



Call for papers, Brussels 28-29 September 2023

Resisting the autocratic turn: Can (and should) autocratization be prevented, stopped, and resisted?

Motivations and key themes

The Centre d'Étude de la Vie Politique (CEVIPOL) of the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), and the Berlin-based Cluster of Excellence “Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)” are organizing an international conference entitled “**Resisting the autocratic turn: Can (and should) autocratization be prevented, stopped, and resisted?**”.

The 2022 annual V-Dem report puts forward that we are currently observing autocratization processes in 33 countries, directly affecting the political environment of a total of 36% of the world population (Boese et al. 2022, 18). These processes are global in nature and constitute a worrying trend. They concern the full spectrum of political regimes, and they take many forms depending on the starting and end point of the process.

In recent years, the focal point of research has been to better grasp these phenomena by improving and finessing the methodological detection of these processes. Debates about the widespread nature of the phenomenon (Boese, Lindberg, and Lührmann 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Skaaning 2020; Tomini 2021) as much as the concrete measurement have been emphasized (Jee, Lueders, and Myrick 2022; Pelke and Croissant 2021), tackling the conceptual fuzziness of what is sometimes described as “autocratization”, “democratic backsliding” (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018), “democratic regression” (Croissant and Haynes 2021; Diamond 2021), or “de-democratization” (Tilly 2003).

Yet, what has largely been sidelined is the question what political regimes, institutions and actors can do against these processes. Since the phenomenon of autocratization is of global nature (see Cassani and Tomini 2018) and takes many different forms, the analysis of resilience and resistance must also embrace this global and comparative approach. The conference therefore adopts a multi-perspective approach that cuts across political science subdisciplines:

- a) The legal-institutionalist dimension. Recently, ideas about “militant democracy” have been revived (Bourne 2018; Kirshner 2014; Malkapoulou and Norman 2018; Rijpkema 2018; Stahl and Popp-Madsen 2022) that take recourse to the classic concept by Karl Loewenstein (Loewenstein 1937a; 1937b). In this line of argument, democracies’ robust response against existential threats is accentuated, including even the usage of illiberal means to save democracy (Capoccia 2013; Müller 2016). Yet, it seems unclear to what extent these classic answers actually apply to today’s situation, how they need to be modified, and what lessons can be learned from the past. Papers exploring these phenomena in a historical comparative perspective are also welcomed.
- b) The agency factor. There is a growing debate around the strategies and role that political, social and other domestic or international actors can do to prevent and resist autocratization (Gamboa 2017; Merkel and Lührmann 2021; Somer et al. 2021; Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2022). The open questions are manifold and include: what are the most effective strategies and when should they be adopted? What is the role of the different types of actors in resisting autocratization? How and why do they ally? How does the authoritarian incumbent adapt its strategies when it faces resistance?
- c) The structural factor. Actors can attempt to oppose autocratization, but they do not act in the vacuum. Preventing autocratization, directly addressing its causes, is pivotal. Across autocratizing countries, many of those which are resisting autocratization with more difficulties are less established democracies, affected by bad economic conditions (Przeworski et al. 2000), surging inequalities (Haggard & Kaufman 2012), fragmented party systems (Bértoa & Enyedi 2021), polarized electorates (Somer et al. 2021) and social groups (Houle 2015), and unconsolidated political institutions (Schedler 1998). We set forth that, as the interrelation of structure and agency is fundamental to explain social change (Mahoney & Snyder 1999), a multilevel analysis might be necessary to study autocratization and its resistance: what is the impact of structural conditions on the ‘success’ of autocratization? And how to prevent its rise?
- d) The conceptual side. Recent works on concepts such as resilience and resistance showcase different types of opposition to autocratization, focusing on prevention and respectively blocking and reversing autocratization once it kicks in, that could constitute an organic link between literature on autocratization and democratization. Yet, the elaboration of these concepts raises questions such as to what extent do we need to distinguish between different types of opposition to autocratization via separate concepts? How do concepts such as resilience and resistance relate to mirroring ones existing in democratization, such as consolidation and transition, and is such a comparison desirable?
- e) Methodology and measurement challenges. While resistance practices are a compelling empirical reality, our methodological toolkit to make full sense of them still lags behind. Some authors that have framed these practices as actions granting accountability during critical junctures (Guasti 2021; Laebens and Lührmann 2021) have started a methodological reflection: how to measure resistance to autocratization? Which time

scale shall researchers adopt to examine phenomena of resistance? Does resistance against autocratization imply a successful outcome or should also unsuccessful attempts to push back against the autocratizer be analyzed? How to account for the “resistance behind the scene” carried out by actors that choose not to go public?

Against this backdrop, the conference unites scholars from diverse backgrounds to inquire into the question how and why political regimes should resist the current autocratization turn. We invite paper proposals, ranging from normative to positive political theory, from conceptual to empirical works, while at the same time being ecumenical when it comes to concrete empirical research methods.

Based on the Brussels conference, a follow-up authors workshop is planned in Berlin for late 2023.

Submission Guidelines

Abstracts (max. 300 words) should be submitted, along with contact information (name, institutional affiliation, department, e-mail address), to Luca Tomini (luca.tomini@ulb.be) and Johannes Gerschewski (johannes.gerschewski@wzb.eu) by May 1st, 2023. Submissions must be in an electronic form as PDF format or as a Microsoft Word document. Notifications of acceptance will be sent out by late May 2023.