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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trajectories and Modes of Autocratization in the Early 21st Century

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary processes of autocratization attract growing attention, but their trajectories and modes remain relatively understudied. To contribute filling this gap, we offer one of the first case-oriented comparative analyses of twenty-first century autocratization. First, we examine a global set of cases. Hence, we focus on four typical cases from different regions – namely, Ecuador, Moldova, Thailand and Rwanda – representing different forms of contemporary autocratization. The analysis confirms that autocratization is an empirically relevant phenomenon in this historical phase. Moreover, an evolution is occurring in how this political syndrome unfolds, in the regimes it tends to hit, and in its outcomes. More specifically, the main threat that liberal democracies currently face is a process of sequential autocratization, perpetrated by elected rulers wishing to expand and prolong their power through the loosening of the mechanisms of horizontal accountability and the manipulation of the electoral process. However, we also highlight that an ongoing process of autocratization could be interrupted or reversed.

KEYWORDS: Autocratization, regime change, Ecuador, Moldova, Thailand, Rwanda

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1. Introduction

The processes of autocratization – that is, regime changes towards autocracy – have re-gained attention, after decades in which the debate mainly focused on the opposite processes of democratization (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Przeworski 1991; Linz and Stepan 1996, among several others). Much of the recent research on this phenomenon analyses the global and historical trends (Mechkova et al. 2017;

Abramovitz and Repucci 2018; Luehrmann et al. 2018 and 2019; Schenkkan and Repucci 2019). In this regard, a debate has emerged on the beginning of an outright new wave of autocratization (Merkel 2010; Levitsky and Way 2015; Diamond 2015; Luehrmann and Lindberg 2019; Berman 2019; cf. Huntington 1991). Moreover, the literature offers several in-depth studies of single or few recent cases, such as Hungary (Bogaards 2018) and Turkey (Laebens and Ozturk 2020). With few exceptions (Bermeo 2016; Tomini and Wagemann 2018), relatively little attention has been devoted to the medium-n level, thus far, and to comparing contemporary processes of autocratization with each other. As a consequence, several questions of substantive interest remain unanswered regarding the different forms that regime changes towards autocracy can take. What are the main autocratization trajectories in the twenty-first century? Are there regional patterns of diffusion? Finally, if contemporary processes of autocratization differ from twentieth century cases (Bermeo 2016), how and in how many different ways do they happen?

To address these questions, we offer a case-oriented comparative analysis of twenty-first century processes of regime change towards autocracy. More specifically, the article proceeds as follows. In the first section, we present an analytical framework that distinguishes the possible points of departure and arrival of a process of autocratization and the various modes through which these regime changes unfold. In particular, based on a regime classification that includes liberal democracy, defective democracy, electoral autocracy and closed autocracy, the analytical framework on which we build identifies six possible trajectories of regime change towards autocracy and five main modes of autocratization, namely, military intervention, electoral manipulation, political liberties limitation, civil liberties limitation and horizontal accountability loosening. The second section presents the results of a comparative analysis of the 38 cases of autocratization occurred around the world between 2000 and 2018. In the third section, we focus on four typical cases from different regions and representing different forms of contemporary autocratization, namely, Ecuador, Moldova, Thailand and Rwanda. The final section wraps up the main findings and concludes.

The analysis confirms that autocratization represents an empirically relevant phenomenon in this historical era that affects several world regions. Moreover, an evolution is occurring in how this political syndrome unfolds, in the regimes it tends to hit, and in its outcomes. More specifically, we find sequential autocratization as the main threat that liberal democratic regimes currently face; elected rulers seeking to expand and prolong their power as the main agents of contemporary processes of autocratization; and electoral manipulation and the loosening of horizontal accountability as their preferred strategies. However, we also highlight the possibility that an ongoing process of autocratization can be interrupted or reversed.

2. Autocratization: a framework for the analysis

Autocratization is the opposite of democratization, that is, “a process of regime change towards autocracy that makes the exercise of political power more arbitrary and repressive and that restricts the space for public contestation and political participation” (Cassani and Tomini 2019, 22). We prefer a definition of autocratization emphasizing the direction of the examined political transformations (i.e. “towards autocracy”) to other definitions emphasizing the point of departure. For instance, Luehrmann and Lindberg define autocratization “any move *away* from democracy” (2019, 1099, emphasis added). In our view, the former is a more valid approach to conceptualize the opposite of democratization, which Whitehead defines “a movement *towards* an outcome” (2002, 32, emphasis added). Moreover, Cassani and Tomini’s definition of autocratization is more demanding, as it requires outright regime change to occur, whereas Luehrmann and Lindberg’s definition is more sensitive to minor signals of a possible process of autocratization. We see selectivity as an advantage.

To identify regime changes towards autocracy, we rest on a procedural conceptualization of political regimes, defined by the formal and informal institutions that regulate how to assign and exercise political authority in a country. We employ a fourfold regime spectrum, along which liberal democracy, defective democracy, electoral autocracy and closed autocracy can be ordered along a democracy-autocracy continuum. While alternative regime classifications exist, both simpler (e.g. Przeworski et al. 2000) and more elaborate (Bogaards 2009), the proposed four categories are widely recognized in the recent literature on regime change (see for instance Luehrmann et al. 2018). This fourfold classification has the advantage of covering the full spectrum of contemporary political regimes, from the most democratic to the most autocratic, with a relatively fair balance between parsimony and detail. This is essential, given the goal of capturing outright regime changes towards autocracy.

From a procedural viewpoint, democratic regimes guarantee political participation and public contestation, that is, the possibility for all citizens to choose their rulers, to oppose and criticize publicly the conduct of a government and to compete for replacing it (Dahl 1971). At a minimum, in a democracy the main government positions – including the chief executive and the legislative – should be assigned through multiparty universal suffrage elections periodically held under conditions of freedom and fairness. We distinguish liberal from defective democracies. In liberal democracies, the executive power is effectively constrained and citizens' liberties are protected (Diamond 1999). In a defective democracy, on the contrary, the boundaries of executive power are blurred, which makes it easier for rulers to abuse their authority, even though the electoral process remains sufficiently participatory and competitive.¹

Autocracies, in turn, are regimes in which rulers “achieve power through undemocratic means” (Geddes et al. 2014, 317). Among them, electoral autocracies hold formally inclusive and multiparty elections but restrict both citizens and opposition parties' ability to criticize the government and compete for power (Schedler 2002).² Closed autocracies, finally, do not allow people to choose who governs, either de jure or de facto, and are typically headed by a king, a military junta or a civilian dictator, who often but not always is the leader of a political party (Geddes et al. 2014).

Accordingly, as a process of regime change towards autocracy, autocratization can follow six main trajectories, representing alternative combinations of the political regimes that can suffer autocratization and of the regimes that can be installed as a consequence of it (Cassani and Tomini 2019). These are: (1) liberal democracy → closed autocracy; (2) liberal democracy → electoral autocracy; (3) liberal democracy → defective democracy; (4) defective democracy → closed autocracy; (5) defective democracy → electoral autocracy; (6) electoral autocracy → closed autocracy.

The six above-listed regime transitions share the direction towards autocracy. Admittedly, however, these autocratization trajectories differ in several respects from each other. Rather than disregarding these differences, a few dimensions of variance can be identified that allow for a comparative examination of autocratization trajectories.

¹ So defined, defective democracy roughly corresponds to the illiberal and delegative models (Zakaria 1997; O'Donnell 1994). Merkel (2004) identifies two other forms of defective democracy. Exclusive democracies exclude some categories of citizens from the democratic process. In tutelary democracies, real executive power rests on (or is shared by) a non-elected authority. For different reasons, these regimes do not satisfy the procedural standards for democracy (see also Schmitter and Karl 1991).

² Some authors (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010) separate electoral autocracies in competitive and hegemonic-party based on the strength of the opposition. In our regime scheme, competitive autocracies lie somewhere very close to the border between defective democracy and electoral autocracy. Having a separate category for these regimes would make capturing regime changes particularly challenging.

First, not every autocratization trajectory determines an outright democratic breakdown. Accordingly, a distinction could be made between *radical* autocratizations causing the end of a democratic regime and the installation of an autocratic regime, and *moderate* processes that imply a qualitatively minor regime change (i.e. they do not cross the democracy-autocracy threshold), such as transitions from liberal democracy to defective democracy and from electoral autocracy to closed autocracy. A second analytically meaningful difference refers to the fact that not every autocratization trajectory leads to closed autocracy. Accordingly, *full* processes of autocratization leading to closed autocracy should be separated from *partial* autocratizations that only lead to defective democracy or electoral autocracy. These dimensions of variance crosscut each other. Hence, for instance, Thailand's transition from defective democracy to closed autocracy in 2014 is a case of radical and full autocratization. On the contrary, the 2001 transition from defective democracy to electoral autocracy of Moldova is radical but partial autocratization.

The modes of autocratization – that is, how regime change towards autocracy happens – represent a further source of variance. A first raw distinction can be made between processes of autocratization that unfold through “quick”, “rapid” and “sudden” breakdowns, from the regime changes towards autocracy that occur through “slow death”, “lingering demise” or “reform” (O'Donnell 1992; Schmitter 1994; Schedler 1998; Lueders and Lust 2018). This binary classification points to a meaningful distinction concerning the duration and/or the intensity of regime change, but tells relatively little about how a process of autocratization takes place in practice. In a diachronic comparison between contemporary and past autocratization, in turn, Bermeo (2016) identifies three varieties of coups d'état – i.e. open-ended, promissory, and executive coups – and three varieties of less disruptive modes of autocratization, namely, executive aggrandizement, election-day fraud, and electoral manipulation.

We build on Bermeo and try to update her classification with a more specific focus on the twenty-first century, paying special attention to the various techniques would-be autocrats could use. We draw on the literature on electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010), authoritarian upgrading (Cavatorta 2010), survival (Svolik 2012), and legitimation (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017). We identify five ideal-typical and non-mutually exclusive ways in which contemporary processes of autocratization unfold: military intervention, electoral process manipulation, limitation of political liberties, limitation of civil liberties, and the weakening of horizontal accountability.

Military interventions imply an active and overt role of the army in the process of autocratization of a country. The army can intervene either of its own accord to overthrow an elected government, or on the initiative of a civilian chief executive in the context of a self-coup. To be sure, military interventions do not necessarily lead to the installation of a non-elected government. They can also lead to new elections, typically following a period of interim government.

Electoral manipulation encompasses all the actions that directly relate to the conduct of elections. These include blatant election-day fraud, such as ballot stuffing, vote buying, irregularities in voter and candidate registration, in vote counting, and in the accessibility of the polling stations. This category also covers subtler modifications of the electoral rules, such as removing presidential term limits (Cassani 2020), and actions aimed at interfering in the work of the electoral management body and at undermining its autonomy.

Differently from the previous category, the limitation of political liberties encompasses all the measures that, while not directly related to elections, tamper with the freedom of association, assembly, expression, opposition and information. Limitations of political liberties include both violent (e.g. harassment, intimidation, arrest, imprisonment) and non-violent (e.g. legal, financial) actions and could be targeted to politicians, political supporters, activists and journalists.

Civil liberties refer to the non-strictly political dimension of the life of individual citizens, social groups and civil society organizations. Civil liberties in a country could be limited by any measure that compromises

the physical integrity of citizens, the principle of equality before the law, individual and personal autonomy rights, religious freedom, academic freedom, minorities' rights, the freedom to form civil society organizations and their independence.

Finally, the weakening of horizontal accountability has mainly to do with the mechanisms through which the executive power is constrained and monitored by other state actors. More specifically, horizontal accountability loosens when constitutional reforms and other formal and informal measures are implemented with the aim of reshaping the balance of power between the executive and the legislative in favour of the former, of subordinating the judiciary power and of suppressing or undermining the autonomy of other regulatory agencies.

3. Autocratization trajectories in the 21st century

Based on the proposed analytical framework, we investigate how autocratization happens in the twenty-first century. What specific trajectories and modes characterize contemporary processes of autocratization? Does autocratization take different forms in different regions? Are there systematic connections between certain modes and trajectories of autocratization? To address these questions, we collect a sample of autocratization episodes that occurred all over the world between 2000 and 2018, which we examine in a comparative perspective.

To select and classify the cases, we adopted a mainly qualitative approach, even though the first step of the procedure was based on a quantitative scale. More specifically, we used the Liberal Democracy index of the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem, Coppedge et al. 2019) to conduct an initial screening and select a pool of potential autocratization cases, that is, countries that have recorded a decrease in the index. The index ranges from 0 to 1 and measures progresses and declines concerning freedom of expression and information, freedom of association, universal suffrage, election integrity, government electivity, legislative and judicial constraints, equality before the law, individual liberties. Given the preliminary character of this step in the case selection process, we set a relatively low magnitude threshold [$\Delta(t, t-2) \leq -.01$] to identify a potential case of autocratization.

Similarly to other democracy-autocracy scales, this index is problematic. Its sensitivity may induce to overestimate the empirical relevance of the phenomenon under examination, and we could hardly tell outright regime changes from other analytically minor transformations. Moreover, since it aggregates several institutional attributes together, the index tells little about how autocratization unfolds in a country. To overcome these limitations, each potential case of autocratization was examined in-depth, drawing information from several sources that include Freedom House's Freedom of the World annual country-reports. The in-depth examination assessed whether an outright process of autocratization occurred, in the first place. If yes, we proceeded to establish the regime type of the country that suffered autocratization; the regime type installed as a consequence of it; and the autocratization-related events occurred in that historical juncture. Finally, we classified every selected case of autocratization and the corresponding autocratization-related events based on the trajectory and the modes, respectively. An Appendix reports the resulting dataset.

Following the described procedure, we selected 38 autocratizations between 2000 and 2018 in 33 countries. This amounts to about two cases of autocratization per year, on average, which confirms the

empirical relevance of the phenomenon in this historical period.³ However, twenty-first century autocratization has taken only four of the six possible trajectories discussed in the previous section. We count 7 transitions from liberal democracy to defective democracy; 12 transitions from defective democracy to electoral autocracy; 8 transitions from defective democracy to closed autocracy; and 11 transitions from electoral autocracy to closed autocracy. No transition from liberal democracy to electoral autocracy and no transition from liberal democracy to closed autocracy have been recorded between 2000 and 2018.

In other words, liberal democracies rarely suffer autocratization. Even when they do, moreover, autocratization “only” leads to defective forms of democracy rather than to radical transitions that end democracy and replace it with some form of autocracy. However, defective democracies represent by far the most likely victims of this political syndrome. More than half (53%) of contemporary processes of autocratization have occurred in defective democracies, leading to either closed autocracy or, more frequently, electoral autocracy. Finally, about 30% of twenty-first century processes of autocratization consist in transitions from electoral autocracy to closed autocracy. These cases might appear less worrisome, as they occur in non-democratic countries. However, we should consider that, until recently, electoral autocracies were considered a stepping-stone to democracy (Hadenius and Teorell 2007). Our findings tell quite a different story: electoral autocracies do not necessarily move towards democracy, they can also become (again) more authoritarian.

Geography represents another dimension that helps understand the recent trends of autocratization diffusion. Figure 1 illustrates the regional distribution of the 38 regime changes towards autocracy previously selected, classified by trajectory. As a first remark, contemporary autocratization qualifies mainly as a non-Western phenomenon. With 16 cases, or 42% of our 2000-2018 sample, sub-Saharan Africa is the continent that has suffered the most from this syndrome. Another 21% of the contemporary processes of regime change towards autocracy occurred in Asia (8 cases). Latin America and Eastern Europe (including the Balkans) have already experienced 6 cases each. Our sample also includes one case in the Middle East and one case in Oceania – Turkey and Fiji, respectively.

Most importantly, Figure 1 shows that autocratization tends to take different forms in different regions. The most evident trend refers to Africa, which has the lion’s share of twenty-first century full autocratization: 82% and 37.5% of the recorded transitions from electoral autocracy to closed autocracy and from defective democracy to closed autocracy occurred south of the Sahara, respectively. *Vice versa*, when autocratization occurs in Africa, it likely leads to the installation of a closed autocracy – it happened in 12 out of 16 regional cases. Transitions from electoral autocracy to closed autocracy represent the modal autocratization trajectory in the continent, in particular (9 cases).

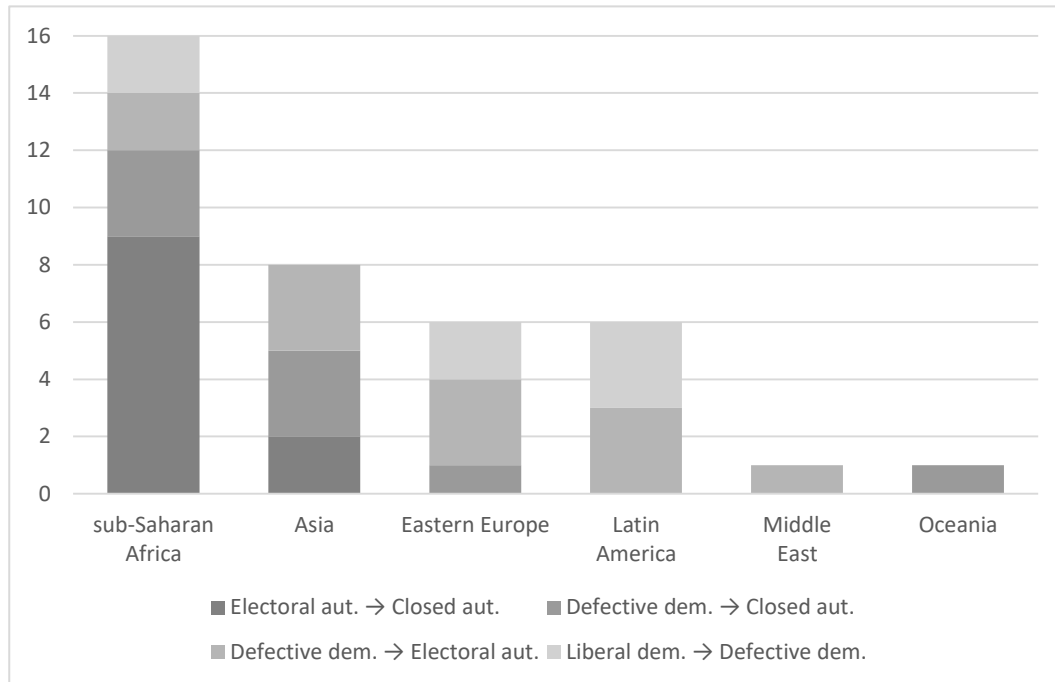
The second most evident regional trend of contemporary regime change towards autocracy regards Latin America, which has only experienced partial autocratization, in striking contrast with the regional past record of full autocratization (Linz and Stepan 1978). More specifically, contemporary processes of autocratization in Latin America have taken the form of transitions either from liberal democracy to defective democracy (3 cases), or from defective democracy to electoral autocracy (3 cases). Latin America is the region in which the majority of the contemporary transitions from liberal democracy to defective democracy have occurred.

Asia and Eastern Europe offer a more variegated picture. Similarly to Africa, autocratization in Asia led to closed autocracy in a majority of the regional cases (62.5%). Similarly to Latin America, in turn, Eastern

³ To be sure, this is not a test of the “new wave of autocratization” hypothesis (cf. Luehrmann and Lindberg 2019), since we only focus on cases of autocratization and do not compare them with the cases of democratization occurred in the same period.

Europe has mainly experienced partial autocratization. More specifically, transitions from defective democracy to closed autocracy (3 cases) represent the most frequent autocratization trajectory in Asia, along with transitions from defective democracy to electoral autocracy, which in turn represent the modal autocratization trajectory in Eastern Europe.

Figure 1 – Autocratization by region and trajectory



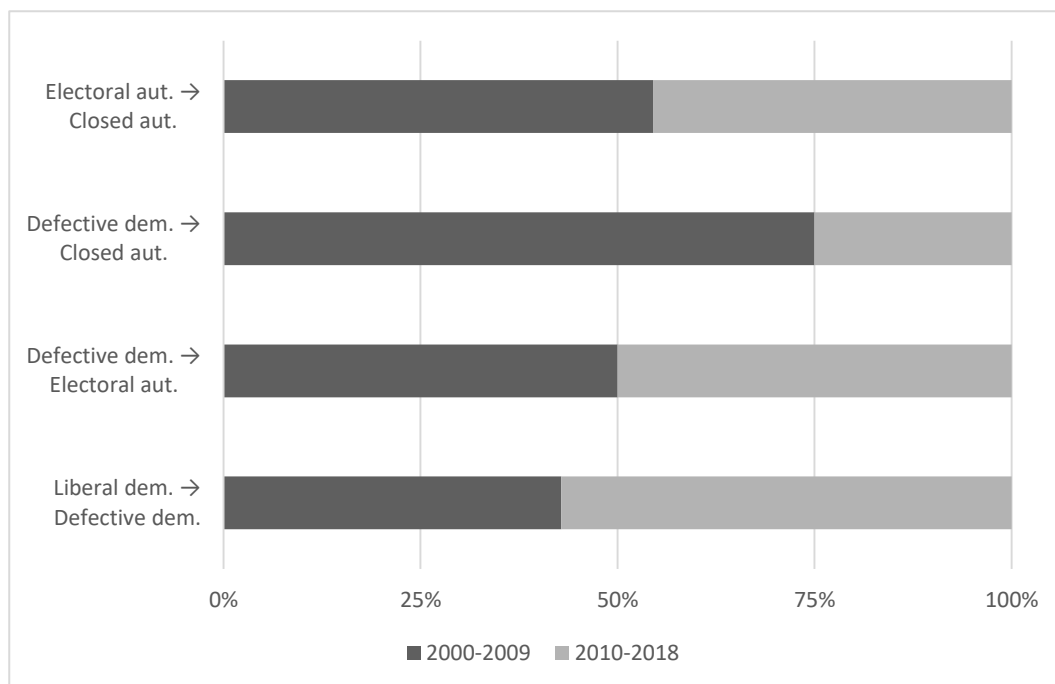
Notes: For each region, the horizontal bar reports the raw number of autocratization cases occurred, classified by trajectory.

Source: authors' own data and elaboration.

Besides geographical patterns, historical trends could be identified, too. For each autocratization trajectory, Figure 2 shows how many cases occurred in the first (2000-2009) and in the second (2010-2018) decade of the new century. A first consideration regards the processes of full autocratization. While they account for half of twenty-first century processes of autocratization overall, most of these regime changes leading to closed autocracy occurred between 2000 and 2009. The most evident decline refers to the transitions from defective democracy to closed autocracy, which represent the least common autocratization trajectory between 2010 and 2018. Hence, countries hit by the most recent processes of autocratization remain more democratic than the countries that suffered autocratization in the past (Luehrmann and Lindberg 2019).

Two other evolutionary trends deserve attention. On one hand, the processes of autocratization that affect defective democracies and replace it with electoral autocracy, which were one of the most frequent autocratization trajectories in 2000-2009, became the most common form of contemporary autocratization in 2010-2018. On the other hand, and perhaps more disturbingly, transitions from liberal democracy to defective democracy represent the only form of autocratization whose frequency has increased between the two phases of diffusion, even though the total amount of these cases remains comparatively low.

Figure 2 – Autocratization trajectories by period



Note: For each trajectory, the horizontal bar reports the percentage of autocratization cases occurred in the 2000-2009 and 2010-2018 period, respectively.

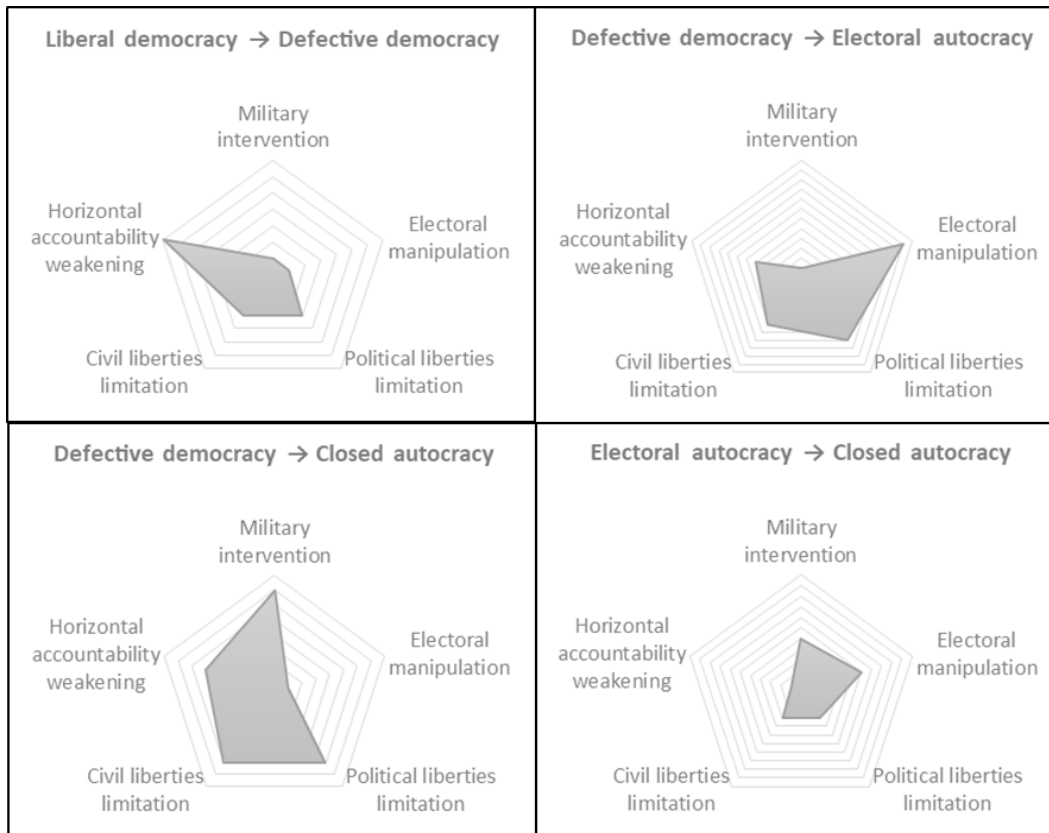
Source: Authors' own data and elaboration.

Concerning autocratization modes, the collected data reveal the composite and heterogeneous nature of twenty-first century processes of autocratization. In the vast majority of the cases examined (25 out of 38), autocratization resulted from a plurality of political events. More specifically, we count 14 military interventions, 19 events of electoral manipulation, 20 limitations of political liberties, 18 limitations of civil liberties, and as many events of horizontal accountability weakening, which variously combine with each other in the 38 cases of autocratization occurred between 2000 and 2018.

Figure 3 combines trajectories and modes. Each prism depicted in the figure represents a different autocratization trajectory and summarizes how autocratization has unfolded in the corresponding empirical cases. Overall, the four prisms reveal a few systematic connections between specific trajectories and specific modes. The first (and most obvious) connection is between military interventions and full autocratization, that is, the installation of a closed autocracy. More specifically, virtually all the recorded transitions from defective democracy to closed autocracy were consequence of a military intervention (Belarus is the exception), often combined with the limitation of civil and political liberties and the loosening of horizontal accountability.

Military interventions are also frequent drivers of the transitions from electoral autocracy to closed autocracy. However, the most common autocratization mode in these transitions is the manipulation of the electoral process. Electoral manipulation is also the most common way through which defective democracy shifts towards electoral autocracy, often combined with the limitation of political liberties. Finally, the weakening of the mechanisms of horizontal accountability emerges as a key autocratization mode in all the recorded transitions from liberal democracy to defective democracy.

Figure 3 – Autocratization by trajectory and modes



Note: For each autocratization trajectory, a prism depicts the overall configuration of autocratization modes. In each prism, the number of concentric pentagons equals the number of autocratization episodes that have followed the corresponding trajectory.

Source: Authors' own data and elaboration.

4. Four trajectories of 21st century autocratization

To carry on the analysis of how contemporary processes of autocratization happen, we study in-depth four cases from our sample, namely, Ecuador, Moldova, Thailand and Rwanda. These should be thought of as “typical” cases, as they are especially representative of the phenomenon under study and, more specifically, of some of its most frequent manifestations (Gerring 2007, 91). In fact, they are typical in several interrelated respects. First, the selected countries are from the four regions most affected by autocratization. Second, they represent the four autocratization trajectories that can be observed in this historical phase. Third, each case represents the autocratization trajectory that prevails in the region to which it belongs (see also Figure 1). Fourth, each case unfolded through the autocratization mode that has most frequently driven the autocratization trajectory this case represents (see also Figure 3).

Concerning the trajectories of partial autocratization, which do not lead to closed autocracy, Ecuador is a Latin American case of transition from liberal democracy to defective democracy that mainly resulted from Rafael Correa’s attempt to expand executive power by loosening the mechanisms of horizontal accountability, “justified” by the need to implement his ambitious policy agenda. In Eastern Europe, in turn,

following the return of the Communists to power, Moldova suffered a transition from defective democracy to electoral autocracy that involved both electoral manipulation and political liberties limitation. Concerning the trajectories of full autocratization, Thailand is an Asian case of transition from defective democracy to closed autocracy, resulting from a military coup. Finally, Rwanda is a sub-Saharan case of transition from electoral autocracy to closed autocracy caused by Paul Kagame's manipulation of presidential term limits, which de facto institutionalized a personalist dictatorship.

4.1 Ecuador: from liberal democracy to defective democracy

Ecuador's return to democracy in 1979, after two decades of military rule, was accompanied by the beginning of an economic recession, which triggered a spiral of social tension and of political instability that extended until the early 2000s (Weyland 2013). As a result of this long-lasting crisis, the recently re-introduced democratic institutions progressively lost legitimacy, especially due to a relatively strong parliament that often prevented the executive from implementing the promised reforms, leading to frequent government changes (de la Torre and Conaghan 2008).

The strong demand for political renewal favoured the electoral victory of the outsider Rafael Correa in 2006, who committed to end the era of neoliberalist policy, tackle poverty and inequality, and promote the inclusion of the indigenous and the Afro-Ecuadorian communities (Becker 2011). To implement this ambitious reform agenda and to avoid the gridlocks that proved fatal to his predecessors, the new president immediately started a constitutional revision. In September 2007, Correa's PAIS movement overwhelmingly won the elections for the Constituent Assembly, which assumed full legislative powers at the expense of the parliament elected in 2006, de facto preventing the opposition from controlling government policies.

Approved via referendum in 2008, the new constitution expanded the protection of social and economic rights, but also introduced a hyper-presidential system (de la Torre and Ortiz Lemos 2016). The strengthening of the executive power coupled with a reduction of the parliament's monitoring capacity and of the central bank's autonomy (Conaghan 2008). Moreover, the government gained control over the main state agencies through the creation of a commission for the selection of public officials. A transitional council was also created to review and reform the judicial system. In few years, Correa built "an institutional edifice devoid of horizontal accountability" (Conaghan 2016).

In 2009 and 2013, Correa and the PAIS were confirmed in sufficiently clean elections (Freedom House 2010 and 2014), thanks to quite successful redistributive programmes that led to unprecedented drops in poverty and income inequality (Bermeo 2016). Despite the genuine popularity he enjoyed, however, Correa took advantage of the expanded executive power and of the government-controlled parliament to silence criticism in the media and the civil society.

Following the creation of a regulatory agency, in 2011, the coverage of opposition parties in the media diminished significantly (Freedom House 2012). The same year, a presidential decree introduced new restrictions for foreign-sponsored nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and banned activities "incompatible with public security" (Freedom House 2012). In 2013, a new law on communications introduced another regulatory body to monitor journalistic content (Freedom of the Press 2014). New and onerous requirements were introduced for NGOs, whereas public officials were given the power to dissolve them (Freedom House 2014).

4.2 Moldova: from defective democracy to electoral autocracy

Following independence from the Soviet Union, Moldova developed a peculiar form of democracy characterized by “pluralism by default”, in which political competition derived more from the weakness of the main political actors than from their adhesion to the rules of the democratic game (Way 2002). However, blurred lines of authority between the legislative and the executive power (Crowther 2011) and a judiciary financially dependent on the executive (Freedom House 1999) resulted in frequent abuses of power of the government during the 1990s.

High factionalism and low party discipline in parliament, and a continued struggle between the legislative and the executive, caused a prolonged political stalemate leading the Moldovan economy to spiral downward at the end of the 1990s, also due to the Russian financial crisis. Resentment against politicians and nostalgia of the Soviet era favoured the rise of the re-formed Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), which won the 2001 elections.

The combination of an overwhelming majority in parliament and a higher organizational capacity (Levitsky and Way 2010) gave the Communists nearly total control over the legislative process, de facto transferring decision-making from state to party institutions (Tudoroiu 2011). The PCRM-dominated parliament elected the party secretary Vladimir Voronin as President of the Republic, who exerted strong influence on the formation of a “communist-controlled technocratic government”, acting as a de facto chief executive in a formally parliamentary system (Roper 2008).

To consolidate power, Voronin and the PCRM engaged in a struggle against opposition parties through a combination of repression, electoral fraud and media control. After a series of mass demonstrations, in 2002, the government banned the main opposition party (the Christian Democratic People’s Party) for thirty days (Freedom House 2003). The 2003 local and regional elections were described as the least free and fair since 1991 (Freedom House 2004). However, the limitation of media freedom probably represented the most effective way through which the new ruling elite restricted political competition in Moldova. In 2001, the government created a centre for public information, as the official channel to deliver information on social and economic issues to the press. An amendment to the press law banned financial support for domestic media from foreign governments (Freedom House 2002). Between 2002 and 2004, some of the most important opposition newspapers were sued for libel, two leading media outlets had their broadcasting license suspended, whereas several journalists were removed from the main public radio-television through a process of selective rehiring (Freedom House 2005).

4.3 Thailand: from defective democracy to closed autocracy

The first part of the twenty-first century has confirmed the role that the military has historically played in Thai politics (Chambers 2010), with two coups between 2006 and 2014, following a relatively long period of civilian rule started in 1992. In 2006, the army overthrew the government chaired by the telecommunication tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, in reaction against the abuse of executive power and the capture of state institutions (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008). However, it returned to the barracks relatively soon and civilian rule was re-established.

Unfortunately, the 2007 elections did not represent the beginning of a new phase in Thai politics, which remained profoundly divided between the winner People’s Power Party (PPP, an heir of Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai party, TRT) and its opponents, including the military and the crown (Pongsudhirak 2008). In December 2008, the constitutional court banned the PPP for alleged electoral fraud in the 2007 elections, and the

opposition Democratic Party formed a new government coalition, which remained in power until 2011 amidst social unrest.

The 2011 elections saw the success of the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), a new incarnation of the TRT led by Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra. This victory re-fuelled the tension both at the institutional level and at the social level, with several episodes of political violence, anti-government protests and repression (Baker 2016). The crisis eventually peaked with the early elections of February 2014. These elections were called in an effort to break the persistent deadlock, but only had the effect of sparking new protests, when the constitutional court decided to invalidate the vote. Mass demonstrations turned violent and, on May 20th 2014, the army intervened, repressed the protests, dissolved the parliament, suspended the constitution and declared martial law (Kuhonta and Sinpeng 2014).

While in 2006 autocratization was followed by a relatively rapid return to democratic politics, the 2014 coup led to the installation of a more permanent military regime in Thailand. A National Council for Peace and Order was established, which unilaterally approved an interim constitution, eliminated the judicial control over the government and several human rights safeguards, and formed a non-elected legislative assembly. A new constitution was approved in May 2017 via referendum, which strengthened the military control over civil authorities and political activities, expanded the role of unelected technocrats, and established new royal prerogatives.

4.4 Rwanda: from electoral autocracy to closed autocracy

In 2003, a constitutional referendum formalized the birth in post-genocide Rwanda of an electoral regime that soon revealed its non-democratic nature. In the following year, electoral authoritarianism in Rwanda consolidated, thanks to the charisma of its president Paul Kagame, an impressive development record (Mann and Barry 2015), a systematic repression of dissent, and the limitation of political competition (Reyntjens 2007). Having scored landslide victories in all the previous presidential and parliamentary elections, in 2015 the regime led by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) was approaching a particularly delicate juncture, though.

Kagame was serving his second and final term, according to the country's constitution. Despite the regime's relatively strong legitimacy, the poor electoral record of African ruling parties when they nominate a new presidential candidate (Cheeseman 2010) and the formation in 2013 of a new opposition party (i.e. the Democratic Green Party of Rwanda) probably had some part in Kagame's decision to seek a third term. The criticisms coming from the Western partners (US State Department 2017) did not stop the African leader, but possibly shaped his strategy. Rather than exploiting legal ambiguities, as several other sub-Saharan Presidents did (Tull and Simons 2017), Kagame proceeded through four main steps.

The modification of presidential term limits was presented as a bottom-up initiative, in the form of a popular petition to allow Kagame running for re-election (Freedom House 2016). A subsequent survey promoted by a RPF-dominated parliament identified only "about ten" citizens who openly opposed the proposal (Mbaku 2017). Hence, in November 2015, the parliament discussed and rapidly approved a constitutional revision to reduce presidential mandates from seven to five years, starting from 2024, thus resetting the clock on the presidential terms already served. Moreover, a transitional seven-year term was introduced.

The constitutional amendment underwent a referendum the following month, obtaining 98.3% of the preferences, in the absence of independent observers (Economist Intelligence Unit 2015). Turnout was similarly high. As a final step, President Kagame "accepted" the request of Rwandans to continue leading the country, as he put it in a televised address (The Guardian 2016). Unsurprisingly, in August 2017, he won a third term, in what has been described as "more of a coronation than real contest" (Reyntjens 2017).

4.5 Discussion

As much as the described cases differ from each other, a comparison between Ecuador, Moldova, Thailand and Rwanda reveals important characteristics of contemporary processes of autocratization. In general, while the intervention of the military remains quite an effective way to end democracy and install closed autocracy, as the 2014 coup in Thailand demonstrates, military interventions increasingly represent an exception rather than the standard way to proceed.

A first point to be noticed refers to the actors involved and their goals. In all the examined cases but Thailand, incumbent elected rulers were the main agents of autocratization. Hence, contemporary processes of autocratization are not the consequence of an attempt to conquer political power, which is typically achieved via legal means (i.e. elections) and often thanks to genuine popular support. Both the Communists in Moldova and Correa in Ecuador came to power regularly, taking advantage of the failure of their predecessors and of citizen dissatisfaction. Even though electoral competition in post-genocide Rwanda has always been limited, Kagame is a national hero and has a remarkable developmental record, in turn. Rather than power seizures, contemporary autocratization more frequently consists in rulers' effort to expand, consolidate and prolong power.

Second, twenty-first century autocratization rarely unfolds through disruptive events, such as military coups. Increasingly, "autocratizers" pursue their goals by resorting to subtler and more gradual tactics that substantially undermine democratic norms without blatantly abrogating formal institutions (Luehrmann and Lindberg 2019). While the reduction of military interventions in politics is good news, the alternative strategies that currently prevail are not necessarily less effective.

In Rwanda, for instance, the manipulation of electoral rules to allow Kagame to run for a third term was pursued in apparent compliance with constitutional procedures and approved by voters in a referendum. However, in a country in which competition was already limited, the almost unanimous approval of the reform depicts an electorate deprived of alternative options and thus of any concrete influence over politics. Political participation in Rwanda has been *de facto* (even though not *de jure*) abrogated (Adebanwi and Obadare 2011).

Moreover, Ecuador and especially Moldova highlight that election integrity is only occasionally the primary target of contemporary would-be-autocrats (Luehrmann et al. 2019). Electoral fraud and opposition repression can be complemented, or even replaced, by formally legal measures that restrict the freedom of expression. When criticism is silenced, elections are less threatening for incumbent rulers wishing to hold on to office.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we offered a case-oriented comparative analysis of twenty-first century processes of autocratization, building on a framework that distinguishes the different trajectories these regime transitions can follow and the various modes through which they occur. The analysis confirmed that autocratization represents an empirically relevant phenomenon in this historical era that has especially affected the non-Western world, thus far, and that an evolution is occurring in the trajectories, modes and actors characterizing these processes of regime change.

Beyond these trends, a few more general considerations concerning contemporary processes of autocratization can be formulated. A first point deserving attention is that twenty-first century autocratization

has rarely taken root in liberal democratic regimes, thus far. The more advanced democracy is, the less likely a country will experience autocratization, apparently.

The stability of liberal democracy probably rests on its distinctive institutional trait, namely, the limitation of the executive power. The presence of counter-powers such as the legislative and the judiciary – along with other independent agencies that monitor the conduct of the government and that enforce the protection of citizen's civil and political liberties – is one of the most effective deterrent against rulers' abuses of power. Not surprisingly, the loosening of the mechanisms of horizontal accountability was one of the first moves of Ecuador's newly elected president Correa, in the attempt to gain sufficient decision-making power to implement his ambitious reform agenda.

The importance of executive limitation as a defence against autocratization is indirectly confirmed by the fragility of defective democracies, in which rulers are poorly constrained. These regimes represent the most frequent victims of contemporary processes of autocratization, typically as a consequence of incumbent rulers wishing to hold on to power that try to weaken opposition parties and repress dissent. As the case of Moldova shows, electoral fraud, opposition repression and restrictions to media freedom can be more easily carried out when the lines of authority between the executive and the other state actors are ill defined.

A possible implication of these considerations regards the recent transitions from liberal democracy to defective democracy, whose frequency has been growing throughout the past two decades. While these transitions do not end democracy in a country, they might represent the first step of a longer-term process of "sequential" autocratization leading to electoral autocracy. The weakening of the mechanisms of horizontal accountability that typically accompanies the shift from liberal democracy to defective democracy could be thought of as a breach in democracy's system of defence that paves the way to further assaults at the very core of democracy itself, namely, contestation and participation (Dahl 1971). With a look at our dataset (see the Appendix), Venezuela has already travelled this path of sequential autocratization, throughout the presidencies of Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro. Hungary might be next (Levitsky and Way 2019).

Another point worth emphasizing, which should receive closer examination in future research, has to do with the role of citizens in contemporary processes of autocratization. While incumbent rulers are the main agents of contemporary autocratization, we should not overlook that these leaders are often legitimated by a relatively strong and genuine popular support, at least in the early stages of an autocratization process. The extent to which citizens' approval remains authentic in the later stages of the process is hardly measurable, though, given the restriction of political liberties and the manipulation of the electoral rules that typically accompany autocratization.

Finally, a more positive note to conclude this article refers to what follows regime change towards autocracy. Two of the cases examined in-depth – Moldova and Ecuador – suggest that autocratization can be reversed and that at least moderate democratic progress can follow. A possible explanation has to do with the partial nature of the processes of autocratization experienced by these countries. Autocratization in Moldova led to electoral authoritarianism, but elections never became mere window dressing. In Ecuador, autocratization was even "softer", leading to defective democracy. The examined cases of full autocratization, on the contrary, appear more stable. Kagame in Rwanda is unlikely to fall anytime soon, whereas Thailand, after five years of military rule, has recently held elections, which the former leader of the junta Prayut Chan-o-cha unsurprisingly won.

Second, the fate of a process of autocratization to some extent intertwines with the fortune of the political leader who initiated it. As an example, in Ecuador, the decision of Correa to comply with term limits led to an electoral succession in 2017. The newly elected and former vice-president Lenin Moreno, however, has re-opened a dialogue with the opposition, the civil society and the media, and he has undertaken a series of reforms aimed to strengthen the transparency and the accountability of political institutions.

Crises are a third factor that may influence the outcome of a process of autocratization. As we have seen, many of the examined processes of autocratization began as a response to a crisis – either social, economic, political, or a combination of them. However, the emergence of a new crisis (or the persistence of an unresolved one) can similarly determine the interruption of a process of autocratization. In less than a decade, for instance, the ruling PCRM suffered a significant loss of popular consensus in the 2009 Moldovan elections, largely due to an economic setback derived from the global financial crisis and the worsening of the relations with Russia. The massive street protests against alleged electoral fraud that followed – that is, the so-called “Twitter Revolution” (Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu, 2009) – led to the fall of the PCRM-led regime.

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Appendix

Autocratization episodes, 2000-2018

| Country | Year | Region | Trajectory | | Modes | | | | |
|----------------------|------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | | | from | to | Military intervention | Electoral manipulation | Political liberties limitation | Civil liberties limitation | Horizontal accountability weakening |
| Belarus | 2000 | Eastern Europe | defective democracy | → closed autocracy | no | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| Russia | 2000 | Eastern Europe | defective democracy | → electoral autocracy | no | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| Venezuela | 2000 | Latin America | liberal democracy | → defective democracy | no | no | no | no | yes |
| Moldova | 2001 | Eastern Europe | defective democracy | → electoral autocracy | no | yes | yes | no | no |
| Nepal | 2002 | Asia | electoral autocracy | → closed autocracy | yes | no | yes | yes | no |
| Central African Rep. | 2003 | sub-Saharan Africa | electoral autocracy | → closed autocracy | yes | no | no | no | no |
| Guinea-Bissau | 2003 | sub-Saharan Africa | defective democracy | → closed autocracy | yes | no | no | no | no |
| Philippines | 2004 | Asia | defective democracy | → electoral autocracy | no | yes | no | no | no |
| Mauritania | 2005 | sub-Saharan Africa | electoral autocracy | → closed autocracy | yes | no | no | no | no |
| Chad | 2006 | sub-Saharan Africa | electoral autocracy | → closed autocracy | no | yes | no | no | no |
| Ecuador | 2006 | Latin America | liberal democracy | → defective democracy | no | no | yes | yes | yes |
| Fiji | 2006 | Oceania | defective democracy | → closed autocracy | yes | no | yes | no | yes |
| Sri Lanka | 2006 | Asia | defective democracy | → electoral autocracy | no | no | yes | yes | no |
| Tajikistan | 2006 | Asia | electoral autocracy | → closed autocracy | no | yes | yes | yes | no |
| Thailand | 2006 | Asia | defective democracy | → closed autocracy | yes | no | yes | yes | yes |
| Bangladesh | 2007 | Asia | defective democracy | → closed autocracy | yes | no | yes | yes | no |
| Kenya | 2007 | sub-Saharan Africa | defective democracy | → electoral autocracy | no | yes | no | no | no |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|------|--------------------|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Guinea | 2008 | sub-Saharan Africa | electoral autocracy → closed autocracy | yes | no | no | no | no |
| Senegal | 2008 | sub-Saharan Africa | liberal democracy → defective democracy | no | yes | no | no | yes |
| Honduras | 2009 | Latin America | defective democracy → electoral autocracy | yes | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| Madagascar | 2009 | sub-Saharan Africa | defective democracy → closed autocracy | yes | no | yes | yes | no |
| Djibouti | 2011 | sub-Saharan Africa | electoral autocracy → closed autocracy | no | yes | no | no | no |
| Hungary | 2011 | Eastern Europe | liberal democracy → defective democracy | no | no | yes | yes | yes |
| Nicaragua | 2011 | Latin America | defective democracy → electoral autocracy | no | yes | yes | no | yes |
| Guinea-Bissau | 2012 | sub-Saharan Africa | defective democracy → closed autocracy | yes | no | no | yes | yes |
| Mali | 2012 | sub-Saharan Africa | liberal democracy → defective democracy | yes | no | no | yes | yes |
| Venezuela | 2012 | Latin America | defective democracy → electoral autocracy | no | yes | yes | yes | no |
| Central African Rep. | 2013 | sub-Saharan Africa | electoral autocracy → closed autocracy | yes | no | no | no | no |
| Panama | 2013 | Latin America | liberal democracy → defective democracy | no | no | no | no | yes |
| Turkey | 2013 | Middle East | defective democracy → electoral autocracy | no | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| Bangladesh | 2014 | Asia | defective democracy → electoral autocracy | no | yes | no | yes | no |
| Thailand | 2014 | Asia | defective democracy → closed autocracy | yes | no | yes | yes | yes |
| Burundi | 2015 | sub-Saharan Africa | electoral autocracy → closed autocracy | no | yes | yes | yes | yes |
| Congo, Rep. | 2015 | sub-Saharan Africa | electoral autocracy → closed autocracy | no | yes | no | no | no |
| Rwanda | 2015 | sub-Saharan Africa | electoral autocracy → closed autocracy | no | yes | no | no | no |
| Poland | 2016 | Eastern Europe | liberal democracy → defective democracy | no | no | yes | no | yes |
| Zambia | 2016 | sub-Saharan Africa | defective democracy → electoral autocracy | no | yes | no | no | yes |
| Serbia | 2017 | Eastern Europe | defective democracy → electoral autocracy | no | yes | yes | no | no |