AGENCY LEARNING PRIORITY: AFFIRMATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Rapid Literature Review

What development approaches are effective at mitigating external authoritarian influences, actions, or messages?

AUGUST 2023

Produced at the request of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), this rapid literature review is part of a series contributing toward the 2022–2026 Agency Learning Agenda. In response to critical evidence needs, this series seeks to improve awareness and sharing of the latest available evidence linked to the Agency's highest policy priorities through a review and synthesis of select studies published from 2018–2022.

CONTRACT INFORMATION

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ACRONYMS

AEA	American Economic Association
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCCC	Chinese Communications Construction Company
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
PRC	People's Republic of China
SORM	System for Operative Investigative Activities
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
VDEM	Varieties of Democracy
VOA	Voice of America
ZTE	Zhongxing Semiconductor Co., Ltd

> Democracy is not in decline. Rather, it is under attack. Under attack from within by forces of division, ethnonationalism, and repression. And under attack from without by autocratic governments and leaders who seek to exploit the inherent vulnerabilities of open societies by undermining election integrity, weaponizing corruption, and spreading disinformation to strengthen their grip on power. Worse, these autocrats increasingly work together, sharing tricks and technologies to repress their populations at home and weaken democracy abroad.
>
> After years of democratic backsliding, the world's autocrats are finally on the defensive. But to seize this moment and swing the pendulum of history back toward democratic rule, we must break down the wall that separates democratic advocacy from economic development work and demonstrate that democracies can deliver for their people. We must also redouble our efforts to counter digital surveillance and disinformation while upholding freedom of expression. And we must update the traditional democratic assistance playbook to help our partners respond to ever more sophisticated campaigns against them. Only then can we beat back antidemocratic forces and extend the reach of freedom.—*USAID Administrator Samantha Power, "How Democracy Can Win: The Right Way to Counter Autocracy," Foreign Affairs, March/April 2023*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Evidence shows democracy consistently outperforms authoritarianism in achieving a broad range of development goals (see, for example, the Varieties of Democracy (VDEM) Institute "Case for Democracy"). Authoritarian tactics to erode democracy undermine political and human rights and threaten development goals and gains. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) practices an affirmative approach to development that advocates for good governance, the rule of law, and human rights protections that strengthen the foundations for free and open societies that are connected, secure, prosperous, and resilient. This approach complements the Agency's long-standing practices emphasizing environmental impact, social impact, and financial sustainability.

Rooted in the National Security Strategy and the Department of State and USAID Joint Strategic Plan, "affirmative development" is an increasingly used term of art that communicates this democracy-positive vision for development. Affirmative development emphasizes that countries are free to make the choices that best serve their interests and course correct and adapt, unlike the development approach of autocracies, which prefer to coerce via military might, energy extortion, crippling debt, or other similar means. This affirmative, rights-respecting vision for development extends beyond USAID's work in conflict prevention and democracy, human rights, and governance to "doing development democratically" across all sectors in ways that support democratic resilience and mitigate against authoritarian tactics.

II. REVIEW METHODOLOGY AND SEARCH TERMS

This rapid literature review contributes toward the 2022–2026 Agency Learning Agenda question on affirmative development: *How can USAID advance an affirmative, sustainable development approach to mitigate authoritarian or malign influences and actions?* This review was designed to address the following evidence gap, identified in collaboration with specialists from USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning; the Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance; and the Bureau for Europe and Eurasia: "What development approaches are effective at mitigating **external** authoritarian influences, actions, or messages?"

To conduct the review, the authors first examined resources shared by Agency affirmative development specialists, followed by a search for relevant literature from the most recent five-year period (2018–2022) on USAID's Evaluation Registry, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) Development Evidence Portal, JSTOR, and the American Economic Association's (AEA) registry of randomized controlled trials. Similar search terms were used across sites, with adaptations made as outlined in Annex A. Included evidence comes from randomized controlled trials, quasi-experiments, case studies, impact evaluations, and data analysis. Alongside limitations presented by the rapid nature of the review, the search primarily returned studies on the influence of the governments of Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) on foreign countries; therefore, approaches for countering authoritarian influences beyond those employed by these governments may be underrepresented in the findings.[1] The primary users of this document include those designing and implementing development programs focused on countering authoritarianism, affirmative development, or democracy strengthening.

III. AUTHORITARIAN TRENDS AND VULNERABILITY

Authoritarian governments, such as the PRC and Russia, are promoting their models of authoritarianism globally and manipulating the information environment in their favor by methodically spreading misinformation, applying diplomatic and economic pressure, and exporting suppression tools. Even governments classified as democracies have become more authoritarian, according to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute's new V-Party dataset (Lührmann 2020). Examining data from 169 countries from 1970 to 2019, V-Dem found that the "median governing party in democracies has become more illiberal in recent decades – rising from a score of 0.08 in 1970 to 0.28 in 2019," indicating "that contemporary threats to democracy typically come from within the government," according to V-Dem Director Staffan I. Lindberg.

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[1] The search terms used across sites were similar but adapted as needed depending on that site's search capability and the need to narrow or broaden terms according to its content and the results received. Annex A contains more detail on the search methods.

Online misinformation campaigns have grown quickly in recent years, orchestrated by authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning regimes utilizing their model of information suppression to create narratives that serve their own benefit and discourage civic unrest. "Technology increases the efficiency of autocrats' efforts to drown out criticism and inflate perceptions of regime support, lowering the prospects for protest," according to USAID's *Digitized Autocracy Literature Review* (USAID 2021). The Oxford Internet Institute found that "state-backed social media manipulation campaigns" occurred in 70 countries in 2019, compared to only 28 in 2017 (Bradshaw 2019). An analysis by the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (USACPD 2020) revealed that the Russian government accounts for about half of the global disinformation threats.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a development strategy employed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) involving infrastructure development and investments across Asia, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas, also wields economic coercion to exert authoritarian influence. BRI deals, often opaque and corrupt, erode fragile democracies' institutions and saddle countries with high levels of debt (IRI 2020). The rapid growth of PRC development programming is rivaling that of Bretton Woods international financial institutions. From 2008 to 2019, the PRC's overseas development finance totaled approximately $462 billion, nearly equal to World Bank spending over the same period (CRS 2022).

The Russian government and the CCP directly enable domestic authoritarian practices by exporting their "digital authoritarianism" technologies that suppress, surveil, and control their populations. The Russian government's model is lower-tech and relies on tightening control of information and intimidating internet service providers, telecom providers, private companies, and civil society groups. "[W]hile Russia's brand of digital authoritarianism is not as technologically savvy as the PRC, it could prove to be readily adaptable and enduring. Many autocracies more closely resemble Russia than the PRC in that they did not build censorship into their systems from the start and lack the resources and, in many cases, the capacity to filter data and block content like Beijing" (USAID 2021).

The governments of Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and other former Soviet Republics are replicating Russia's System for Operative Investigative Activities (SORM) surveillance system, which "basically cop[ies] all data flows on internet and telecom networks—sending one copy to the government and the other to the intended destination" (Polyakova 2019). The use of such systems is spreading. Russian companies providing these systems are forming partnerships across the Middle East and Latin America.

> *"Beijing's experience using digital tools for domestic censorship and surveillance has made it the supplier of choice for illiberal regimes looking to deploy their own surveillance systems, while Moscow's lower-cost digital disinformation tools have proven effective in repressing potential opposition at home and undermining democracies abroad." (Polyakova 2019)*

Meanwhile, the CCP's model requires more sophisticated surveillance tools, government firewalls, and artificial intelligence. According to Polyakova (2019), "at least 18 countries currently use Chinese surveillance and monitoring systems, and at least 36 governments have held Chinese-led trainings and seminars on new media or information management. In Ethiopia, security services relied on telecommunications equipment from ZTE (a partially PRC state-owned telecom giant) to monitor and surveil opposition activists and journalists (Polyakova 2019). The governments of Zimbabwe and Angola have signed partnerships through the BRI with ZTE to provide artificial intelligence for their ruling regimes (Polyakova 2019). Under President Maduro, the Venezuelan government contracted with ZTE to use PRC-backed technologies to censor and control critics by blocking social media platforms and political content. As part of this effort, ZTE used pro-regime commentators to manipulate online discussions, surveil citizens, track and detain government critics, and access the data of human rights organizations (USSFRC 2020).

For an extensive review of digital repression, global trends, and the spread of digital authoritarianism, see USAID's 2021 *Digitized Autocracy Literature Review*.

IV. APPROACHES TO COUNTER AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCES

Resisting the rise of authoritarianism through information suppression, censorship, international coercion, and misinformation attacks depends on the strength of a country's democracy. The following findings are organized by seven key elements for democratic resilience[2] identified by USAID specialists:

- Local Values and Culture
- Information Integrity
- Digital Democracy
- Checks and Balances
- Public Administration
- Economic Competitiveness
- Global Law

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[2] While these categories are used to organize the findings of this review, they were not the primary terms used in the literature search (see Annex A). Due to this, and the limited and rapid nature of the review, some categories contain fewer findings; this should not be interpreted as a sign of the relative promise or importance of the categories in achieving democratic resilience.

Local Values and Culture

A cohesive local political culture can be an effective bulwark against the rise of authoritarianism, including support for democratic institutions, personal experiences with authoritarian governments, and civic demands for accountability and change. Recent literature contributes to this evidence base through the following findings:

- Pressure from civil society is a key factor in halting democratic erosion, as found in case studies by Laebans et al. (2021). Civil society mobilization incentivizes incumbent politicians and opposition parties to take action. Healthy competition between electoral parties is also key to halting democratic erosion.

- Active civil societies were found to make democratic transition and resilience more likely, and improve terms of (or even cancel) BRI deals (Lee 2018, IRI 2020).

- An experiment showed that three types of online civic education courses in Tunisia positively affected democratic support, political efficacy, and intentions to register to vote in upcoming elections, and negatively affected authoritarian support. Courses that emphasized the losses that result from transitioning to authoritarian governments were most effective in reducing authoritarian nostalgia (Finkel 2018).

Multiple studies uphold civil society as a major factor of democratic resilience and resistance to authoritarian influences. Case studies of democratic breakdown in Benin, Ecuador, and South Korea by Laebans et al. (2021) suggest **halting democratic erosion is more successful with pressure from civil society and electoral competition between parties**, among other factors. The authors note that pressure from civil society, such as protests, may not be enough alone to halt democratic erosion but appear to be effective in agitating government institutions and opposition parties to act: "To have an incentive to check on the incumbent, and to successfully sanction incumbents either electorally… or through institutional checks and balances, … elites must often be pressured by civil society mobilization."

An examination of cases by Lee (2018) also found the importance of civil society, noting that in Indonesia, Mongolia, and Timor-Leste, **an active and vibrant civil society made democratic transition and resilience more likely**. An assessment of CCP influence through the BRI by researchers with the International Republican Institute (IRI 2020) found evidence that **civil society pushback on BRI initiatives can effectively improve the terms of or even cancel planned projects** (see Box 1). In Australia, "a vigorous independent media and vibrant civil society, particularly in Australia's ethnic Chinese diaspora community, helped to expose CCP influence efforts." Australia's accountable and transparent government responded to these efforts by passing laws strengthening

transparency, controlling donations to political parties, and improving espionage protections. These policies were reviewed and debated by civic groups.

Additionally, a **civil society familiar with the practices of certain authoritarian regimes may be more skeptical and present stronger opposition** to attempted authoritarian influence. A study by Popescu-Zamfir and Sandu (2021) found former Soviet republics with lower nostalgia for communism had stronger democratic resilience. Furthermore, countries weighing deals with the BRI are more likely to face resistance when the country is familiar with the CCP's predatory approach to investment and their effort to influence foreign countries, such as countries that are geographically and historically closer to China (IRI 2020).

> ### BOX 1. CASE EXAMPLE: CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA PUSHBACK AGAINST BRI INVESTMENT IN THE MALDIVES
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> In the Maldives, former President Yameen pushed through investment proposals by the PRC against opposition and popular wishes through opaque, closed-door meetings, fast-tracking legislation, and making changes to the country's constitution. However, "despite the overwhelming efforts of the Yameen administration to open the Maldives to CCP influence, Maldivian civic organizations and independent media remained intact. Although the Yameen administration was not transparent in disseminating information regarding Chinese construction projects, the local media was able to access Chinese media reports regarding the development of housing projects in Hulhumale. Additionally, local media served as a check on the Sinamalé Bridge project, noting that the PRC state-owned enterprise Chinese Communications Construction Company (CCCC) Second Harbour Engineering Company [a subsidiary of CCCC] had been blacklisted by the World Bank due to corrupt business practices. Although the 2018 presidential election took place against the backdrop of political authoritarianism and democratic decline, an active civil society, watchful media, and vigorous opposition were able to oust Yameen" (IRI 2020). The new president is repairing the Maldivian economy and increasing resilience against PRC economic influence by diversifying international financing, reviving economic ties with India and other nations, and exposing corruption under Yameen. (IRI 2020)

Civic Education Campaigns

To bolster civil society, civic education campaigns can counter pro-authoritarian messaging and educate citizens on the advantages of democratic institutions. Finkel et al. (2018) explored the optimal messaging strategy for civic education campaigns through an experiment in Tunisia. The experimenters designed four separate online education programs. The first program emphasized the *benefits* of a democratic system; the second emphasized the *losses* of not having a democratic system by pitting autocracy versus democracy; the third attempted to induce political *self-efficacy* and electoral participation by offering a tutorial on how to put civic education into practice; and the fourth was a control group that learned about wildlife conservation.

The experiment found **exposure to the three online civic education programs positively affected democratic support, political efficacy, and intentions to register to vote in upcoming elections and negatively affected authoritarian support** compared to the placebo group. Across all three treatment groups, participants reported a 5–10 percent higher support for democracy, a 10 percent lower support for the Ben Ali regime, a 7 percent increase in intention to vote, a 17 percent intention to engage in campaign actions (i.e., attending a rally working for a candidate), and 10 percent higher feelings of political efficacy compared to the placebo group. The "loss" and "benefit" treatments were generally more effective than the "self-efficacy" treatment, but the "loss" group generally had higher and more significant effects than the "benefit" group. However, the researchers were unable to conclude a statistically significant difference between the two treatments, except for reducing authoritarian nostalgia. For this factor, the "loss" treatment resulted in 16 percentage points lower support for the Ben Ali regime than the placebo group, compared to only 6 percentage points difference for the "benefit" treatment, a significant difference. Finally, the study found the treatment effects were stronger among those with an existing commitment to democracy and those not previously registered to vote.

These findings suggest **civic education can provide an important tool to prevent authoritarian backsliding and help promote democratic participation and support by those with less experience in the democratic process**. The authors suggest "short-term interventions can foster change in supportive democratic attitudes and participatory orientations, even interventions of relatively short duration and consumed privately by individuals without direct guidance from facilitators. Moreover, these positive effects can potentially be achieved on a much greater scale in the online environment, relative to the few individuals exposed to a given face-to-face intervention."

Information Integrity

The rise of disinformation and "fake news" represents a major threat to democracy, as authoritarian governments harness false narratives to denigrate democracies and tout supposed advantages of authoritarian governments. There is considerable new research that points to the importance of journalism and media literacy in debunking misinformation, exposing authoritarian actions and corrupt deals, and providing pressure on governments to be accountable. Overall findings from recent literature include:

- Case examples of Voice of America (VOA) journalism suggest their reporting has inspired al-Shabab defections and countered disinformation by the Venezuelan government (Osipova-Stocker 2020).

- Several case examples provide evidence of journalists and media resisting and countering CCP influence, such as discontinuing paid advertisements by the CCP, publishing independent stories countering or exposing misinformation or bias, and providing a platform for CCP dissenters to express their opinion (Cook 2021).

- Media pressure has helped push back against economic coercion through corrupt BRI deals (IRI 2020), provided accountability, and slowed democratic erosion (Laebans 2021).

- Interventions to improve media literacy may be effective, but the effectiveness and longevity of results may be directly related to the intensiveness of the training. Two experiments examined social media exposure to a tip sheet on fake news and an in-person media literacy training program. (Guess 2020, Murrock 2018)

- However, higher levels of digital literacy do not necessarily predict whether a person will share false information: an experiment in the U.S. suggests social media users may share information whether or not they believe it is true (Sirlin 2021). An experiment in India suggests people are less likely to challenge a known misconception if it comes from their own social group (Augsburg 2022).

Case examples of the influence of Voice of America (VOA) journalism by the U.S. Agency for Global Media show the potential for state-sponsored impact in countering misinformation and practicing high-quality journalism. In Somalia, equipment and property surrendered by al-Shabab fighters after government forces liberate areas from their control often contain clandestine copies of VOA Somali reports, indicating al-Shabab fighters consume this content. Most prominently, **some high-profile defectors from al-Shabab have credited VOA Somali reporting for their ultimate decision to leave the group and have requested their first media interviews be with VOA**, for maximum effect not only in the country but among al-Shabab's ranks, too (Osipova-Stocker 2020). In Venezuela, "VOA is countering [President] Maduro's disinformation by providing consistent coverage of the situation, rather than [responding] to narratives by the government. In fiscal year 2019, digital traffic for Venezuela alone increased by 62 percent, indicating the service's overall approach and digital-first strategy are extremely effective. Perhaps an additional indicator of VOA's success in the region is the angry responses by the Maduro Government to some of its reports" (Osipova-Stocker 2020).

Improving News Media Literacy

As a direct response to the rapid increase in online misinformation, states and development programs are seeking to improve people's ability to discern "fake news" from high-quality journalism. Two recent experiments examined the impact of different interventions to improve media literacy. One looked at social media exposure to a tip sheet on fake news, while the other focused on an in-person media literacy training program.

Facebook's "Tips to Spot Fake News" post was first promoted by the company in April 2017 on users' news feeds, printed in full-page newspaper advertisements, and distributed over WhatsApp. An experiment by Guess et al. (2020) tested the effectiveness of this approach in the U.S. and India by randomizing survey respondents' exposure to the tip sheet, then asking respondents to rate the accuracy of a series of actual mainstream, hyperpartisan, and false headlines. The initiative appeared to **improve respondents' ability to discern between false and mainstream news stories**, **resulting in a 26.5 percent improvement in the U.S. (among a nationally-representative sample) and a 17.6 percent improvement in India (among highly educated populations only)**. Three weeks later, the effects were diminished but still measurable in the U.S., but no longer present in India. While the intervention's effects were short-lived, the researchers note that low cost and replicability could make it a viable option for educating en masse.

Using an in-person approach, a media literacy training program in Ukraine showed evidence of improved news literacy and positive media consumption behaviors over a year and a half after program completion. The program trained citizens to understand mass media, propaganda and manipulation, and the consequences of dehumanization and hate speech in the media (Murrock 2018). In a quasi-experimental impact evaluation, **treatment groups outperformed control groups on:**

1. **A disinformation news media assessment, where they analyzed a story based on false and manipulative information (12 percent higher than the control group).**
2. **A news media knowledge assessment that assessed understanding of media structures and ownership (28 percent higher than the control group).**
3. **Their likelihood to report cross-checking their news sources directly after and 18 months following the training (38 percent more likely than the control group).**

Media Consumer Behaviors

Some evidence reveals that **increasing media literacy may not necessarily stop the spread of false information**, and a higher level of digital literacy does not predict whether a person will share false (or true) stories on social media. In 2020, Sirlin et al. (2021) surveys presented American social media users with a set of true and false news posts and asked them randomly to assess the accuracy of the headlines or indicate their likelihood of sharing each headline through social media. Users were also surveyed on digital literacy, analytic thinking, procedural news knowledge, partisanship, and basic demographics. The findings suggest **digital literacy was positively associated with the ability to tell true versus false headlines but not with the users' intention to share true or false headlines.** The authors suggest that "while digital literacy is a useful predictor of people's ability to differentiate the truth from falsehood, this may not translate to predicting the quality of information people share online."

Augsburg et al. (2022) conducted an experiment in India among Muslim and Hindu residents testing how misinformation and trust change depending on the social proximity of the source. Using religion as a proxy for social proximity, they found knowledge and preventative behaviors around COVID-19 statistically improved when respondents received information from a trusted source (a doctor). However, **respondents disagreed with COVID-19 misconceptions only when a member outside their religion stated them**, not when the misconception came from within their religious group. This study suggests that while awareness-raising campaigns from trusted sources can be effective, sharing fake news within social groups remains a sticky problem.

((( ))) Digital Democracy

Using technology to censor the internet, surveil citizens, and control information is a common practice of authoritarian governments, and repression models and technologies are being exported globally to new governments to erode democracy and strengthen authoritarian regimes. The Authoritarian Trends and Vulnerability section above and USAID's 2021 Digitized Autocracy Literature Review contain more background on current trends of digital suppression from the recent literature. While the literature search results contained limited evidence on the effect of reducing digital suppression or increasing digital democracy, this is symptomatic of the search parameters and likely of the difficulty of designing an experiment around these factors. The literature search revealed evidence of the effect of increasing internet access:

- An expert survey and literature review identified unrestricted access to the internet as a key driver of democratic resilience in Romania, Hungary, and Moldova (Popescu-Zamfir and Sandu 2021).

- A survey analysis found that increased internet access through the 3G network reduced government support in countries with corrupt governments where the internet was not censored (Guriev et al. 2020).

Popescu-Zamfir and Sandu (2021) developed a Democratic Resilience Index based on an expert survey and a review of social science literature on democratic transitions, backsliding, and resilience in Central and Eastern Europe by examining the key drivers and vulnerabilities of democratic resilience. The index examines instances of "consequences or correlates" of movement toward authoritarianism. **A survey of media and civil society experts in Romania, Hungary, and Moldova identified "open and unrestricted access to the internet" as one of the most important drivers of democratic resilience.**

A survey by Guriev et al. (2020) of nearly 850,000 people across 116 countries found that **increased internet access (through the 3G network) was associated with reduced government support in countries where there is no internet censorship and there is corruption**, and more negatively affects government approval where traditional print and radio media are censored. The authors found an increase in access to mobile broadband of 39 percent "reduced the confidence in the national government of the region's population by 2.5 percentage points (from the mean level of 51 percent), and increased the perception that the government is corrupt by 1.4 percentage points (from the mean of 77 percent)." Conversely, support for the government increased in countries with the least corruption, such as Denmark or Switzerland. Furthermore, in Europe, expanded internet access appears to give greater voice to populist, non-establishment political parties. Mobile broadband access increased by an average of 53 percent across the area from 2008–2017, resulting in a 4.7 percentage point

decrease in the incumbent party's vote share and an increase of 4.6 and 3.6 in right-wing and left-wing populists, respectively. The authors stated that overall, "mobile broadband internet is an important medium for providing voters with political information that is independent of the government."

⚖️ Checks and Balances

Case evidence points to vibrant democracies with functioning checks and balances, including an effective and independent judiciary and legislative oversight, as a potentially effective defense against the rise of authoritarianism. Overall findings from the recent literature include:

- An analysis of V-Dem data showed evidence that an independent judiciary whose rulings are respected by the executive are associated with democratic resilience and weak evidence of the effectiveness of legislative oversight (Boese et al. 2021).

- In case studies of episodes of democratic erosion in Benin, Ecuador, and South Korea, parliamentary and judicial oversight mechanisms appeared to play an important role in halting democratic erosion (Laebans et al. 2021).

A novel study by Boese et al. (2021) analyzed data from the Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset[3] of 59 episodes of democratic erosion that have occurred since 1993, which resulted in a democratic breakdown in 36 regimes. To examine more deeply how democracies decline, the authors separated this breakdown into two stages, the *onset* resilience (resisting the beginning of democratic decline) and *breakdown* resilience (once an episode of democratic decline has happened), and studied what happened at each stage. The authors found judicial constraints on the executive were closely associated with onset and breakdown resilience. At the same time, only weak evidence suggested that checks on the executive by the legislature or government agencies were associated with resilience at the breakdown stage. The authors stated that **"judicial institutions can act as the 'last bulwark' against democratic breakdown, while the legislature can do little to stop autocratization once it has started."** This study also found that economic development and a history of strong democratic institutions were associated with resilience, with caveats (See Economic Competitiveness).

> *"We find corroboration for claims that view the judiciary as the 'last bulwark' against democratic breakdown... judicial institutions seem to play an important role as democracy's last line of defense against aspiring dictators."—Boese et al. 2021*

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[3] The Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset "identifies episodes of substantial and sustained changes in levels of democracy for most political units from 1900 to 2019 drawing on the V-Dem electoral democracy index ." (Boese et al. 2021)

Case studies of democratic erosion in Benin, Ecuador, and South Korea by Laebans et al. (2021) using data from the V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index suggest **halting democratic erosion is more likely to be successful with parliamentary and judicial oversight mechanisms (along with strong civil society, media, and opposition parties).** In South Korea, a country with a strong democracy and democratic institutions, these mechanisms went into action soon after the incumbent initiated a move toward authoritarianism. In countries with less vibrant democracies (Benin and Ecuador), these mechanisms worked after the incumbent was "weakened by contextual factors such as the end of the incumbent's constitutional term, economic downturn, or corruption scandals, …giving accountability actors greater leverage to sanction the incumbent."

Economic Competitiveness

A strong economy tied with other democracies economically and ideologically may be associated with democratic resilience. Overall findings from recent literature include:

- Global economic linkages and investment from international liberal organizations may help drive democratic resilience (Popescu-Zamfir and Sandu 2021).

- Higher economic development may help avoid the beginning of democratic decline but may not help avoid breakdown once it has begun (Boese et al. 2021).

- Nearby transitions to democracy, either large regional waves (i.e., the Arab Spring, 1970's Latin America) or the presence of a democratic neighbor may encourage democracy (Boese 2021, Acemoglu 2019).

The Democratic Resilience Index was developed by Popescu-Zamfir and Sandu (2021) from a review of social science literature and expert opinion on democratic transitions, backsliding, and resilience in Central and Eastern Europe. While the researchers found drivers of democratic resilience differed across countries, **some of the strongest drivers in Central and Eastern Europe were economic linkages and investment from international liberal organizations** (i.e., the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, or NATO).

The 2021 study by Boese et al., mentioned previously, studied 59 episodes of democratic erosion occurring since 1993, which resulted in democratic breakdown in 36 regimes. The authors separated this breakdown into two stages: *onset* resilience (resisting the beginning of democratic decline) and *breakdown* resilience (once an episode of democratic decline has happened). The authors found **"a higher level of economic development is associated with a greater *onset* resilience but has zero influence on avoiding *breakdown* once an episode has begun."** The study also found

evidence to suggest **having democratic neighbors and a longer experience with democracy increased resilience at the *breakdown* stage**.

A seminal paper by Acemoglu et al. (2019) further examines the effect of democratic neighbors, finding that "regional waves" are more predictive of democratic transition than simply having a democratic neighbor. They find evidence that "democratizations take place in regional waves: **a country is more likely to transition to democracy or nondemocracy when the same transition recently occurred in other countries in the same region**." This paper also contributes key evidence to refute the theory that economic growth is higher under authoritarian governments. The analysis finds a **tendency for national gross domestic product (GDP) to dip before an episode of democratization, followed by a 20 percent higher GDP in the next 25 years than a country that remained a "nondemocracy."** The researchers also suggest that "democracy fosters higher GDP by enacting economic reforms, improving fiscal capacity and the provision of schooling and health care, and perhaps also by inducing greater investment and lower social unrest."

V. CONCLUSION

This brief, time-bound literature review summarizes some of the latest evidence around mitigating authoritarian influences. Researchers have found compelling evidence around the role of an active civil society, civic education on democracy and authoritarianism, and media literacy. A functioning democracy that uses effective checks and balances, is linked economically and ideologically with other democracies, and provides public goods to its citizens may help strengthen democracy or prevent erosion into authoritarianism. Further research into areas such as the role of effective public administration, the effects of reducing digital suppression or increasing digital democracy, and more understanding of how to discourage the sharing of "fake news" could be valuable in the future.

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ANNEX A: SEARCH TERMS

Source	Date Range	Search Terms	# of Results	Action	Date Performed	Notes
POC list	2018–2022	Reviewed all entries provided by POC		reviewed all	12/10–13	
https://www.corruptionjusticeandlegitimacy.org/ (From POC)	2018–2022	Reviewed all entries in date range	˜20 results	reviewed all	12/13	
3ie	2018–2022	abstract:(misinformation OR disinformation OR authoritarian OR malign OR propaganda OR "Fake news" OR "false news" OR autocrat* OR "democratic resilience" OR "external influence" OR "foreign influence"OR "foreign actor" OR "external actor") OR title:(misinformation OR disinformation OR authoritarian OR malign OR propaganda OR "Fake news" OR "false news" OR autocrat* OR "democratic resilience" OR "external influence" OR "foreign influence" OR "foreign actor" OR "external actor")	21 results	reviewed all	12/13	
3ie	all	text: external foreign influence authoritarian	1568 results	reviewed first 25, none relevant	12/13	Wanted to broaden search to see if we were missing anything. No new relevant articles led us to conclude we were not likely missing anything.
JSTOR	2018–2022	full text: (misinformation OR disinformation OR authoritarian OR malign OR propaganda OR "Fake news" OR "false news" OR autocrat*)	15683 results	narrowed —too broad	12/13	On JSTOR we are limited to six "OR" terms

Source	Date Range	Search Terms	# of Results	Action	Date Performed	Notes
JSTOR	2018–2022	full text: (misinformation OR disinformation OR authoritarian OR malign OR propaganda OR "Fake news" OR "false news" OR autocrat*) Limited to development studies journals to narrow.	142 results	reviewed first 50, three potentially relevant	12/13	
JSTOR	2018–2022	counter* NEAR5 authoritarian*	54 results	reviewed all, none used	12/13	This search was to explore new tactics to find more relevant articles.
3ie	2018–2022	promot* AND democra*	10 results	reviewed all	12/13	Did this after a suggested article came up from a previous search that was relevant but did not come up in the search itself—no additional relevant articles came up.
JSTOR	2018–2022	"economic coercion"	2,996 results	reviewed first 50, none used	12/13	Searched this phrase after it came up in an abstract in 3ie
AEA		abstract: (authoritarian OR misinformation OR disinformation OR malign OR propaganda OR autocratic OR "fake news" OR "false news"), completed trials	50 results	reviewed all	12/13	
USAID Evaluation Registry	2018–2022	(reviewed abstracts/descriptions from output. impact evals only)	97 results	reviewed all	12/14	

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