

Dismantling Democracy: Patronage and Autocratization in Hungary

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Abstract: Democratic backsliding and autocratization have become defining political trends across regions, with Central and Eastern Europe—particularly Hungary—serving as paradigmatic cases. While existing research often highlights populist political parties as key drivers and international institutions as potential constraints, the mechanisms through which illiberal leaders systematically dismantle democratic governance remain insufficiently explored. This paper addresses this gap by positioning political patronage as a central strategy for initiating and entrenching autocratization.

The study examines how political appointments are strategically used to dismantle democratic institutions and entrench authoritarian regimes. In autocratic contexts, patronage moves beyond traditional roles like vote mobilization or rewarding supporters to become an instrument of state capture. Through centralized control of appointments, state institutions are transformed into mechanisms of political dominance, neutralizing opposition and consolidating power. This transformation, reminiscent of communist-era practices, enables illiberal regimes to enforce institutional changes, populate key positions with loyalists, and block avenues for democratic recovery.

Using Hungary as a case study, our analysis is based on a unique dataset of over 1,900 senior appointments in the ministerial bureaucracy from 1990 to 2022. The dataset was created through systematic coding of the career paths of all senior appointees during this period, providing a comprehensive picture of patronage practices. Our findings reveal a marked shift in these practices since 2010 under Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ-KDNP government, with early signs of transformation observable as far back as 2006. This shift illustrates a broader strategy of "purposeful institutional changes" aimed at eroding democratic norms and consolidating authoritarian control.

This research bridges insights from public administration and party politics, reframing democratic backsliding as a state-driven phenomenon. By illuminating the mechanisms and motivations underlying these shifts, it offers critical insights for scholars and policymakers, providing early warning indicators to counteract the erosion of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.