These events signaled continued problems with government corruption that eroded public trust in the institutions and ruling parties.

Reflecting continued resentment of the party system, a newer populist political party, the ANO, performed well in the 2013 elections and joined the CSSD to form a coalition government. The party began as the Action of Unsatisfied Citizens 2011 movement under the leadership of “one of the most important Czech oligarchs, Andrej Babiš” (Cabada & Tomšič, 2016, 39). After the 2013 election, Babiš became the First Deputy-Prime Minister and Minister of Finance but faced fraud allegations in 2017, forcing him to resign as the finance minister (Nordstrom, 2017). Like the VV, the ANO adopted a populist stance broadly aimed against the political establishment and corruption. The ANO lacks a coherent ideology, but Babiš espouses illiberal ideas from a technocratic populist perspective. He promises to provide “business-like efficient solutions” through “a strongly majoritarian, centralized system that eliminates checks and balances to improve efficiency and get things done” (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018, 218-282).

Babiš’s purchase of MAFRA, a large media conglomerate, “transformed the Czech media landscape” and greatly assisted ANO 2011’s rise to power in the 2013 elections (Guasti, 2020, 479). This prompted Freedom House (2015, 191) to raise “concerns about media independence and the concentration of ownership.” However, the media concentration occurred before ANO became part of the ruling coalition, which sets this case apart from others in the Element, such as Hungary, Bulgaria, and Slovenia, where ruling parties used their power to skew the media through acquisitions.

Despite ongoing fraud allegations against its leadership, the ANO performed well in the October 2017 elections, and Babiš was appointed prime minister in December (Freedom House, 2018). However, Babiš struggled to form a stable government as most parties refused to cooperate with him. He initially lost a vote of no confidence but finally formed a coalition with the CSSD and Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia nine months after the 2017 election (Freedom House, 2019). Babiš also clashed with President Zeman in 2019 over the appointment of the Minister of Culture, as the president refused to accept Babiš’s nomination and instead selected another candidate (Freedom House, 2020). Protests against Babiš by the “Million Moments for Democracy”

organization spread throughout 2019 after the European Commission “found him in breach of EU conflict of interest rules and threatened to suspend EU funding” (Bakke & Sitter, 2022, 30). Protests against Babiš in 2019 “were the largest in the Czech Republic’s modern history since the Velvet Revolution” (Freedom House, 2020).

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the ANO coalition government attempted to impose several measures that may have undermined democracy. Specifically, it tried to limit suffrage by excluding COVID-19 patients, attacked the independence of state media, and favored MAFRA with state relief package funding. However, “all attempts to undermine formal institutions were subjected to meticulous scrutiny by the courts and failed” (Guasti & Bustikova, 2022, 538). The Pandemic Backsliding Project registers “minor violations” in this case due to some limits on media access (Edgell, Lachapelle, Lührmann, & Maerz, 2021; Edgell et al., 2022).

### *4.3.3 End of the Episode*

The ANO went to the polls in October 2021 amidst growing resentment over several scandals involving its leadership. The “Million Moments for Democracy” protests that had erupted in 2019 encouraged a coalition of anti-Babiš parties leading up to the election. While ANO won a plurality, it failed to form a majority coalition. Two opposition alliances- the Together Coalition (SPOLU) and the Pirates-Mayors Coalition- instead formed a “comfortable majority”, and Petr Fiala, the leader of the SPOLU, replaced Babiš as the prime minister (Buben & Kouba, 2023; Freedom House, 2022).

### *4.3.4 Implications of this Episode*

Czechia during this period is sometimes characterized as defying the illiberal trend (Buben & Kouba, 2023) or as “something less than backsliding but more than politics as usual” (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021). Our investigation into the case using Freedom House reports and other sources also came up with a few direct examples of how successive governments during this period engaged in executive aggrandizement. While the populist oligarch Andrej Babiš certainly raised concerns by using his influence over the media and lack of campaign oversight to acquire power from 2017 to 2021 (Guasti, 2020), we failed to locate sufficient evidence of other substantial patterns of aggrandizement to include this case. Instead, it appears best situated as a failed attempt at state capture by oligarchs – similar to Moldova (2013-2017).

The trajectory of the Czechia case contrasts sharply with Hungary under Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in several ways. Whereas Orbán's Fidesz party embraces an ultranationalistic populism, Babiš and the ANO are more aptly situated as technocratic and devoid of a clear ideology. In an oligarchic fashion (also see Anna Vachudova, 2020), Babiš used his power to benefit his companies disproportionately but did not undermine the formal institutions of democracy or seriously attempt to consolidate executive powers. This differs from the other cases explored in this Element, where leaders used formal and informal procedures to target diagonal and horizontal accountability institutions from within. In Hungary, for example, Orbán's government has pushed through major constitutional changes, targeted the media and civil society, and tilted the electoral playing field such that democracy collapsed under his rule. Similarly, while Babiš's technocratic rhetoric has many similarities to Rafael Correa in Ecuador, the two cases are quite different in the extent to which leaders undermined formal democratic procedures and threatened their rivals.

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