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Standing up against autocratization across political regimes: a comparative analysis of resistance actors and strategies

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ABSTRACT

Resistance against autocratization is a neglected area of inquiry. Although we have solid knowledge of the structural pre-conditions, modalities, and patterns of autocratization, as well as the motivations and strategies used by authoritarian actors, very little is known about the actors resisting autocratization and their strategies. This article provides an answer to the following questions: why does resistance against autocratization matter and why do we need to address it? How to define it? Who are the actors involved and what are the main strategies adopted? This article contributes to the current debate on autocratization by providing a detailed discussion on the topic of resistance and a definition that can be operationalized for empirical research. It also addresses this issue in a comparative perspective by analysing resistance against autocratization across different types of political regimes, therefore overcoming the narrow focus on democratic backsliding in democratic regimes. Eventually, based on the analysis of selected cases of successful resistance, we conclude by formulating working hypotheses to be further investigated on the density of resistance networks and the shifting nature of resistance when moving from democracy to authoritarianism.

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The study of autocratization, understood as the opposite of democratization is an established scholarship nowadays,¹ with growing interest for the analysis of contemporary autocratic change.² From Europe to Latin America, South-East Asia to sub-Saharan Africa, there are numerous cases where incumbent governments restrict political and civil rights, erode independent institutions to expand executive power, manipulate elections, and limit political pluralism. Democratic institutions are threatened by would-be authoritarian leaders and parties that, with or without popular support and/or powerful allies such as the military, foreign powers, or oligarchical networks, pursue a project of authoritarian transformation of politics and society.

Yet, equally powerful forces are constantly at work to resist and revert such processes: free and independent media, civil society organizations, democratic parties

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and leaders, ordinary citizens, state officials loyal to democratic institutions, transnational networks of activists, international and supranational institutions. Recently, Human Rights Watch noted that “the excesses of autocratic rule are fueling a powerful counterattack”.³ Admittedly, this counterattack is not always successful, but resistance against autocratization deserves more attention and, in this respect, the academic debate clearly lags behind. We have a solid knowledge of the structural pre-conditions, motivations, and strategies used by authoritarian actors, modalities, and patterns of autocratization. However, besides some notable exceptions,⁴ those who resist this process are widely overlooked. Where there is a *driver* of autocratization, there is also one or more *opponents*. Very little is known about these actors and their strategies in fighting autocratization. As recently shown by V-DEM, “successful” resistance to ongoing autocratization is a rare phenomenon⁵: once initiated, there are few cases in which autocratization is blocked or reversed. This conclusion, however, should not discourage research. Although successful cases of resistance to autocratization are few, resistance attempts are numerous, and the academic debate must acknowledge this and catch up.⁶ This concern is the starting point of this article: why does resistance against autocratization matter? How to define it? Who are the actors involved and what are the main strategies adopted? We need a broad investigation on resistance against autocratization to better understand the different resistance patterns, with the ambition of providing a useful scientific foundation to the actors in the field: a resistance “playbook” to counter autocratization.

This article is structured in three parts. First, it describes why it is crucial to address the issue of resistance against autocratization and, in this perspective, it provides a definition that can be easily operationalized for empirical research. Moreover, the article calls for comparative strategies of inquiry that may cover resistance against autocratization across different types of political regimes, therefore overcoming the narrow focus on democratic backsliding in democratic regimes. Second, the article lists the different types of actors who take part in resistance, by focusing on domestic actors. Third, the article provides an empirical analysis of resistance divided into three parts, dedicated to different types of resistance against autocratization. Accordingly, the article analyses, six case studies of successful resistance against autocratization to highlight actors and strategies involved. Comparative discussion about the findings is made in the last section of the paper.

Resisting autocratization: why it matters and what it is

Autocratization processes are identifiable periods of time where single or collective actors carry out an inter or intra- regime transformation, making the exercise of political power more arbitrary and repressive and restricting the space for public contestation and political participation in the process of government selection. Autocratization is an “umbrella concept” encompassing several phenomena of change such as democratic regression/backsliding (when the core features of liberal democracy are eroded but no transition to autocratic regime occurs), democratic breakdown (where democracy collapses), or authoritarian deepening (when we observe the deepening of authoritarian characteristics in already autocratic regimes). The concept is still the subject of debate and can be conceived both from a continuous (or quantitative) perspective as “any movement” away from democracy (see Lurhmann and Lindberg⁷), or from a qualitative perspective as a “regime change towards autocracy” (see Cassani and

Tomini).⁸ These approaches are complementary and can be adopted depending on the research question. In this article we refer to autocratization as a regime change and we are dealing with cases of “failed autocratization” because of a successful resistance. By using a conceptualization based on regime change we minimize the risk of false positives, excluding ambiguous instances of autocratization. This is in line with the exploratory approach of the article: we focus on few, solid cases of (failed) autocratization to generate working hypotheses at the end of the analysis.

In both conceptualizations, autocratization has a beginning and an end. During this timeframe, the drivers of autocratization never act in the absence of a counterpart, and those who undergo the process of autocratization are not necessarily passive, on the contrary. Many actors often try to resist the autocratic turn. Sometimes they fail, and sometimes they stop and revert the process. Nonetheless, they play an active role during autocratization attempts and they should be part of any explanation of this process. Since power and resistance are highly intertwined, it is surprising that the literature on autocratization has neglected one side of the equation by focusing mainly on the former. Actually, the outcome of autocratization is defined by the strategic interaction between *drivers* and *opponents* of autocratization within a specific context marked by the structural socio-economic, institutional, cultural, or international pre-conditions that provide opportunities and constraints to both actors.

“Resisting” autocratization is different from “preventing” autocratization and, in this perspective, is a field of inquiry that has links with the studies on democratic resilience.⁹ The phenomenon of democratic resilience against autocratization has been addressed by the autocratization literature when scholars analysed causes and structural pre-conditions for this process, such as polarization, international authoritarian diffusion, overlapping inequalities, or the collapse of the party system.¹⁰ From an analytical point of view though, preventing autocratization *from starting* is not the same as *opposing autocratization when it is underway*, during the limited period in which the process unfolds. The context is different: autocratization is the realm of “hidden agendas”, Machiavellianism and improvisation, meaning that the uncertainty about the outcome, the rules, and the actors’ motivations and goals is a central feature of this process. In this perspective, studying resistance against autocratization requires a specific and distinct focus.

Further studies on this phenomenon are needed if we recognize our lack of knowledge on which actors and resistance strategies are more effective and better fitted to each specific country and context. Existing contributions are focused mainly on the study of mild forms of autocratization (namely democratic regression unfolding in liberal democracies). Still, we witness cases of contemporary autocratization in different regions of the world and in different forms. The lessons from resistance against autocratization in established authoritarian regimes might be extremely valuable for democratic countries. In a nutshell: only sound comparative research designs will allow us to overcome a West-centered, liberal democracy-focused perspective on autocratization and resistance.

Subsequently, what do we mean by resistance against autocratization? We suggest defining it as *any activity, or combination of activities, taken by a changing set of often interconnected and interacting actors who, regardless of the motivations, attempt at slowing down, stopping, or reverting the actions of the actors responsible for the process of autocratization*. First, through this definition, we highlight the fact that resistance against autocratization is (often) a *collective endeavour*, where multiple

actors are involved in distinctive and evolving configurations (alliances, coalitions, networks) affecting different levels (national, local, and international actors; political, social and cultural actors). Second, we stress the fact that *resistance strategies are manifold* (e.g. building opposition coalitions, parliamentary boycotting, organizing demonstrations, supporting the opposition from abroad, etc.) and that these strategies, visible or covert, might (or might not) be coordinated. Third, we stress that resistance actors' decisions can be based upon *different and sometimes diverging motivations*. We need to overcome the simplistic division between authoritarian, populist actors on the one hand, and democratic, reformist actors on the other hand. Resisting autocratization does not always mean being pro-liberal democracy. Just like autocratization can be pursued in the framework of various political ideologies (e.g. far-right nationalism, populism, far-left ideologies, technocracy, etc.), so can actors of resistance oppose these changes for different political reasons (e.g. pro-democratic normative preferences), but also for simple cost–benefit calculations in terms of power distribution, because of a misinterpretation of the situation, or even for non-political reasons. Finally, we stress that *autocratization itself is agent-based*: there are always one or several actors responsible for the authoritarian turn (most often the incumbent government, but other actors might concur such as the military, or oligarchical networks among others).

Hinged on this foundation, as suggested by Cleary and Öztürk, any analysis of resistance against ongoing autocratization should consider the “agency-based perspective”.¹¹ In this regard, we must be clear: actors do not act in a vacuum. Extensive literature shows that pre-existing conditions matter when it comes to explaining autocratization, be they institutional (the form of government, the territorial division of the state, or the electoral law and the type of party system), economic (economic development or the level of inequality), social (culture or ethnic composition) or related to the structure of the international system. However, this essay focuses on the actors, using the characteristics of the regime in which they operate as a reference base and maximizing the differences between cases to highlight similar patterns.

The constellation of domestic resistance actors

Who are these actors and in what conditions do they act? Addressing this initial question requires the analysis of different categories.¹²

First, the *institutional resisters* are those inhabiting state institutions at the national and sub-national levels and are responsible for implementing inter-institutional accountability on the executive power. These are the actors who, precisely because of their role within state institutions, have the power and competencies to ensure compliance with constitutional rules and democratic norms and thus resist autocratization attempts. Here, we find top-level actors such as judges of the constitutional or supreme courts who can overturn laws or decisions taken by the government and challenge an attempted abuse of power, or members of independent bodies such as the anti-corruption authorities who can act against the executive power's illiberal decisions, and even members of independent electoral authorities responsible for controlling and supervising the electoral process to guarantee the proper conduct of an election and possibly oppose pressure from the executive for electoral manipulations.

Existing studies show how the capacity of these actors to resist autocratization processes decreases as the regime becomes more authoritarian. In a liberal democracy,

where there are checks and balances and where power is fragmented, these actors constitute the first line of defense of democratic institutions. They possess resources, competences, and legal and constitutional protection that minimize cost of opposition to illiberal decisions by an authoritarian executive. This capacity decreases in electoral democracies and is further reduced in authoritarian regimes, which is confirmed by the greater resilience to autocratization shown by democratic regimes compared to authoritarian ones and, among democratic regimes, by liberal compared to electoral democracies.¹³

Second, the *political resisters* are political leaders and parties that can initiate resistance against autocratization inside and outside state institutions. In most cases, opposition parties play this role through a multitude of tactics and strategies: in the context of electoral competition, or in their role of coordination and representation of social groups and interests. Across the regime spectrum, the capacity of these actors to effectively react against autocratization decreases as the regime becomes more authoritarian: freedom of expression and freedom of association, that allow the opposition to express and organize dissent in public space; the respect of rights and prerogatives that empower opposition forces within institutions; and the freedom and fairness of elections that allow pluralism and fair competition, and influence the parliamentary strengths of opposition parties, are all dimensions that are compressed as regimes become more authoritarian.

However, another form of political resistance that does not involve opposition parties may also come from within the incumbent party or ruling coalition in the form of an internal split between hard-liners and soft-liners, or defection from party allies. This form of resistance “from within” is also affected by the type of regime since the cost of dissent increases with the expansion of authoritarianism, making an internal split from the incumbent unlikely (*ceteris paribus*).

Third, the *social resisters* are those actors capable of organizing resistance to autocratization at the grassroots level, such as civil society organizations, social movements, trade unions, but also actors from the social, economic, and cultural spheres. Here again, the characteristics of the political regime have a strong influence on their capacity to resist. Where freedom of association, expression, and press are respected, civil rights are guaranteed, and civil society is independent of the government, the room for maneuver of these actors is ample, giving them a significant role in countering autocratization. Conversely, as the regime becomes increasingly authoritarian, their room for maneuver shrinks. The fact that the actual power of institutional and political resisters in more restrictive authoritarian contexts is quite limited, even non-existent in some cases, makes these actors key players. The lack of certainty regarding the rules, subject, and procedures of the political game plays in favour of authoritarian leaders who enjoy great levels of freedom when it comes to “handling” opponents. Consequently, an oppositional force – whether a movement or a figure – deals with great insecurity concerning its contentious activity because the regime claims to represent the best interests of its people, but also the State and its values.

We therefore assume that the characteristics of the political regime in which autocratization takes place have a major impact on the types of resistance actors involved and their strategies. Based on this premise, the next section analyses resistance against autocratization across three different contexts: the liberal democracy-electoral democracy continuum; the electoral democracy-electoral autocracy continuum, and the electoral autocracy-closed autocracy continuum. The selection of cases considers several

factors: (1) The belonging of the chosen case to a specific political regime (2) The moment when autocratization unfolds, to cover the whole post-1989 period (3) the presence of a process of “failed autocratization”, that is an autocratization process which, once started, is blocked, or reversed (4) The geographical distribution of cases. At this stage, our purpose is to maximize the diversity of cases to uncover potential common patterns of resistance.

To this end we have used the recent V-DEM ERT dataset¹⁴ and, based on their conceptualization we firstly selected two cases of “averted democratic regression” in liberal democracies (the United States between 2016 and 2021 during the presidency of Donald Trump and Israel between 2009 and 2021, the second tenure of Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister). We thus follow the definition provided by Maerz et al¹⁵ and considered averted democratic regression as a “substantial decline in the democratic quality before reverting back to some higher democratic state”. In other words, autocratization falls short of transforming liberal democracy in a stable electoral democracy, and is then reverted. We then selected two cases of “preempted democratic breakdown” (Ecuador between 2006 and 2008 under Rafael Correa, and North Macedonia between 2006 and 2016 under Nikola Gruevski), when autocratization falls short of transforming an electoral democracy into a stable electoral autocracy, and is then reverted. Finally, we select one case of “resistance against a preempted democratic transition” (Tunisia since 2011), when an authoritarian regime temporarily achieves minimally democratic conditions but then starts to move back to authoritarianism, and one case of “resistance against reverted liberalization” (Sudan between 2018 and 2021), when a closed autocracy experiences some forms of liberalization, before they revert back to the previous status and some actors start resisting these push-backs.

For all the cases of autocratization examined,¹⁶ this article focuses on (1) The main arenas of domestic resistance (institutional, political, social) (2) The specific actors responsible for this resistance and (3) The strategies implemented to counter the process of autocratization. The choice to examine only cases in which this process has been blocked or even reversed derives from a research aim, at this stage, to highlight common patterns of successful resistance across different political regimes. Inevitably, this approach has its limits because we do not include cases of “failed” resistance. Therefore, this article does not have the ambition to generalize on the effectiveness of the strategies and on the conditions that allow them to be successful, but instead to open a debate by adopting an exploratory approach.¹⁷ This development in the analysis will require further studies but with this paper, we generate some working hypotheses at the end of this article.

Resisting autocratization in liberal democracy: resistance from within institutions and the role of political opposition

Liberal democracy is the type of regime most capable of *preventing* a process of autocratization.¹⁸ Yet even these regimes may have difficulty resisting and avoiding a transition to electoral democracies or even electoral autocracy if authoritarian leaders or parties come to power. In this unfortunate circumstance, the confrontation between autocratizing actor(s) and resisters mainly takes place in the institutional arena. When a liberal democracy regresses to an electoral democracy, the main dimension in which change occurs is precisely that of executive limitation. Usually, the first

move of autocratizing actors is to implement reforms to manipulate and change institutions to weaken (if not to eliminate) control on executive power.

No democracy, not even the most established one, can avoid with absolute certainty that at some point and for a multitude of causes, a leader or a political party with authoritarian tendencies will be able to win the elections, rule the country, and carry out an attack on the Rule of Law and on democratic institutions that guarantee accountability.¹⁹ This is the moment in which the real stress test of democratic institutions occurs.

The recent case of the **United States** during the Trump presidency gives us a concrete example.²⁰ His electoral defeat ended four years marked by scandals, authoritarian behaviour, conflicts of interest, attacks on the Supreme Court, the judicial system and individual judges, investigations on the president and an impeachment procedure. With two months left before the official inauguration of president-elect Joe Biden, Donald Trump and his closest allies refused to recognize the electoral results and concede defeat. Instead, they tried every permissible and political way to invalidate the results, a process that culminated with the riots at the Capitol in January 2021 and the second impeachment. The period between the November elections and Biden's inauguration in January 2021 was therefore the moment when autocratization attempts reached their peak in the USA.

Faced with strong political pressure coming directly from the President or his entourage, US state and local election officials, judges, as well as state legislatures and federal departments (in particular the justice department), followed the rules and behaved with integrity. Several appeal court judges, appointed, in many cases, by Trump himself, ruled against the attempts to overturn Biden's victory at the state level on the basis of supposed voter fraud.²¹ Justice Department officials refused to launch investigation over election fraud claims.²² Local election officials, many of them Republicans, resisted the pressure to discard in-mail ballots and to decertify the electoral results.²³ After the January riots, the U.S. military's Joint Chiefs of Staff condemned the 2021 Capitol violence as an attack against the constitutional process and the law.²⁴ The pattern of resistance from within to halt the executive's unconstitutional and illegal moves, particularly visible during the last months of the Trump presidency, was actually a constant presence during his mandate, including top US generals refusing to intervene violently against civil rights protest,²⁵ and members of the Trump administration actively working to keep his presidency within constitutional limits and norms.²⁶ These evidences not only show the important role played by institutional resisters, but also how the division within an incumbent coalition is a crucial weak-point of any potential authoritarian leader.

Overall, the actions of these institutional actors blocked the attempts to overturn the results of the elections coming from the executive power. The attempted autocratization was stopped "from within" in the first place, by the actors inhabiting democratic institutions. To be clear, these strategies were effective as short-term opposition, but they neither address the causes of autocratization attempts nor were they intended to prevent future, similar attacks on democracy. Nevertheless, this institutional resistance and the intra-incumbent division were the precondition for allowing opposition forces to peacefully replace through election a leader that was still popular among his voters such as Donald Trump.

The case of **Israel** during Netanyahu's second tenure as Prime Minister (2009–2021) was scarred by markings of autocratization. Besides spearheading measures

tied to the Israeli political system, such as a nation-state law,²⁷ Netanyahu drew from the “classic” autocratizer toolkit.²⁸ The government introduced measures hampering executive limitation, like a law limiting the occasions under which the police could file indictment recommendations.²⁹ The government also undermined public contestation, requiring NGOs to report and disclose foreign funding on a quarterly basis and commissioning ethical codes attempting to limit academic speech.³⁰

Moreover, Netanyahu and his party Likud used the democratic game’s loopholes to curb resistance. The appointment of Avichai Mandelblit as Attorney General, who prior to his appointment in 2016 served as Netanyahu’s cabinet secretary,³¹ is a characteristic attempt of a policy of installing loyalist into key positions.³² Furthermore, Netanyahu maneuvered skilfully across party cleavages, balancing the demands of secularist and Haredi parties and taking advantage of the ostracization of the Arab list to block the formation of an anti-Netanyahu bloc.³³

Nonetheless, despite being fragmented, comprising a wide spectrum of parties, including former coalition partners of Likud, the opposition managed to cooperate on key issues concerning the upkeep of democracy. It raised awareness about certain misgivings of the government and, together with civil society, protested against the slowly-led investigations against Netanyahu, prompting institutional actors, such as the Supreme Court and the Attorney General, to check the executive. Encouraged to act independently, the Supreme Court blocked laws and practices that undermined safeguards, such as the independence of the public broadcaster and legislative scrutiny over the budget, while Attorney General Mandelblit filed the indictment against Netanyahu in November 2019.³⁴

The Israeli opposition also managed to transcend schismatic cleavages and form a government that would replace Netanyahu and Likud at the helm of the executive. After holding four legislative elections between April 2019 and March 2021, marked by incumbent coalition splits and political realignments, the opposition formed an anti-Netanyahu bloc in June 2021. Composed of diverse parties, many of which former rivals, such as liberal Yesh Atid and the New Right, the bloc also relied on the support of the traditionally ostracized United Arab list and an agreement to alternative ministerial among parties in August 2023. Notwithstanding its longevity, the compromise has interrupted Netanyahu’s attempts to undermine accountability mechanisms and the trial against him, discontinuing the prospects of autocratization via state capture and the instrumentalization of divisive cleavages.

The case of Israel shows how autocratization could be halted in the face of an autocratizer’s attempt to diminish civic space while exploiting the perks of the executive tenure and a fragmented party system. In such settings, the opposition should cooperate on raising awareness against autocratization to empower other institutional and societal actors and increase the pressure on the incumbent. Ultimately, though, the opposition has to find a common platform capable of transgressing cleavages and animosity to cut short the incumbent advantage of the autocratizer, removing the latter from the executive via democratic means.

Overall, these two cases show how autocratization in liberal democracy can be reverted first by the actions of the institutional resisters and secondly by the strategies of the political opposition. Institutional actors are the primary, and often the most effective line of defense against autocratic turn when it unfolds. In accordance with their role, competencies and functions, institutional actors can stop authoritarian projects by merely enforcing the norms and, if needed, by using their role to raise

awareness in the public opinion about the potential threat to democratic institutions. However, institutional resistance is all but flawless. As autocratization advances, it can overwhelm institutional defenses. In these situations, the burden of resistance moves to political actors. The two cases show that the capacity of opposition forces to unite and coordinate their efforts and put pressure on the incumbent to offer a democratic alternative to popular authoritarian leaders or governments.

Resistance along the electoral democracy – electoral autocracy continuum: resistance driven by the “forceless force of the better argument”

As seen in the previous section, in liberal democracies, autocratizers can be confronted by institutions and the political opposition. However, the effectiveness of this first layer of resisters decreases in regimes situated along the electoral democracy – electoral autocracy continuum. In such regimes, marked by the autocratizers’ attempt to suppress public contestation, and by the lack of a robust institutional framework to withstand the blow, political resisters are best suited to carry the resister’s torch. This section deals with the cases of Ecuador under Rafael Correa and North Macedonia under Nikola Gruevski, depicting a strategy of opposition resistance referred to in Habermasian terms as the *forceless force of the better argument*.³⁵

The case of **Ecuador** during the Correa presidency is compelling. Since his electoral victory in 2006, and together with a process of significant social and economic reforms, the government changed the Constitution in 2008. This weakened the mechanisms of checks and balances, allowing Correa to take control of state agencies, limit the activity of civil society and restrict media freedom.³⁶ After comfortably winning the 2009 and 2013 presidential elections (both considered free and fair³⁷), the persistent economic problems hitting the country coupled with corruption scandals defined the context in which the 2014 local elections took place. Opposition candidates won the elections in several mayoral races, including the capital Quito. The increasing polarization of national politics, combined with the incapacity of the ruling party to form alliances and the opposition’s ability to coordinate and show cohesion, turned local elections into a referendum on Correa with the result of a clear defeat for the latter.³⁸

After the PAIS’s³⁹ defeat, the party tried to further consolidate power, and a discussion regarding the elimination of the two-mandate presidential limit began. With no more institutional resistance, the Constitutional Court gave the green light for this reform declaring that no referendum would be needed. Consequently, in 2015 the National Assembly amended the Constitution deactivating term limits starting from 2021, in a move that would have allowed Correa to step down, skip a presidential term and re-run in 2021 (a tactical retreat similar to Putin and Medvedev in Russia). Correa thus endorsed Vice-President Lenin Moreno for the 2017 Presidential elections. However, this is where autocratization in Ecuador came to a halt. After the election, the new President Lenin Moreno quickly distanced himself from Correa and his policies. Moreno re-opened a dialogue with the opposition forces, media, and civil society organizations. He introduced reforms to curb corruption and strengthen the transparency and accountability of state institutions. A referendum was held in February 2018 on these measures, including the re-introduction of term limits for all elected officials, and the reforms were approved with 64 percent of the vote. Overall, a split in the ruling coalition combined with the pressure of coordinated opposition forces, at

least at the local level, changed the political course of the country and halted the process of autocratization.⁴⁰

Whereas the case of Ecuador under Correa illustrates resistance defined by the pivotal role of the opposition and the intra-incumbent division, the one of **North Macedonia** under Gruevski (2006–2016) depicts a more disruptive model.⁴¹ Institutions and agencies were filled with cadres loyal to the ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, which also co-opted a select few businesses benefitting from procurement projects such as “Skopje 2014”. Moreover, during Gruevski’s reign, some media outlets were closed while others were pressured through the arrests and sentencing of journalists.

Faced with state capture, which had allowed the government to undermine the integrity of the electoral process and squash contestation via official channels, the opposition opted for an extra-institutional approach. After the elections in April 2014 cemented VMRO-DPMNE in power, Zoran Zaev, the leader of the largest opposition party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), initiated a parliamentary boycott.⁴² The boycott was launched before the first plenary session and its lifting was conditioned on improvements in media regulation, the electoral code, and the depoliticization of the administration.⁴³ Conditionality enabled the party to raise awareness against autocratization on the domestic and international front, pressuring the government.

The boycott also allowed the party to reorganize itself and renew its ties with social actors. Instead of focusing on its group in the Assembly, the SDSM attracted new members and strengthened its youth branch.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the party was well positioned to cooperate with civil society and citizens in urban centres who were at the heart of the protests in 2015 and 2016 and to enlarge its potential voter base.⁴⁵ The connection of the SDSM with societal resisters was amplified after the party released recordings revealing a massive governmentally driven illegal wiretapping campaign, triggering a large protest movement in 2015. While the latter was originally appeased by the resignation of Gruevski and the formation of a technocratic government, the movement was reignited in 2016 after President Ivanov pardoned 56 politicians, including Gruevski.

After consistent political, societal, and international pressure, VMRO-DPMNE and the SDSM agreed to hold elections in December 2016. Subsequently, the SDSM managed to form a government headed by Zaev, which distinguished itself from the policies of Gruevski, putting North Macedonia on a path toward re-democratization. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the disruptive resistance would likely not have succeeded without the moderation of the Constitutional court and the mediation of international actors. The former called off the initial elections, scheduled for June 2016 after the SDSM and other opposition parties decided to perform electoral boycotts that would have led to an unchallenged victory of VMRO-DPMNE. Additionally, EU and US mediation brought SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE to the negotiating table pushing them to agree on an alternative election date, rendering the democratic transfer of power possible.

This section shows that political opposition is the pivotal resister along the electoral democracy – electoral autocracy continuum. It can rely on a more institutionalized approach, using official channels to cooperate with other actors and apply consistent pressure against autocratization, fostering intra-incumbent division and the creation of political alliances. Yet, if the incumbent has captured formal channels of resistance,

the opposition could resort to extra-institutional strategies such as parliamentary boycotts and the initiation of scandals and protests.

However, the opposition should stick with the “forceless force of the better argument” and avoid radicalized forms of resistance. Thus, considering that the electoral dimension is still intact in electoral democracies and electoral autocracies, the opposition’s actions must be driven, or directed by other actors, towards one goal – the reversal of autocratization via electoral means. While electoral victory certainly does not suffice, it constitutes the steppingstone on which positive regime transformation occurs.

Where there is a will, there is *another way*: resistance patterns in transitory and authoritarian regimes

The risk when working on autocratization in authoritarian and transitory regimes experiencing authoritarian backlash is to minimize patterns of resistance, notably because they are not always visible and do not systematically opt for overt methods of contentious action. However, the limited visible evidence should not presuppose a lack of oppositional ambition.⁴⁶ Unlike liberal or electoral democracies, where resistance and opposition are primarily voiced at the institutional and political levels, resistance in authoritarian and transitory regimes experiencing authoritarian backlash privilege the societal and individual levels. The literary debate on authoritarianism has provided important insight into the inherent components of authoritarian rule and polity, most notably regarding the main institutional and political opposition forces in diverse contexts.⁴⁷ However, when analysing links between autocratization, authoritarian resilience, resistance, and change (or lack thereof), empirical evidence shows that there is no common explanation as it highly depends on the context.⁴⁸

Consequently, identifying and understanding the patterns of resistance taking place in these settings, regardless of the relative freedom granted to oppositional voices, requires a broadening of the classic concept of resistance and the diversity of forms it takes. Resistance equally encompasses very visible forms, intending to be recognized by the public eye (large-scale popular uprisings, social movements, the occupation of public space), and less visible forms, a “quiet encroachment” of public space through acts of everyday resistance.⁴⁹ In other words, “some resistance is intended to be recognized, while other resistance is purposefully concealed or obfuscated. Resisters may try to hide either the act itself ... or the intent behind it”.⁵⁰ To provide insight into these forms of resistance, the cases of the Tunisian transition since 2011 and the Sudanese uprisings of 2019 will be presented.

Following the 2011 uprisings, **Tunisia** was regarded as a pristine example of transitory regime, moving slowly towards a democratic form of government. The main political actors, namely Nidaa Tounes (secular “big tent party”) and Ennahda (Islamist party) privileged consensus and cooperation, leading to the drafting of a new constitution, the formation of a party system, as well as two presidential elections in 2014 and 2019.⁵¹ From a political perspective, while Tunisia’s secular-Islamist government ensured the emergence of a transitional “pact”,⁵² it failed to deliver on key demands from the population, primarily the socio-economic situation, characterized by high inflation, unemployment, and corruption. This brought on a new political configuration after the 2019 presidential elections, characterized by a race between two political outsiders, Nabil Karoui, a businessman (Qalb Tunis – Heart of Tunisia), and Kaïs

Saïed, jurist and retired law professor (Independent). The victory of Saïed, who focused his campaign on strong anti-corruption measures, was a testimony to the level of mistrust and disapproval towards the established parties, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda.

In July 2021, Saïed suspended the activities of Parliament, lifted the immunity of deputies and dismissed the Prime Minister, Hichem Mechichi. This major political development, supported by the army and the police, disrupted the Tunisian democratic transition. Following demonstrations in several cities, Saïed invoked Article 80 of the Constitution allowing for the temporary freezing of certain activities in case of “imminent danger threatening the nation”. The president justified his actions by referring to the demonstrations on the one hand, and the importance of the social, economic and health crises accentuated by the deadly spikes of Covid19 on the other, as well as the political blockage attributed to the parliamentary coalition and the tensions with Ennahdha.

He confirmed his stronghold by frequently using presidential decrees to suspend articles of the Constitution and introduce exceptional measures to carry out “necessary political reforms”, more recently also the freezing of the immunity of judges (May 2022). Saïed’s main institutional resisters were blocked from engaging in real opposition, while social resisters were very vocal and took to the streets to voice their discontent. However, it is interesting to look at the role of one of the main actors in this context, namely the UGTT, the Tunisian General Labor Union,⁵³ who played a central role as a member of the National Dialogue, negotiating with political parties for the establishment of the new Constitution and institutions.⁵⁴

To this day, it remains a crucial actor of the Tunisian political scene, particularly in the conflict with President Saïed. In June 2022, the UGTT called for nationwide strikes to oppose governmental policies and the freezing of all institutional activities. The UGTT’s strong domestic and international networks, showcase the true power of the labour union and its traction within Tunisian society as a whole. Although still in the early stages of transition, this particular case demonstrates the importance of actors at the intersection between politics and civil society who can act as counter-powers capable of wielding strong popular support and disrupting daily lives enough to instigate change.

The **Sudanese** uprisings of 2018–2019 provide valuable material for the more visible patterns of resistance, especially those aimed at prompting substantial societal and/or political change in more closed forms of authoritarian regimes.⁵⁵ Triggered by the tripling of bread prices, mass demonstrations started in late 2018 with sustained civil disobedience and protests for eight months. The protests quickly spread around the country⁵⁶ and to all sections of the population, giving the movement an unprecedented aura.

Resisters took to the streets around the armed forces headquarters in Khartoum and organized a sit-in that lasted until their violent dispersal in June 2019. This space quickly became the heart of the struggle, with large numbers converging towards an arena where a “counter-model of society” was being shaped.⁵⁷ These actions further increased the pressure on the army to side with the demonstrators and put an end to General al-Bashir’s thirty-year reign. The army, with the support of the paramilitary militia (RSF) and the intelligence services (NISS), ultimately intervened in April 2019 and deposed Bashir. A state of emergency was then declared, followed by a two-year transition period, during which a transitory government composed of civil (Abdallah

Hamdok) and military (General al Burhan) actors would agree on a new Constitution and prepare for general elections to be held in 2022.

After another military coup by General al Burhan on 25 October 2021, the reactions were swift with demonstrators returning to the streets, demanding the liberation of the Prime Minister and the restoration of the civil–military transition. After a month of diplomatic pressures combined with ongoing protests, Hamdok was reinstated as head of the government, while the military kept a firm grip on the executive; an executive that was expunged of its most vocal opponents, resulting in limited *actual* power in the hands of Hamdok and his office.

The Sudanese case highlights the central role of the military apparatus as a political and institutional player, acting in some cases as a *resister* and in others, as the *safeguard* of authoritarian rule. Indeed, if the authoritarian leader is seen as a threat to regime stability, the military will either defect and join protesters to bring down the regime, or take control of power, resulting in a military coup.⁵⁸ This case bears witness to the capacity of mass mobilization and diplomatic pressure to resist further autocratization in established authoritarian contexts and bring effective changes. Additionally, it emphasizes the role of the military as a proxy for institutional and political actors, which secures the preeminence of political interests over the survival of a specific form of authoritarian leadership. Indeed, the military used authoritarian strategies to overthrow Bashir's authoritarian rule, replacing it with a newer and more adapted version to best serve its interests. Consequently, it perpetuated authoritarian strategies and exacerbates the repressive and constrained political environment, while answering certain achievable demands of protesters – for instance, the release of Hamdok from prison – without threatening their stronghold on power.

In this section, we focused on two examples of resistance patterns aimed at challenging processes of autocratization in authoritarian and transitional contexts. The Tunisian and Sudanese cases provide useful insight into the capacity of political and social actors to collaborate to prevent a case of authoritarian backlash. However, to date it remains difficult to establish durable examples of success stories. This is largely explained by the disproportionate response of authoritarian regimes (electoral or closed) towards these sparks of resistance and mobilization. In even more restrictive contexts – and sometimes akin to more overt forms of dissent – characterized by repressive measures and control, where traditional avenues of resistance are obstructed, civil society organizations unable to function safely, and legal channels obsolete, these *traditional* resistance patterns fade in favour of more symbolic and non-traditional forms of resistance,⁵⁹ alternative routes and *other ways*.

Conclusions

Resistance once autocratization unfolds is a promising field of inquiry, though theorization and empirical analysis on this matter are still in their infancy. This article pleads for further investigation on the modalities, actors and patterns of resistance against processes of autocratization. It contributes by adopting an actor-based perspective, by looking at a broad set of political regimes in search of common patterns, and by providing an empirical definition of resistance against autocratization *as any activity, or combination of activities, taken by a changing set of often interconnected and interacting actors who, regardless of the motivations, attempt at slowing down, stopping, or reverting the actions of the actors responsible for the process of autocratization*. Different

Table 1. Main actors and strategies of resistance against autocratization across regime types.

	<i>From Liberal democracy</i>	<i>To Electoral democracy</i>	<i>From Electoral democracy</i>	<i>To Electoral autocracy</i>	<i>From Electoral autocracy</i>	<i>To Closed autocracy</i>
Institutional resisters	<i>Judges (from sub-national to Supreme Courts); Executive agencies such as the Electoral Commission (all levels); Military officials</i>		<i>Judges (Supreme/Constitutional Courts)</i>			
Political resisters	<i>Incumbent administrative staff; Ruling majority; lower-ranking grassroots party members; alliances between defected members of the majority and the opposition; opposition parties (all levels)</i>		<i>Alliances between defected members of the majority and the opposition; Political opposition (also extra-institutional)</i>		<i>Political opposition (also extra-institutional); Military officials</i>	
Social resisters	<i>Organized civil society; independent media; social movements; resisting individuals</i>		<i>Social movements and unions; overtly and covertly resisting individuals</i>		<i>Social movements; covert and non-traditional forms of individual resistance</i>	
Potential other case studies	<i>Slovenia (2020–2022), South Korea (2008–2016)</i>		<i>Armenia (2015–2021), Bolivia (2016–2021)</i>		<i>Burkina Faso (2016), Pakistan (2015)</i>	
<i>Institutional sphere</i>	-----				<i>Extra-institutional sphere</i>	
<i>Overt, traditional</i>	-----				<i>Covert, non-traditional</i>	

types of actors, with different motivations and strategies adopted, animate this resistance across political regimes. Based on the discussion and the illustrative examples, we observe that the more we move towards authoritarianism, the more resistance evolves. Table 1 summarizes these findings: in bold and italics, the table shows the key actors (not the only ones therefore) who carry out the main actions of resistance across political regimes. In italics only are the auxiliary/supporting actors. We conclude by drawing some working hypotheses to be tested in future research.

First, we observe that the more authoritarian the regime, the fewer the options for resistance. Though this does not necessarily mean that these options are less effective to counter autocratizers, fewer options *per se* might translate into lower chances of success for resistance actors. Consequently, a first hypothesis suggests that more the resistance is diffuse and transversal across types of actors and the wider it is, the greater the chances of success. From liberal democracy to established autocratic regimes, resisters should try, from the outset and despite the ideological differences, to build the largest possible alliance to stop further autocratization. Research should then look at specific *configurations* or resistance actors, instead of focusing on a single category of actors.

Second, we observe that the more authoritarian the regime, the more resistance against autocratization will slide from within to outside institutions. In liberal democracies, the processes of autocratization find a primary and effective obstacle in the actors who are within the institutions themselves and, if that is not sufficient, in the divisions within the incumbent or in a unified opposition (i.e. in the political dimension). In electoral democracies, the key actors of resistance are the political opposition through the classic channels of parliamentary and electoral politics, using anti-incumbent alliances and, if that is not sufficient, through extra-institutional, but not anti-

democratic means such as parliamentary boycott. In established authoritarian regimes, the key actors of resistance are the social actors, through overt forms of dissent and contentious politics and, if that is not sufficient, through non-traditional, covert, and even delocalized forms of protest. Consequently, a second hypothesis suggests that resistance should be tailored to the context and targeted primarily at its most effective dimension (e.g. institutions, in liberal democracy).

Ultimately, resistance to autocratization deserves further investigation on the contribution of external resisters, on the motivations of actors, and on the combination between actors' strategies and structural constraints/opportunities, and these first observations are only a basis for subsequent and more extensive empirical tests, to which end [Table 1](#) lists other cases of successful resistance, extracted from the V-DEM ERT dataset, to be explored. Recently, there have been several attempts to identify an authoritarian playbook that could predict the risks of autocratization. What we lack now is a *resistance playbook* to provide an understanding of resistance against autocratization in whatever context it occurs, with an updated and exploitable scientific knowledge.

Notes

1. See Cassani and Tomini, "Reversing regimes and concepts"; Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here"; Skaaning, "Waves of autocratization and democratization"; Tomini, "Don't think of a wave!"; Boese et al., "Waves of autocratization and democratization".
2. See the 2015 special issue of the *Journal of Democracy* "Is Democracy in Decline" or the seminal article by Nancy Bermeo "On Democratic Backsliding".
3. Human Rights Watch, "World's Autocrats Face Rising Resistance 2019".
4. See Cleary and Öztürk "When Does Backsliding Lead to Breakdown?"; Gamboa, "Opposition at the Margins".
5. Maerz et al., "A Framework for Understanding Regime Transformation".
6. As Andreas Schedler noted, the hope to "revert the current processes of illiberal subversion (...) does not rest on anything close to scientific certainties.", see Schedler, "What Do We Know about Resistance to Democratic Subversion?".
7. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here".
8. See Cassani and Tomini, *Autocratization in Post-Cold War Political Regimes*; "Reversing Regimes and Concepts".
9. For a recent overview of democratic resilience, see the special issue of Democratization edited by Merkel and Luhermann, "Resilience of Democracies".
10. For the different causes see Somer, McCoy, and Luke, "Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies"; Kneuer and Demmelhuber, *Authoritarian Gravity Centers*; Tomini, *When Democracies Collapse*; McCoy, "Chavez and the End of 'Partyarchy' in Venezuela"; Diamond, "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective"; Boese et al., "How Democracies Prevail".
11. Cleary and Öztürk, "When Does Backsliding Lead to Breakdown?".
12. The extensiveness and complexity of the topic leads us to examine only the role of domestic actors in this essay, leaving the study of the role of external resisters to further and more complete analyses. A specific focus on domestic actors is also justified by the fact that autocratization is usually considered to be driven by domestic actors. Without neglecting entirely the external actors, we think their role can be better understood as supportive of domestic processes.
13. See Boese et al., "How Democracies Prevail"; Boese, Lindberg, and Lührmann, "Waves of Autocratization and Democratization".
14. The concept of "failed" autocratization subsumes the concepts of "averted democratic regression" and "preempted democratic breakdown" as defined by Maerz et al., "A Framework for Understanding Regime Transformation". Moreover, we extend this concept to the cases

- where we observe resistance to what Maerz et al. “A Framework for Understanding Regime Transformation” defined as “preempted democratic transition” and “reverted liberalization”, that is transitional regimes experiencing authoritarian backlash.
15. Maerz et al., “A Framework for Understanding Regime Transformation”.
 16. We do not dwell on the detailed description of all stages, causes, and actors of these autocratization processes. These are cases that are extensively discussed as cases of autocratization. Therefore, we suggest referring to this literature.
 17. See Rohlfing, *Case Studies and Causal Inference*.
 18. See Cassani and Tomini. *Autocratization in Post-cold War Political Regimes*; and Boese et al., “How Democracies Prevail”; Boese, Lindberg, and Lührmann, “Waves of Autocratization and Democratization”.
 19. Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”.
 20. See more in Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracy Dies*.
 21. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-trump-judges-idUSKBN28B600>.
 22. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/15/doj-emails-trump-election-fraud-claims-494589>.
 23. <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2021/08/politics/trump-georgia-2020-election/>
 24. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-capitol-military-idUSKBN29H2WF>.
 25. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/24/politics/bender-book-trump-milley-protests/index.html>.
 26. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html>.
 27. Ben-Youssef and Samaan Tamari, “Enshrining Discrimination: Israel’s Nation-State Law”.
 28. For more information on autocratization in Israel, please see: Chazan, “Israel’s Democracy at a Turning Point”; Kubbe and Harel-Fisher, “Populism and Corruption in Israel-from a Clientelist Point of View”.
 29. See Freedom House, *Israel: Freedom in the World 2021*.
 30. See Freedom House, *Israel: Freedom in the World 2018* and 2021.
 31. <https://www.france24.com/en/20200524-israel-s-attorney-general-netanyahu-appointee-turne-d-accuser>.
 32. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/13/world/middleeast/israel-attorney-general-mandelblit-netanyahu.html>; <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/police-recommend-israeli-pm-benjamin-netanyahu-be-indicted-corruption-bribery-n847616>.
 33. Belder, “Decoding the Crisis of the Legitimate Circle of Coalition Building in Israel”.
 34. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/opposition-blasts-pm-attorney-general-after-indictment-hearing-delayed/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/13/world/middleeast/israel-attorney-general-mandelblit-netanyahu.html>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51277429>.
 35. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*.
 36. For more details on Ecuador see de la Torre, “Technocratic populism in Ecuador”; and Conaghan, “Ecuador Under Correa”.
 37. See Freedom House, *Ecuador: Freedom in the World 2010* and 2014.
 38. https://cepr.net/what-do-the-local-ecuadorian-elections-tell-us-about-alianza-pais/?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=pmd_g.OooCezrVqJIRImk2YQ7HWeMArPCeTPhNfVMOXua5s-1632231649-0-gqNtZGzNAmWjcnBszQel.
 39. “Patria altiva i soberana”, the party founded by Rafael Correa in 2016.
 40. See Freedom House, *Ecuador: Freedom in the World 2018*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ecuador/freedom-world/2018>.
 41. For more information on autocratization in North Macedonia under Nikola Gruevski, please see: Bieber, “Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans”; Günay and Dzihic, “Decoding the Authoritarian Code”.
 42. Laštro and Bieber, “The Performance of Opposition Parties in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes”.
 43. Aleksov et al., “Parliamentary Boycotts in the Western Balkans”.
 44. Taleski, Dimovski, and Halili, “Membership Recruitment and Propaganda in Macedonia”; <https://lider.mk/rechisi-20-procenti-od-azuriranoto-chlenstvo-na-sdsm-nema-da-glasa-na-vn-atrepartiskite-izbori>.
 45. Pudar et al., “Big Dreams and Small Steps”.
 46. Cavatorta, “No Democratic Change ... and Yet No Authoritarian Continuity”

47. For the destabilizing effect of intra-incumbent divisions and political actors on authoritarian rule, see notably Beissinger, “Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena”; Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* or Knutsen et al., “Autocratic Elections: Stabilizing Tool”.
48. See Köllner and Kailitz, “Comparing Autocracies”; Pepinsky, “The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism”; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, “Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitionss”.
49. Bayat, *Life as Politics*.
50. Hollander and Einwohner, “Conceptualizing Resistance”.
51. See Cavatorta and Mekki, “How can we Agree on Anything in this Environment?”.
52. See Boubekeur, “Islamists, Secularists, and Old Regime Elites in Tunisia”, and Jermanová, “From Mistrust to Understanding”.
53. See Bellin, “The Puzzle of Democratic Divergence in the Arab World” and Zemni, 2015. The other significant political actor is the military. While not as predominant as its counterparts in the region (such as Egypt or Sudan), the Tunisian military prevented a return to authoritarian rule by staying on the sidelines amid mass mobilization.
54. See Hartshorn, *Labor Politics in North Africa*.
55. Starting with 2018, the V-DEM index of electoral democracy shows a clear downward trend.
56. The protests started in Atbara on 18 December, even though smaller initiatives started earlier in Ad-Damazin, in the peripheral region of the Blue Nile (South region of Sudan). See Poussier. “How History Has Informed Sudan’s Revolution”.
57. See Mahé, “Sudan: Transitional Challenges Following the Fall”.
58. Other examples of deposed leaders include Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Bah N’daw and his administration in Mali, Win Myint and Aung San Suu Kui in Burma.
59. These forms of alternative resistance include the arts (theatre, dance, music, street art), the sporting arena or the digitalization of opposition. See notably Goeffray, *Contester à Cuba*; Mittermaier, “Death and Martyrdom in the Arab Uprisings; Curato and Fossato, “Authoritarian Innovations”.

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