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## The Fragility of Democracy: The Rise of Authoritarianism in Hungary and Poland

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**The Fragility of Democracy: The Rise of Authoritarianism in Hungary  
and Poland**

By

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## **Abstract:**

Hungary and Poland have attempted to establish democratic systems of government since the end of Soviet occupation in 1991. Recently, both states have elected leaders who have started to manipulate their democratic institution into one that seems not so democratic; both Hungary and Poland have manipulated their judicial branch into one that now serves only their own interests. Leaders in Hungary and Poland have shown their support for regimes such as those in Russia, China, and Turkey. What factors contribute to democratically elected officials shifting towards authoritarianism in post Eastern-Bloc countries? From Samuel P Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, to Levitsky and Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die*, scholars have examined key factors that contribute to the stability and downfall of democracies. This thesis examines the countries of Hungary and Poland, whose democracies are in decline. The study expected a correlation between the loss of democracy in Hungary and Poland, as a result of their recent history as satellite states of the USSR. The case study found no direct correlation between the two countries' history as part of the Eastern-Bloc; their authoritarian leaders were able to exploit the weaknesses of Hungary and Poland in the precise ways that allowed them to gain more power.

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## **Introduction**

Democracies are seen as the most ideal form of government for a nation. There are many benefits to democratic nations, and many downsides to illiberal democracies. For the larger international benefits, Democratic Peace theory states that democracies are much less likely to go to war with other democracies. Democracies have more motivation to keep peaceful relations with other democracies; meanwhile, governments leaning towards authoritarianism put their citizens at risk and embroil their government with corruption and consolidated power. Studying the loss of democracy is just as important as studying the establishment of successful democracies. In 2019, many democratic nations gradually shifted systems of governance; leaders and parties ruled by shaping regimes into forms of illiberal democracies with authoritarian tendencies. It is necessary to address the causes of this occurrence to have better ideas of warning signs, and protect citizens from undergoing harm in corrupt systems. This thesis asks what factors contribute to democratically elected leaders shifting to authoritarian regimes in post Eastern-Bloc countries.

Hungarian president Viktor Orban, founder of the Fidesz party, used to be in support of defeating the Soviet Union, and helping Hungary establish a new democracy. Today, the president resembles an autocrat, taking any opportunity to influence and control the citizens of Hungary. All major media outlets in Hungary are controlled by one business, the board members of which are all allies and friends of Orban. The majority party in Hungary is run by Orban's Fidesz party, and the judicial courts are packed with

Orban allies, providing him with a network of support in all branches of government and no check on his power. Following closely in his footsteps is Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Poland's Law and Justice Party. Arguably faced with slightly more resistance than Orban, Kaczyński has attempted to manipulate the courts in his favor, and similarly placed allies in powerful positions. Orban and Kaczyński are openly supportive of each other, and Orban has envisioned what he labels as an "illiberal democracy" for Hungary.

Scholars from Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die*, have discussed the ways in which democracies are at risk. This research into different factors that cause a retrogression from solid democracies is thorough, but a gap in literature appears with region specific research. As mentioned by scholar Aron Buzogany, there is a lack of research into the "ideational foundations of these developments" (Buzogany and Varga, 822). This paper used a case study method to examine the recent authoritarian tendencies of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his Fidesz party and Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland. In post Eastern-Bloc countries, their past Soviet occupation leaves a potential for a correlation between their recent communist past and current at-risk democracies. This study argues that there must be a correlation between the loss of democracy in Hungary and Poland, as a result of their recent history as satellite states of the USSR.

Beginning with an explanation of past literature supporting theories and factors contributing to a shift towards an illiberal democracy, this thesis then used the works of

Juan Linz and Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt to conduct a case study of Hungary and Poland. In order to determine possible factors, an analysis of the current situation in Hungary and Poland over the past 10-15 years was conducted. Many scholars examine specific areas of failing democracies, but in order to find correlations between different threats to democracy, it is necessary to look at all potential threats. The case study begins with an analysis of the constitutions of Hungary and Poland, and the behaviors and actions of their two leaders. Then this thesis examined whether there are institutional norms to protect the democracies of Hungary and Poland and end with a conclusion of results and findings from the case study.

## **Literature Review**

Since the birth of democracy, scholars have discussed what factors make up a democracy, and the causes of its success or failure. As the world has grown more complex, the discussion of what is crucial for the survival of a democracy is ongoing and necessary. Because there are constantly new democracies trying to gain a solid and stable system of government, and autocrats testing the power of even the most established democracies, it is pivotal to continue developing a better understanding. Democratic systems of government are considered by many scholars to be the most ideal form of government, and therefore it is important to know about factors that can contribute to its failure.



Democratic systems are the most promising form of government for the Western world. Russett (1993) writes about the idea of democratic peace, and describes why a liberal democratic system is the most desirable, and how it constitutes the best system for global peacekeeping. Russett explains that the habits of democratic institutions are more likely to have peaceful resolutions to conflicts, avoiding wars with other democratic institutions (Russett, 4). In *Grasping the Democratic Peace*, Russett (1993) explains how democratic norms and culture create this idea, and how democracies are peaceful on a structural and institutional level.

### **What makes a democratic system possible?**

Although there are many definitions of a democracy, most scholars agree on some essential parts of a government that allow for a democracy to be successful. Linz (1996) groups the principles of a modern consolidated democracy into five categories: civil society, political society, rule of law, state apparatus, and economic society (*Problems of Democratic Transition* 14). All of these arenas demand both support and mediation from one another. Juan Linz provides an explanation of this interconnectedness.

“ For example, civil society in a democracy needs the support of a rule of law that guarantees the right of association and needs the support of a state apparatus that will effectively impose legal sanctions on those who would attempt to use illegal means to stop groups from exercising their democratic right to organize. Furthermore, each arena in the democratic system has an effect on other arenas. For example, political society crafts the constitution and major laws, manages the state apparatus, and produces the overall regulatory framework for economic society. In a consolidated democracy, therefore, there are constant mediations between the arenas, each of which is correctly in the ‘field’ of forces emanating from the other arenas” (Linz, *Problems of Democratic Transition* 15).

All variables are needed to ensure healthy democratic consolidation, and all variables rely on the existence of the others for a strong democracy. This becomes evident as Huntington (2009) uses Linz's theory to describe the wave of democratization at the end of the Cold War.

From this discussion, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) add on Linz's work. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) discuss important elements of a democracy that must be in place to prevent autocrats from rising to power and corrupting the system. Political parties, strong constitutions, upkeep of democratic norms, and a system of checks and balances, are all factors of a democracy that are necessary to the prevention of autocratic rulers coming to power. Fareed Zakaria (2003) and Samuel Huntington (1991) agree that the current idea of a democracy must go beyond its original meaning of "rule by the people." A country that embodies how we see a democracy needs more than free elections to avoid the potential for autocratic leaders taking away the rights and systems that most consider to be fundamental.

It becomes evident democratic consolidation is not solely based on the rules implemented in a nation's structure and constitution; Zakaria (2003) writes, "democracy has gone from being a form of government to a way of life" (14). He argues the society created today is a result of the democratization of economy, democratization of culture, and, more recently, the democratization of technology and information; this is what allows for the freedoms and opportunities included in the world's perception of a democratic society today (Zakaria 14-15). The original and most basic ideas of

democracy have retained these same values, but, over time, in order to uphold those values and freedoms, democratic ideals must be more widespread than the structure of government itself.

### **Loss of Democracy**

Democracies have become fragile, and an authoritarian regime often rises to power from them. Samuel Huntington (1991) describes the causes of a “reverse wave” of democratization in “Democracy’s Third Wave.” He argues obstacles to democratization are political, cultural, and economic; issues within each of these groups can be found in most countries that are struggling with a potential reversal of their democratization. Huntington discusses that these states may have weak democratic values from key elite groups and from the public, along with terrorism or insurgency resulting in a breakdown of law and order, or intervention by a non democratic foreign power have the ability to cause a reverse wave of democratization (Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave” 17-18).

Scholars Juan Linz (1996), Steven Levitsky, and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) have developed and agreed upon their “litmus test,” which includes what they say are four key indicators of authoritarian behavior. These four factors are: rejection (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game, denial of the legitimacy of political opponents, toleration or encouragement of violence, and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media (Levitsky and Ziblatt 23-24). In addition to these key signs from leaders, they also describe the actions leaders will take to manipulate different parts of the system in order to have leadership positions taken up by their supporters.

Huntington also describes culture as a main contributor that could pose a threat to democracy, certain cultures are particularly hostile to democracy, but they don't necessarily prohibit democratization ("Democracy's Third Wave" 23).

### **Obstacles for Democracy in Post Eastern-Bloc countries**

Huntington (2009) uses Linz's categorizations of different liberalization/democratization processes when describing the transitions in the 1974-1990 wave of democratization. In this analysis, Hungary is described as transformation (labeled as *reforma* by Linz) and Poland as transplacement (a combination of Linz's *reforma* and *ruptura*) in their processes (Huntington, "How Countries Democratize" 34). Transformation is described as occurring when "the elites in power took the lead in bringing about democracy," and transplacement when "democratization resulted largely from joint action by government and opposition groups" ("How Countries Democratize" 35). Huntington (2009) continues to add that there was no correlation between the nature of authoritarian regime and democratic transition ("How Countries Democratize" 35).

Buzogany and Varga (2018) have recent literature for the discussion of post-Soviet countries and their illiberal democracies. They argue educational institutions have influenced this change in ideology and acceptance of illiberal democratic ideals. Most importantly, that "despite the strong interest in the factors facilitating the 'illiberal backlash' in Central and Eastern Europe and its practical implications, there has been relatively little research on the ideational foundations of these developments" (Buzogany and Varga, 822). Conservative intellectuals push against core democratic ideals, such as

checks and balances, individual rights, and judicialization of politics; as a result this anti-democratic discourse becomes normal in a society (Buzogany and Varga, 822).

Buzogany and Varga (2018) claim Hungary's "illiberal backlash" is partially due to ideational views in Hungary during this time. Hungarian intellectuals were "receptive to post WWII Western conservative critiques of liberalism" (Buzogany and Varga, 814). When Hungary was developing its democratic ideals, there were many trusted intellectuals criticizing liberal democratic principles. This led to Buzogany and Varga's findings that "rather than considering Hungarian intellectuals as located merely at the receiving end of Western illiberalism, we find that the search for alternatives to liberalism was initiated by Hungarian intellectuals themselves" (Buzogany and Varga, 814). While this trend in scholarly work in Hungary is just one element, it may influence the upkeep of democratic principles and norms.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Hungary and Poland, along with other Eastern Bloc states, began their journey to establish new democratic governments. Poland was the first to spark political revolutions, which eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, making it seem that their democratic spirit was high. They were seen as the "most rebellious Warsaw Pact member," having four previous social upheavals (Levesque 236). In the 1981 uprising, Poland's Solidarity organization was 10 million strong, and Soviet leaders even agreed to not intervene for fear of extreme retaliation; eventually Polish leader Jaruzelski established a military coup in December 1981 and quickly suppressed Solidarity (Levesque 314). Ideologically, Poland appeared

promising for the hopes of future democratic consolidation. Hungary, often grouped with Poland in the latter years of the Cold War, generally had more resistance to Soviet communism. The two countries were grouped separately from other Eastern-Bloc countries, being more agreeable to “experiments in democratization,” compared to the much more hesitant East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania (Levesque 315). The two countries were among the first to implement democratic regimes during Gorbachev’s rule. As Hungary and Poland exited the Cold War, the two countries appeared to be some of the most promising for democratic consolidation.

Hungary and Poland began the process of democratization on what appeared to be solid ground, but democracies are fragile. Scholars have determined the elements needed to establish a consolidated liberal democracy, what norms must be in place to keep it, and elements that prove to be destructive to democracies. There is not enough research into how a decline in democracy may affect different regions of the world, and in this case post Eastern-Bloc countries. Region specific history may show a trend when examining obstacles of democratic consolidation. To determine whether there are specific factors in Poland and Hungary which have allowed for their current leaders to shift towards an authoritarian leadership, many factors must be examined.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Democracy is generally viewed as the most ideal form of government, providing citizens with rights and freedoms, and a ruling class made to serve its citizens; however, today we see a decline in democratic governance in countries that previously boasted democracies. Unexpectedly, countries around the world, particularly in Eastern Europe are becoming less democratic, and are electing leaders whose values do not align with a democratic system. This is unexpected for many post Soviet countries, because many of them were on a path to having stable democratic systems after emerging from the USSR. Along with other sure signs of a solid democratic foundation, such as establishing checks and balances and forming civil society organizations, this thesis argues that these countries' past must have contributed to some correlation with their failures today.

This thesis defines democracy as “a system of government with regular, free and fair elections, in which all adult citizens have the right to vote and possess basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech and association” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 6). For the sake of clarification, authoritarian regimes are defined as “political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones” (Linz, *Problems of Democratic Transition* 38).

Democratization theory, as developed by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996) and built upon by Samuel Huntington (2009), is used to establish variables necessary for democratic consolidation and factors that contribute to a decline in democratic values. This thesis utilizes a comparative approach to reveal what factors contribute to a decline in liberal democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). More recently, there has been increased awareness for the autocratic tendencies of Eastern European leaders. Because Hungary and Poland are two of the most prominent countries showing signs of an illiberal democracy, they were used as cases to determine what factors of failing democracies are consistent within the post Eastern-Bloc region. The two countries are headed down similar paths under autocratic rule, and, because of their history of Soviet occupation, this thesis looked for patterns that contribute to a lack of democratic consolidation. The thesis argued that the case study would find a correlation between the backsliding in democracy in Hungary and Poland, and their history as satellite states of the Soviet Union.

## **Data Collection and Methodology**

This thesis used a Hypothesis-Generating case study (Levy 2008). Case study method is applied to examine this idea of failing and illiberal democracies in post-communist Eastern Europe, as they do not fit in with the hopeful predictions of their new democracies. Levy (2008) discusses the potential for case studies to “refine and sharpen existing hypotheses in any research strategy involving an ongoing dialogue of theory and evidence” (5). This thesis examines Hungary and Poland in relation to the



work of Buzogany and Varga (2018) in their discussions of post-Communist European societies, and the issues that contribute to their troubled democratic systems.

Additionally, factors to determine authoritarian behavior and weaknesses in democracies were developed from Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan's factors needed for democratic consolidation, as well as Huntington (2009), and Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

The data used included an analysis of different aspects of democratic values and their flaws, as well as factors of authoritarian leaders suggested by Levitsky and Ziblatt. Howard (2003) uses Juan Linz's litmus test, but since his study, Levitsky and Ziblatt have finished Linz's incomplete work to achieve a more comprehensive framework describing authoritarian behavior. Using Hungary and Poland as cases, their constitutions were examined for signs of loopholes that would allow an authoritarian leader to rise to power. The variables of a strong constitution used were: time period the constitution was written (after or during Soviet rule), the system of checks and balances, a separation of powers, term limits, a bill of rights, and the recognition of political parties. The next section examined the leaders themselves, and looked at the authoritarian behaviors of Viktor Orban and Jarosław Kaczyński. The four variables of authoritarian behavior used were the following: rejection of democratic rules of the game, denial of legitimacy of political opponents, toleration of violence, and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, as developed by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018). Democratic norms are essential to the preservation of a healthy democracy; norms of mutual toleration, institutional forbearance, and polarization were examined in the instances of Hungary and Poland. Another variable is threats to democracy, as described by scholars such as Huntington,

Zakaria, and Levitsky and Ziblatt. The final variables looked at the ideological state of educational institutions during the period of the end of Soviet rule and into the establishment of Hungary and Poland's new democracies. In this final section, the other variables identified as threats to democracy were a negative public opinion of democracy, a poor economy, significant event/crisis, refugees used as a threat.

In order to assess these factors, both Polish and Hungarian newspapers were used, along with articles from newspapers outside the two countries, reporting on the social and political developments of Hungary and Poland. The data used to examine recent actions and ideological positions of president Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland and his PiS party were obtained from articles in the following newspapers ranging from July 2016 to August 2019: *Reuters*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Politico*, *Foreign Policy*, *The New York Times*, along with Polish newspapers *Krakow Post*, and *Warsaw Voice*. For data to examine Viktor Orban of Hungary and the Fidesz Party, the articles from the newspapers used were: *Foreign Policy*, *The New York Times*, *Times Higher Education*, *The New Yorker*, and Hungarian newspaper *Direkt36*, ranging from November 2014 to December 2019. Copies of both Poland and Hungary's constitutions were used from their respective official government websites, [sejm.gov](http://sejm.gov) and [kormany.hu](http://kormany.hu) in order to look for potential specific weaknesses in their constitutions. Scholars Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), along with Buzogany and Varga (2018) mentioned in the literature review were used for data collection of both countries' governments and their actions.

## **Findings and Analysis: Hungary and Poland**

From the beginning of Viktor Orbán's presidency in 2010 and when Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS party took control of the Polish government in 2015, both leaders have been shaping their respective countries into illiberal democracies taking on increasingly authoritative tendencies. Following their taking of power, they have managed to keep it, despite protests from citizens (Kingsley "Opposition in Hungary;" Barteczko and Sobczak). Both leaders are eager to attempt any opportunity to grasp more control. With Kaczyński praising Orbán as a role model for his "illiberal democracy," he follows closely behind Hungary's president, his "ideological ally on the political right," putting Poland on a path to authoritarian rule (Cienski). Fareed Zakaria (2003) warned about the dangers of an illiberal democracy for a country, and it is evident that both Hungary and Poland are heading in a dangerous direction.

Hungary's President, Viktor Orbán, and the man in charge of Poland's PiS party, Jarosław Kaczyński will be used for this case study. Kaczyński may no longer hold a leadership position in the Polish government, but recent scholars would agree he is the man behind all of the decisions made by the Polish government through 2019 (Markowski). In an article for *Politico*, Jan Cienski addresses Kaczyński's leadership and control over the Law and Justice party, which in turn rules the Polish government. Kaczyński does not hold an official position in office, but he chose Prime Minister Beata Szydło and President Andrzej Duda for their positions; and he said "no one doubts he is the man in charge in Warsaw" (Cienski). This case study examines features of the democracies in Hungary and Poland that hold the potential for reversing their backslide

into autocratic tendencies. It is important to look at a country's foundation, i.e. its constitution, to see what protections are evident or left for a wide range of interpretation. Additionally, this study examines the behaviors of Hungary and Poland's ruling party leaders, and to what extent they display autocratic behaviors. Also crucial to democratic consolidation are the upkeep of unwritten norms, and additional threats to a democracy known to test a state's democratic system.

### **Constitutional Safeguards**

Authors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue even countries with strong constitutions that contain preventative measures can fall subject to a decline in democratic values with an authoritarian leader (98). They claim keeping democratic norms are the essential element for survival of democracies. Regardless, it is necessary to evaluate the constitutions of these countries to determine if there are any essential flaws at the basic level. I assess the potential for flaws within the Hungarian and Polish constitutions, and then continue to examine other elements that may be flawed within these countries that allow for their slipping democracies. There are six variables of a strong democratic constitution. The variables are: when the constitution was written, checks and balances, a separation of powers, presidential term limits, a bill of rights, and the recognition of political parties (See Table 1).

Table 1: Protections in the Constitution

	When Written	Checks and Balances	Separation of powers	Presidential term limits	Bill of rights	Recognition of political parties
<b>Hungary</b>	2011	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Poland</b>	1997	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Both countries have constitutions written after their separation from the Soviet Union, however, Hungary's constitution was not written until 2011, under Viktor Orbán's leadership. Hungary may have received the new constitution it needed (the previous constitution was created while under Soviet rule in 1949), but with Orbán writing the rules, it left room for the laws to be stretched in the Fidesz party's favor. Although both constitutions originally had the protections that ensure democratic values on a basic level, both leaders implemented policies or made changes which undermine these rules and values set forth by their constitutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 80). Hungary's constitution states that before dissolving the national assembly, "the president must address the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the national Assembly, and the leaders of the parliamentary groups" (Article 3, sec. 4). Viktor Orbán has assured these positions were filled by companions who are in agreement with him and his vision for Hungary. In addition, he was able to manipulate the size of the courts and appoint the members of his choosing. If every position that makes up the system of checks and balances in Hungary is a friend or ally of Orbán, the system of checks and balances and other constitutional protections becomes meaningless.

An almost mirror image of this is reflected in Kaczyński's PiS party within the Polish government (Levitsky and Ziblatt 80). Kaczyński did not have the advantage of being the one to write the constitution, as Poland's constitution was written in 1997. Because Kaczyński is known to be the man in charge of the PiS party, the roles in all branches of government are controlled and influenced by him. With both leaders

consolidating their power, they managed to invalidate some of the fundamental democratic policies in their respective constitutions.

### **Authoritarian Behavior**

Table 2 exhibits the authoritarian behaviors of Hungary and Poland’s leaders, Viktor Orban and Jarosław Kaczyński. Using Levitsky and Ziblatt’s findings, an initial assessment of both Orban and Kaczyński’s actions show authoritarian behaviors. Both countries were studied by Levitsky and Ziblatt and they found that both regimes were “mildly authoritarian” (187).

Table 2: Authoritarian Behavior

	Rejection of democratic rules of the game	Denial of legitimacy of political opponents	Toleration or encouragement of violence	Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media
<b>Hungary- Orban</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Poland-Kaczyński</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

The characteristics of authoritarian behavior outlined by Levitsky and Ziblatt include: rejection of democratic rules of the game, denial of legitimacy of political opponents, toleration or encouragement of violence, and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents. The first variable is “rejection of the democratic rules of the game.” Both Orban and Kaczyński have publicly expressed their discontent with a liberal democratic society (Lyman and Smale; Cienski). In a report describing Orban’s speech in the summer of 2014, Orban reportedly “praised ‘illiberal democracies’ in Turkey, China, Singapore, and Russia” (Lyman and Smale). They have become closer companions with each other, also among them Serbia’s president Alexander Vucic. Orban wrote a new

constitution after being elected that allowed for loopholes so he would be able to change democratic principles that did not benefit him (Scheeple).

In Poland, as Jarosław Kaczyński applauds Orbán's behaviors and actions, it is no shock that the PiS leader exhibits the same behaviors of the first factor of authoritarian behavior (See Table 1). In 2015, when the PiS party gained control in the government, they managed to appoint five new justices to the Constitutional Tribunal who were loyalists to PiS, and attempted to create different judicial reforms which would remove checks on power. The reforms included a necessary two thirds majority in the Constitutional Tribunal, giving the newly appointed PiS allies a veto power in the courts; additionally, the reforms included legislation which fundamentally gave the parliament even more control in different offices within the judiciary branch (Rohac). This group of reforms was ruled unconstitutional in 2016, but no doubt shows Kaczyński's intentions for the PiS party to have control in all branches of government (Rohac). The laws were vetoed by Polish President, Andrzej Duda, in defiance of Kaczyński's wishes; Duda later proposed his own judicial reforms which were less viable to backlash (Lyman).

The second variable involves media being used to deny the legitimacy of opponents for both leaders, resulting in the following examples also being evidence of a "Yes" for the fourth variable. A report from *Politico* describes PiS officials creating a "smear campaign against judges opposed to the government's judicial reforms" (Wanat). Multiple attempts were made by PiS to control media campaigns of other candidates. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán not only slanders his competition, but has made moves using his allies that allow him to influence most of the main media outlets in Hungary (Kingsley,

“Orban and his Allies”). In November of 2018, many media owners declared the transfer of “over 400 news websites, newspapers, television channels and radio stations to the Central European Press and Media Foundation” (Kingsley, “Orban and his Allies”). The group was only found in August of 2018, and its board members are made up of Orban’s personal lawyers and two other close allies.

With Orban loyalists holding ownership of all major media outlets in the country, he may not hold official control of what media the residents of Hungary consume, but it does seem clear his opinions and support for his campaigns are the majority of messages coming through Hungary’s major media outlets (Kingsley, “Orban Bends Hungarian Society”). In addition, other independent media outlets have been systematically starved of revenue as well as their owners’ other businesses, almost forcing them to give up their media companies to Orban or his or censor their content about Orban (András). In *Direkt36*, an independent newspaper in Hungary, Pethő András describes the example of Lajos Simicska, a powerful businessman who began to speak against Orban’s leadership, and eventually ended up selling most of his assets to Orban and his friends. This dynamic constructed by Orban leaves “yes” answers for all check marks of authoritarian behavior besides encouragement of violence described by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt.

The above mentioned reports from throughout Kaczyński and Orban’s time in power check three of the four criteria of authoritarian behavior, the difference being slightly more resistance within Poland for its undemocratic policies. In Hungary, Viktor Orban faced much less resistance for his autocratic behaviors and changes in government. Neither leader was found to have toleration/encouragement of violence, however, the



other criteria appear to have a strong presence in the governing actions of Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orban.

### **Institutional Norms**

After all of the legislation and leadership behavior has been examined, there are unwritten norms needed to keep democracies functioning. The three norms mentioned in Table 3 are four of the crucial democratic norms outlined by Levitsky and Ziblatt, and are now applied to the current systems in Hungary and Poland.

Table 3: Democratic Norms

	Mutual toleration	Institutional forbearance	Polarization
<b>Hungary</b>	No	No	Yes
<b>Poland</b>	No	No	moderate

The democratic norms, “Mutual toleration” and “institutional forbearance,” are defined in *How Democracies Die* as a continuation of Juan Linz’s work. The first as “politicians’ collective willingness to agree to disagree” (102). The latter is defined as respecting the “spirit” of the law and not implementing policies or taking actions which may violate such spirit of a democracy (106). As described previously, both Viktor Orban and Jarosław Kaczyński have used their media control to rid their systems of all of the unwritten norms. Orban shows minimal toleration for his opponents, usually undermining them with his control of the media, or using allies to erase other opinions (András). Additionally, it becomes evident both men have used their power to implement legislation and rule in an undemocratic nature, coming to “No” answers for both mutual toleration and institutional forbearance.

Polarization refers to the division of parties where members of one party become “increasingly loyal to their party- and hostile to the other one” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 71). There is extreme polarization in Hungary, as Orban invalidates all opinions of his opponents, excluding those against him and leaving them with little voice in the government or the media. Poland is moderate, as those in disagreement with the PiS party have managed to have some representation, as well as those in the middle ground (Levitsky and Ziblatt; Lyman). Poland seems to have a middle ground, between those protesting the PiS party and officials under Jarosław Kaczyński’s wing there are officials who acknowledge Kaczyński’s extremes, while still having a conservative political view.

**Threats to democracy**

After analyzing the actions of the autocratic leaders and the foundations of the constitutions, a few remaining threats to democracy are left as easy targets or slipping points for these nations. Historically, the circumstances listed in Table 4 can aid autocrats in gaining support for their agendas. With inconsistency in upkeep of democratic norms and autocrats for leaders, Hungary and Poland are left vulnerable to further threats to democracy.

Table 4: Other Threats to Democracy

	Negative Public Opinion of Democracy	Poor Economy	Significant Event/Crisis	Educational institutions with conservative values	Immigration or refugee problem as a threat	History of mistrust in political system/ unstable nation building
<b>Hungary</b>	Yes	Moderate	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Poland</b>	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

A history of mistrust in the political system and/or unstable nation building can easily lead to a negative public opinion of democracy. While both countries had a communist past, other post Eastern-Bloc countries are on drastically different paths. It is clear the previous communist history alone is not a major factor in the cause of the new illiberal democracies. Hungary's history during this period is summed up by Lyman and Smale, in *The New York Times*, describing periods of good living under Soviet rule. Viktor Orban was once against Russia, and a liberal in support of building Hungary's democracy (Lyman and Smale). Hungary's economy was still in recovery from 2008 when the Fidesz party came to power in 2010, and the party promised economic recovery in its' campaign. This, along with the other variables and Orban's control of the media portrays a negative opinion of democracy. Orban has used surveys to blame the state of Hungary on refugees, and reinforce his new "illiberal democracy" (Kingsley, "Orban Bends Hungarian Society").

In another article for *The New York Times*, Patrick Kingsley describes exactly how Orban is influencing the education system, media, and even arts to his advantage. Kingsley addresses Orban's influence in the education system currently, influencing textbooks to promote that "it can be problematic for different cultures to exist." In addition, the Fidesz party has pushed out Central European University in Budapest, a typically pro-democratic higher education institution, and even formed a new university to "train the public officials of the future" (Kingsley). Buzogany and Varga (2018) discuss the "ideational turn in literature" during the end of the Soviet era. This led to the reorientation of the originally liberal FIDESZ party, which then brought about "the

modernization of Hungarian conservatism” (Buzogany and Varga 816). This grew at several social science departments in Budapest universities (Peter Pazmany Catholic University and Corvinus University), while liberals and neoliberals “grouped around Central European University” (Buzogany and Varga 816). Many of the conservative intellectuals at these universities became political figures during the initial rise of the FIDESZ party in 1998 (817). Hungary’s history may not be in its favor, Ekiert explains the complexities that come with understanding the history of the nation and its correlation to democratic consolidation.

Poland faces a notably similar situation. The *Foreign Affairs* article by Volha Charnysh discusses why Poland's roots makes it an easy ground for autocrats to take their power. For example, “Poland’s fraught history of nation building, repeatedly interrupted by wars and occupation, provides right-wing activists with a rich supply of martyrdom and betrayal tropes to support the vision of Poland as surrounded by internal and external enemies” making it a country with a fragile foundation for democratic consolidation (Charnysh). The country has “Xenophobic and fundamentalist sentiments have deep historical roots in the country” (Charnysh). This creates ground for the PiS party to impose fears of refugees as an external crisis and also to spread hate within the country. Jarosław’s brother Lech is now seen as one of the most influential figures in Poland after his passing in 2010, and the PiS party’s undemocratic view was only gaining in popularity using the above (Charnysh). Poland’s economy is doing well, leaving that out for a potential party promise, but it is noteworthy that 86 percent of Poles “complained that the gap between the rich and poor in Poland was too large” (Charnysh). The ties

between a negative opinion of democracy and conservative educational institutions, plus the use of refugees as a threat to the country, imply a chain reaction of these dangers to democracy.

When considering all of the variables that lead to authoritarian regimes and the breakdown of a democratic one, these Eastern European countries are left vulnerable to this slip into authoritarianism, and their autocratic rulers are aware. It suggests there are not only a few variables among the two countries that lead to the breakdown of their democratic regimes. Rather it is the combination of autocrats, lack of upkeep in democratic norms, among other known threats to democracy that allow an easy slip into a system that more closely resembles authoritarianism. Constitutions which have a sound foundation, still have loopholes. Almost every variable for the leaders of Hungary and Poland was marked as clearly authoritarian, which created a pathway to power for Orban and Kaczyński.

## **Conclusion**

In Eastern Europe, autocrats have managed to grasp power in ostensibly democratic ways in Hungary and Poland. Autocrats are ruling in countries that claim to be democracies such as in Serbia and Ukraine, among many others worldwide. After investigating the factors which indicate declining democratic values in Hungary and Poland, it appears there are no specific variables resulting in an authoritarian shift; rather, Hungary and Poland embody many components of at-risk democracies. The norm of institutional forbearance is not upheld if the leader in power chooses to take actions

which are lawful, but still undemocratic. For example, Viktor Orban has stacked the boards of media companies with friends and allies who promote his agenda while not allowing any opposition voices to be heard. Because the government is not “in control of the media and it cannot be considered “state owned,” technically this is not autocratic, yet it is. Although legal, an action like this does not practice the norm of forbearance, and, in turn, can assist in the deterioration of other norms. With no one checking the power of the leaders in Hungary and Poland, they are able to use other variables that leave a country’s democracy vulnerable to gain power.

Hungary and Poland have an unsteady history and are relatively new democracies, and this most likely correlates with the ease of public opinion to shift towards a negative view of democracy. This research was limited in data collection, as sources from news outlets in Hungarian and Polish were not used. Additionally, having a robust civil society is important to democratic consolidation (Howard 2003), but this study did not collect data concerning civil society participation in Hungary or Poland. The next step for further research would be to determine the significance of the history of these countries, both culturally and in their institutions, in their ability to develop secure democracies. Samuel Huntington argues culture can pose an obstacle to democracy, but there are limits to these cultural obstacles in democratic consolidation (“Democracy’s Third Wave” 29-30). In summation, Huntington (1991) states, “economic development makes democracy possible; political leadership makes it real. For democracies to come into being, future political elites will have to believe, at a minimum, that democracy is the least bad form of government for their societies and themselves” (“Democracy’s Third Wave” 33).

Understanding how culture and history affect these nation's democratic consolidation is an essential component to further developing this area of research. Additional research is needed to interpret the extent to which educational institutions have an effect on a society's opinions and beliefs on democracy. In Hungary, the more liberal democratic scholars gravitated towards Budapest's Central European University, with scholars in other higher education institutions leaning to more conservative or antidemocratic views. In March of 2017, Viktor Orban attempted to shut down the university's Budapest campus (Matthews).

The COVID 19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 poses additional tests to Hungary and Poland's failing democracies. This pandemic changes the "No" to a "Yes" in Table 4 under "Significant event/Crisis," adding a very serious threat to the ability of these countries to hold on to democracy. The pandemic is an opportunity for Viktor Orban and Jarosław Kaczyński to grasp power. Orban would appear to be in a better position, as he is president and is able to use prerogative powers to grasp total control of the country which he may not give back. Kaczyński, however, has already faced resistance from Polish president Andrzej Duda in the past (Lyman). Hungary and Poland made moves to consolidate power. The most notable move being the Hungarian Parliament giving Orban the right to rule by decree indefinitely in March 2020 (Erlanger). With Kaczyński facing a bit more resistance to his illiberal democratic values and Orban facing little to none, the COVID 19 pandemic is a crucial time for the future of Hungary.

Autocrats can come to power in even the strongest democracies. Without democratic norms in place and checks on their power, anything from a new democracy to

an established one with citizens who mistrust a democratic system can put it to the test. Democratic nations are ideal for ensuring the freedom and peace that many citizens aspire to have, and Hungary and Poland have autocrats who are attempting to create at the least what they call “illiberal democracies” and at most authoritarian regimes with themselves in complete control. Zakaria warns of the consequences of leaders in democratic societies who do not set legal and moral standards, saying “without this inner stuffing, democracy will become an empty shell, not simply inadequate, but potentially dangerous, bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the manipulation of freedom, and the decay of a common life” (256). With a better understanding of what factors cause a slide away from democracies, the warning signs and autocrats can be caught earlier. The better the understanding, the better the ability to build and upkeep strong democracies worldwide.



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