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Working Paper

International democracy promotion in times of autocratization: From supporting to protecting democracy

IDOS Discussion Paper, No. 21/2022

Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

Suggested Citation: Leininger, Julia (2022) : International democracy promotion in times of autocratization: From supporting to protecting democracy, IDOS Discussion Paper, No. 21/2022, ISBN 978-3-96021-200-3, German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn, <https://doi.org/10.23661/idp21.2022>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/267730>

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International Democracy Promotion in Times of Autocratization

From Supporting to Protecting Democracy

Julia Leininger



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Julia Leininger

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Published with financial support from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

Suggested citation:

Leininger, J. (2022). *International democracy promotion in times of autocratization: From supporting to protecting democracy* (IDOS Discussion Paper 21/2022). Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). <https://doi.org/10.23661/idp21.2022>

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IDOS Discussion Paper / German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

ISSN 2751-4439 (Print)

ISSN 2751-4447 (Online)

ISBN 978-3-96021-200-3 (Print)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23661/idp21.2022>

© German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

Tulpenfeld 6, 53113 Bonn

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<http://www.idos-research.de>

Printed on eco-friendly, certified paper.



Abstract

The worldwide wave of autocratization is doing away with many of the democratic achievements made since 1989. Scholarship on international democracy promotion is yet to theorise how democracy can be protected from autocratization. Such a theory must account for different democratic and autocratic trajectories as well as integrate theoretical approaches from international relations and comparative politics in the study of democracy promotion. However, such a combined perspective is still missing. One reason for this is that the field lacks a clear concept of “protection” and does not yet systematically integrate evidence from democratization research. This paper addresses this research gap. It is the first attempt to develop a concept theory of democracy promotion, which includes support and protection of democracy. Coupling this with a depiction of six phases of regime change, this paper makes a second contribution: based on the proposed conceptual and theoretical integration, it generates a series of testable anchor points for further empirical analysis on what strategies are most likely to be effective during the various phases of regime change.

Preface

The current wave of global autocratization forces us to rethink the parameters and effectiveness of international democracy promotion. This applies equally to those in research and those in politics and society who actively support democracy. This IDOS Discussion Paper intends to contribute to the further development of policy-oriented research in the field of democracy promotion. This is a discussion paper in true form. It contains initial reflections on how democracy protection and promotion can be analysed and how effective strategies can be developed in different regime contexts. Then, with these reflections, a conversation is opened that shall advance our field of research. This paper was not written without exchanges and comments from bright colleagues who are well versed in this research field. My special thanks for insightful and sophisticated comments go in particular to Christine Hackenesch, Staffan I. Lindberg, Karina Mross and Christopher Wingers.

Bonn, 20 November 2022

Julia Leininger

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1 Introduction

Democracy and autocracy come in waves (Huntington, 1991; Skaaning, 2020). Currently, an accelerating wave of autocratization is sweeping across the world (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) that is characterised by slow “strangulations by elected autocrats” (Berman, 2021) rather than sudden events to overthrow democracy (Bermeo, 2016). However, our concepts and theories of international democracy *promotion* do not yet account systematically for such processes. Although existing research does address the question of how international democracy promotion can protect democracies from autocratization, it has not yet developed a concept that distinguishes support for democratization from protection against autocratization. Also, from a theoretical perspective, “there is not yet consensus on a theoretical model of how specific democracy promotion efforts connect to theories of democratisation” (Hyde, Lamb, & Samet, 2022, p. 5). A few studies have examined the effect of democracy aid on democratic backsliding, but no one has identified generalisable international strategies to counter autocratization nor systematically examined distinct phases of regime change.¹ Additionally, existing analyses of democracy promotion formulate theoretical expectations (Wolff & Wurm, 2011) but typically fail to integrate established theories from the fields of comparative politics and international relations on regime change and mechanisms of democracy promotion.

This paper suggests that the analysis of international influences on democratization on the one hand, and autocratization on the other hand, demand different approaches. It makes two main contributions for developing such approaches. First, it provides the first explicit bipartite concept of democracy promotion, encompassing protection (against autocratization) and support (for democratization).² Second, it moves towards integrating theories of international democracy promotion and literature on the patterns of phases of regime change. It does so by identifying the most likely institutional and actors-centred entry points for interventions over six distinct phases of regime change: autocratic regression, transition to democracy, democratic deepening, democratic regression, transition to autocracy, and autocratic deepening.³ As the scope conditions under which democracy promotion works effectively are still unknown, distinguishing and understanding regime phases and their trajectories is fundamental for assessing the impact of international democracy promotion (Leininger, 2010). In addition, “upturns, and downturns ... have quite different sets of causal factors” (Coppedge, Edgell, Knutsen, & Lindberg, 2022, p. 284). Thus, researching and pursuing democracy promotion requires an adaptation to these trajectories.

This paper cannot do justice to the full breadth of the strands of literature addressed here. Yet, it constitutes the first attempt to bring together major research on the varieties of regime change, its causes and international promotion in recent decades. Providing a basis for further empirical analysis, the proposed theoretical integration is expected to be adapted and improved in the study of democracy promotion.

1 The few exceptions will be tackled in subsequent sections.

2 The literature sometimes distinguishes between democracy promotion, assistance and aid. Democracy promotion is often conceived as a broad ideational project that can even include military intervention (Bermeo, 2009; Grimm & Merkel, 2008). Democracy assistance (or democracy aid) provides peaceful and non-coercive support; but diplomatic pressure, sanctions and financial and commercial agreements often formally count as democracy promotion (Burnell, 2008; Hobson & Kurki, 2012). Other authors assign instruments of democracy promotion to specific policy fields, in particular foreign and development policy. Tom Carothers, for example, refers to “political” versus “developmental” democracy assistance (Carothers, 2009).

3 These six phases of regime change mirror the mainstream literature, but I deviate from conventional denominations by using the terms “democratic regression” and “autocratic regression”. For further explanations, see Chapter 4.

The remainder of this paper identifies three reasons why autocratization has not yet been addressed systematically in this field of research. The second section develops the novel bipartite concept of democracy promotion while the third differentiates six phases of regime change and identifies typical institutional reforms and actors, which are linked to insights from research on democracy promotion for each phase. The conclusions point towards how this more integrated approach can be used in empirical research.

2 Why is autocratization still rare in the study of democracy promotion?

In this paper international democracy “promotion” is used to denote all actions and strategies seeking to strengthen, preserve and protect democracy abroad (from the perspective of democracy promoters). There are at least three reasons why research on democracy promotion has not yet taken up the study of autocratization more comprehensively and systematically.

2.1 Issue 1: At the tail end of the knowledge production chain

For 40 years, accounts by political scientists depicted what became known as the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991). Next in the knowledge production chain, a large body of literature then specialised in building knowledge about the causes, triggers and facilitating factors of democratization (e.g., Castelló-Climent, 2008; Teorell, 2010; Weiffen, 2009) and democratic consolidation (e.g., Burton, Gunther, & Higley, 1992; Diamond, 1999; Schedler, 1998). Our field of study began to emerge in the 1990s, after the birth of post-Cold War democracy promotion (Carothers, 1999). In the early 2000s, scholars began to turn to the question of how autocracies survive (e.g., Brumberg, 2002; Gandhi, 2008; Hassner, 2008) and then identified the emergence of an autocratization trend in the late 2010s (Mechkova, Lührmann, & Lindberg, 2017; Puddington, 2015) followed recently by increasing attention to the conceptualisation of autocratization and what factors cause it (Cassani & Tomini, 2020; Waldner & Lust, 2018).

It is only now, when the turn to autocratization has been recognised and scientifically detailed, that the question of what role international pro-democratic actors could play in this context appears on our research agenda more prominently.⁴ For instance, Fiedler, Grävingholt, Leininger and Mross (2020) analyse the effect of electoral support on the democratic quality of elections but not as one element of countering autocratization. In the rare instances when the literature refers to protecting democracy, most authors mean to safeguard the achievements made in the 1990s during the third wave (Halperin & Galic, 2005), address democracy support in autocratic contexts (Hyde et al., 2022; Malesky, Schuler, & Tran, 2012), focus on regional organisations (McCoy, 2006) or look at the unintended effects of regional democracy promotion on autocratization (Meyerrose, 2021).

4 It is also the case that the object of research has yet to be established as democracy promoters have not yet developed a portfolio of democracy protection.

2.2 Issue 2: One-sided theory

One-sided theory-building has also contributed to the blind eye for systematic integration of the study of democracy promotion and autocratization. Since their emergence in the late 1990s (Whitehead, 1996), studies have theorised and analysed the impacts of international democracy promotion on the change in levels of democracy (e.g., Finkel, Pérez-Linan, & Seligson, 2007); the prospects of discrete issues, such as democratic transition (e.g., Johansson-Nogués & Rivera Escartin, 2020); and elements of democracy, such as free elections (e.g., Kelley, 2008), free media and civil society (e.g., Carothers & Ottaway, 2000). While macro-level studies find positive effects of democracy promotion on regime change (Gisselquist, Niño-Zarazúa, & Samarin, 2021), micro-level analyses typically identify what works in narrow spaces, for example, that international election monitoring helps to “reduce corrupt behavior of election officials” (Hyde, 2007, p. 62) and that effectiveness of support to civil society depends on the inclusiveness of political settlements (Jamal, 2012) or whether political institutions manage to transform organised interests into political decisions (Berman, 2009). Such theoretical expectations and foundations have intrinsic value, but they have not yet integrated the rich strands of theories in the fields of comparative politics and international relations (Magen, Risse, & McFaul, 2009; Wolff & Wurm, 2011) that have informed the study of democracy promotion over the past three decades. While international relations theories emphasise international norm-building (Wolff & Wurm, 2011, p. 78) and mechanisms (Börzel & Risse, 2009; Leininger & Nowack, 2021; Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008) by which international democracy promoters influence democratization, comparative politics theories focus on the actors, institutions and mechanisms that contribute to the shift of regime type towards democratic (e.g., citizens’ attitudes and elections) without necessarily emphasising a democracy promoter’s inter- or transnational mechanism.

2.3 Issue 3: Narrow, empiricist definitions

The one-sided theoretical pragmatism has also contributed to empiricist conceptualisations of “democracy promotion” as aiming to bring about a more democratic regime (Leininger, 2010). In effect, democracy promotion has often been used as a “catch-all term” (Hawkins, 2008, p. 375) encompassing objectives, policies and the agency of actors, all of which aiming to foster democracy beyond their own borders. Quantitative studies usually equate democracy promotion with democracy aid (Scott & Steele, 2011; Ziaja, 2020), as is done by the only provider of comparable democracy aid data over time, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

These empiricist conceptualisations also orient the literature on democracy promotion strongly toward one side (democratization), while the concept of “democracy protection” is given scant attention (Schmitter & Brouwer, 1999, p. 12). This paper provides the first conceptual theory that explicitly articulates democracy *protection* as a subtype of democracy promotion in its own right with unique properties.

3 **A concept of international democracy promotion and its two subtypes**

While the field has thus far based conceptualisations on the question “What *is* international democracy promotion?”, we now need to ask what it *should be*. Therefore, the following is partly prescriptive (Sartori, 1987, p. 7), first, when conceptualising democracy promotion as a root concept with two subtypes and, second, when integrating the subtypes with phases of regime change.

3.1 **Defining the root concept**

Democracy is here understood as described by Robert Dahl (1971; 1989). The root concept of democracy promotion comprises

- (1) An actor (A) takes an action (D) intended to support or protect democracy.
- (2) D by A aims to influence conditions outside its own territorial and legal boundaries⁵ (O for objective).
- (3) D involves a complex interplay between A and local actors (LA).
- (4) The relationship between A and LA is inter- and/or transnational.
- (5) To achieve O, A can seek to support or protect democratic behaviour and attitudes of LA (AC for actor-centred focus) and/or seek to support or protect institutional reforms (IR for institutional reform focus) through interaction with LAs.

Because democracy promotion can only be as successful as ongoing domestic dynamics allow (Schraeder, 2002)⁶, the definition only includes peaceful means and excludes measures targeting favourable factors, for example, economic development or state capacity (Rød, Knutsen, & Hegre, 2020).

The definition does not specify A as “international” or “external” for two reasons. First, the concept here encompasses both international and transnational relations, for example, when non-state actors cooperate across borders or when governmental organisations cooperate with non-governmental organisations (Risse-Kappen, 1995). Second, the effectiveness of democracy promotion often depends on how local actors deal with democracy promoters’ offers and how international actors position themselves in domestic constellations (Tolstrup, 2013). They are typically part of the domestic decision-making (Leininger, 2010; Yilmaz, 2002)⁷. “External” thus becomes misleading.

5 In case of democracy promotion within regional organisations, legal boundaries might extend to regional law.

6 The two post-WWII cases of Japan and Germany are usually put forward as evidence to the contrary, but they are exceptional because democracy promotion took place after a complete defeat of regimes that were leading aggressors against world peace (Grimm, 2010).

7 Normally, democracy promotion is only a small part of their economic, developmental and diplomatic relations with the country where they seek to promote democracy (Burnell, 2004).

3.2 Subtypes: Support and protection

Democracy *support* seeks to further democratization processes, and democracy *protection* strives to counter autocratization. The subtypes are categorically distinct, that is, all definitional attributes are necessary and disjunctive (Goertz, 2020; Sartori, 1984). The direction of regime change is the first and main defining characteristic of each subtype (see Table 1). Dependent on whether a regime democratizes, autocratizes or stagnates the actions (D) that an actor (A) can and should take as well as which local actors (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997) are engaged and how varies substantially.⁸

Table 1: Overview of subtypes of democracy promotion

	Subtypes of democracy promotion	
	Democracy support	Democracy protection
Direction of regime change	Democratization	Autocratization
Rationale of democracy promotion	Foster democratization	Counter autocratization
Objective of democracy promotion	Strengthen pro-democratic actors and facilitate reforms of institutions	Protect pro-democratic actors, counter autocratic forces and prevent institutional reforms
Instruments of democracy promotion	Cooperative	Cooperative and coercive

Source: Author

The rationale of democracy promotion naturally changes depending on the direction. In democratization processes, democracy support seeks to foster liberalisation efforts, ensure an actual transition to democracy and further deepen a democratic regime.

In the context of autocratization, the rationale changes fundamentally to protection of democracy and to activities aiming to enhance the ability of actors and institutions to prevent the onset or furthering of deterioration of democratic institutions (or at least slow down the pace of negative changes). This sounds simplistic, but different rationales have significant consequences for the logic of action of actors (A) that have hereto not been contemplated in a comprehensive framework. For example, democracy support in an autocratic regime that begins to open up may be directed at building civil society organisations and training journalists on critical reporting. Democracy protection in a regime that has already jailed journalists and closed most civil society organisations may instead aim to strengthen the last independent courts to prevent institutional reform.

Democracy support and protection also differ with regard to their instruments. Protection during autocratization can include coercive means, such as sanctions to punish anti-democratic actors (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). Democracy support can apply financial incentives to push political elites to implement democratic reforms but not in a coercive manner.

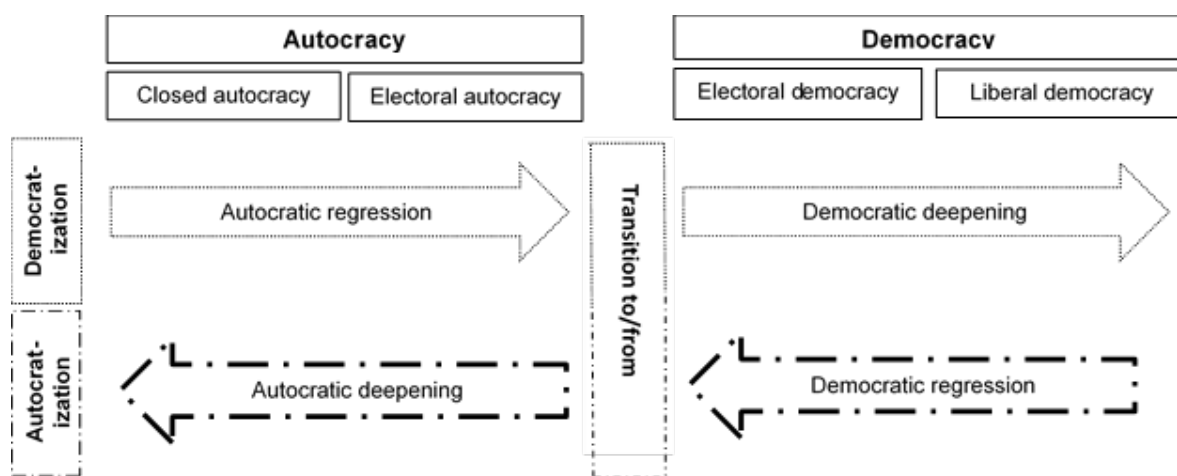
⁸ Admittedly, autocratization and democratization tendencies can occur simultaneously in different subsystems of democracy (Tilly, 2007). Democracy promotion can in such cases be composed of both protection and support, but this level of detail lies outside of the scope of the reasoning here.

4 Integration of six phases of regime change in the study of democracy promotion

Regime change runs along a continuum between democracy and autocracy (Lindberg, 2009; Tilly, 2007), is characterised by uncertainty and is always reversible (Carothers, 1997; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Whitehead, 2009). Processes of regime change are incremental (Maerz, Edgell, Wilson, Hellmeier, & Lindberg, 2021) and do not always result in a change from one type of regime to another. For example, autocracy regressed in many countries during the third wave of democratization without resulting in democratic regimes (e.g., Bangladesh).

While one can debate when one phase ends and another starts, categorical distinctions are helpful for the purpose of theorising. Figure 1 distinguishes between three phases of both democratization and autocratization.⁹

Figure 1: The six phases of regime change



Source: Author

Each phase of democratization and autocratization is distinguished by typical institutional reforms and constellations of actors, relatively independent of context (Edgell, Boese, Maerz, Lindenfors, & Lindberg, 2021; Epstein, Bates, Goldstone, Kristensen, & O'Halloran, 2006; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Marino, Donni, Bavetta, & Cellini, 2020). These provide anchor points for theorising bipartite democracy promotion and a basis for formulating corresponding strategies and actions. These anchor points can also guide hypothesis-building for analyses on the effectiveness of democracy support in different phases of democratization or alternatively analyses on the protection of democracy during autocratization.

While there is a well-established body of literature on democratization, research on autocratization is recent and less coherent (Waldner & Lust, 2018). In addition, autocratization is typically not a process for which actors openly advocate.¹⁰ The large proportion of informal and hidden aspects means that theorising democracy protection during autocratization is naturally somewhat tentative. When existing evidence does not allow generalisable conclusions,

9 Only a few contributions have so far examined the patterns of each phase and how they shape change between regime types (Edgell, Boese, Maerz, Lindenfors, & Lindberg, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020).

10 To the contrary, official state documents, such as the white paper "China: Democracy Works", indicate that democracy is a contested paradigm in global politics (Embassy of China, 2021).

intuition founded on adjacent literature is used as a basis for theorising.¹¹

While decades of research on regime change and democracy promotion cannot be fully reflected here, a theory of democracy promotion sensitive to phases of regime change promises to give guidance for research on both the key institutional reforms (*What institutional reforms characterise a specific phase of regime change? How do international strategies address institutional change?*) and the actors critical to advancing or preventing such reforms (*Who fosters or blocks democratic reforms? How do international strategies address different types of actors?*). It also moves us closer towards an integrated theory of international democracy promotion (see Table 2).

Table 2: Generic overview of democracy promotion in six phases of regime change

Entry points for international democracy promotion		
Democracy support		
	Institutional	Actor-centred
Autocratic regression	Organisation of civil society Independent media	“Soft-liners” within regime and bureaucracy
Democratic transition	Constitution and laws to set rule of game Hardware and software for elections	Vertical accountability holders in civil society Political parties
Democratic deepening	Rule of law Electoral cycles Fora for deliberation of norms	Capabilities in legislative, courts, ombudsmen as accountability holders Media and civil society organisations for human rights and minorities Democratic attitudes of sovereign
Democracy protection		
	Institutional	Actor-centred
Democratic regression	Legislature Media to avert misinformation Anti-polarisation fora Minority rights	Alliance to counter polarisation, including state officials Political parties Journalists and civil society organisations that provide facts
Autocratic transition	Organisation of free and competitive elections Judicial system and law reforms against more dependence on executive	Counter autocratizers, including incumbent Opposition parties and legislature
Autocratic deepening	Electoral periods	Human rights defenders

Source: Author

¹¹ The following reasoning is based on findings from previous research on democracy promotion, on democracy protection or defence by regional organisations as well as on “resilient” and “militant” democracy. It is true that structural factors, such as the size of the national economy, also play an important role, in particular for the effectiveness of democracy protection (Levitsky & Way, 2010). However, these factors would have to be considered at a later stage of theory building.

4.1 Supporting democratization during autocratic regression

Autocratic regression means that autocratic institutions open up. O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) refer to this phase as “liberalisation” and are rightly criticised for teleology (Carothers, 2002). Recent studies demonstrate how such moves have often been regime-preserving (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013), and used to divide opposition (Gandhi, 2008) or fragment it by “competitive clientelism” (Lust, 2009), and to lock in “credible commitments” (Boix & Svolik, 2013; Wright & Escribà-Folch, 2012). The concept of autocratic regression implies no teleological assumptions, remains agnostic to ends and simply denotes a decrease in authoritarian properties. It can start in both closed and electoral autocracies and may lead from the former to the latter. An autocratic breakdown sometimes happens before a closed autocracy turns into an electoral one (e.g., Egypt in the Arab Spring of 2012). In fact, a majority of autocratic breakdowns lead not to democracy but to another authoritarian regime (Geddes, 1999; Wright & Escribà-Folch, 2012).

Institutional reforms and actor constellations

Since autocratic regression typically starts with a relaxation of restrictions on civil liberties and speech (e.g., O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). Thus, building the organisational capacity of civil society¹² and independent media should be expected to be particularly relevant for international democracy promotion. A large body of literature testifies to the critical role civil society often plays in turning autocratic regression into substantial democratization (Bernhard, 1993; O'Donnell, Schmitter, & Whitehead, 1986), and their potential for mass mobilisation can be “magic” (Schedler, 2009), making many actual transitions appear to happen “by mistake” (Treisman, 2020). A more independent media can play many critical functions during this phase, including channelling information for mobilisation and collective action across localities from a more active and capable civil society. In recent years, increasing hopes have been placed on the use of social media, but one should recognise its limits and the proficiency of modern autocrats in controlling the internet in places like Egypt (Freyburg & Garbe, 2018).

These reforms can be further supported by identifying the “soft-liners” in the regime who would be open to allowing further relaxations and moving towards a democratic transition. If found, such actors should be expected to be effective points of intervention as well.

4.2 Supporting democratization during democratic transition

Democratic transition is treated as an event by the transitology literature when liberalisation ends with “founding elections” (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Ethier, 2016). Some quantitative approaches also treat transitions as discrete events (e.g., Boix & Stokes, 2003; Cheibub, Gandhi & Vreeland, 2010). In reality though, transitions typically can stretch out for years (e.g., Germany after 1945 and Senegal after 1992). If successful, the endpoint is democracy, but we only know that ex post, and examples of failures abound. Among others, military interventions (e.g., Thailand in 2006 and Burkina Faso in 2021) and opposition leaders turning out to be non-democratic once in power (e.g., Zambia in the 1990s) have reverted transitions that were presumably destined for democracy.

The phase is identified by institutional reforms that in principle make democracy possible, such as starting to prepare for multiparty elections, moving towards more independent election management bodies and expanding associational freedoms to allow for opposition parties.

12 Depending on the context, this can include support for building political parties (Reilly, 2006).

Along with this, various local actors begin to believe that a transition to democracy is in the making (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Institutional reforms and actor constellations

Since the many autocratic relapses in transitioning democracies indicate common weaknesses, reforms strengthening core institutions that set the rules of the game and regulate political competition and participation should be expected to be effective points of intervention. First, in constitution-building processes, international actors have been influential by providing legal advice and financial support, albeit while creating tension given the need for local ownership and the sense of imposed constitutional provisions (Saunders, 2019). Coordination of international actors is particularly relevant against this backdrop but is often lacking because of the high time pressure and the messy reorganisation during transitions (Fiedler et al., 2020). Second, support for the organising and implementing of democratic elections is also key, comprising both financial support for “hardware” (e.g., ballot boxes, IT systems) and “software” (training of electoral management bodies and judges). While some argue that “too early” elections endanger transitions (Brown, 2004) and in post-conflict settings may contribute to a relapse into conflict (Mansfield & Snyder, 2007), more recent research finds that gradual approaches combining elections with peacebuilding are more successful (Mross, 2019).

It can also be assumed that certain actors would be effective points of support during the transition phase, even given the focus on institutional reforms. To avoid establishing “hollow” democratic institutions, priority should be placed on support for actors who can hold the government accountable (Brown, 2005), such as civil society for social accountability and training of legislators for horizontal accountability, even if transitions are messy processes in which various actors struggle for stakes.

4.3 Supporting democratization during democratic deepening

Given a successful transition, a phase of democratic deepening can be supported. The older literature often refers to this as “consolidation”, but the term can be misleading (Schedler, 1998).¹³ For democracy to remain “the only game in town”, democratic attitudes in society and amongst political elites are essential (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Democracy support during this phase, thus, needs to widen its spectrum and increase its scope of addressees. Additionally, parallel to democratic deepening in one area (e.g., stronger legislature), autocratization tendencies may occur in another area (e.g., greater dependence of the judiciary on the executive). Thus, flexibility should be important during this phase.

Institutional reforms and actor constellations

While this phase is more context-dependent than the previous ones, two sets of institutions and actors can be argued to be effective points of intervention. Evidence suggests that the ensuring of accountability, constraints on executive power, and rule of law are key for democracy support during this phase. First, fostering vertical accountability and legitimacy of elections by continued support of electoral management bodies beyond the first and following election should be expected to be critical. International democracy promotion has rightly been criticised for not supporting repeated electoral cycles and civic education (Carothers, 2015). Beyond electoral

13 Democracy is never complete in the sense that a reversal to autocracy is possible, and democratic deepening is infinite in the sense that it requires active maintenance of the democratic quality of institutions and continuous recreation of a democratic culture.

institutions, institutions of horizontal accountability can be assumed to need special attention (Mechkova, Lührmann, & Lindberg, 2019), for example, capacities of the legislature, ombudsmen, and audit courts to exert constraints. Third, a rule of law system that consolidates minority and individual rights, such freedoms of speech, association, and religion, is of particular importance to protecting freedoms.

For this phase, the argument is that effective, actor-centred support concerns anchoring democratic behaviour and attitudes to take deep roots in society (Mauk, 2020). Research suggests that civic education on the exercise of democratic rights, for example, electoral training for female voters, local political participation and seminars for political party leaders, can be effective (Finkel, 2003). But value formation takes place early, and it should, therefore, be expected that democracy support could contribute to the adoption of democratic values through building school curricula reflecting autocratic experiences and advantages of democratic freedoms. Finally, democratization requires continuous recreation of its core values to keep a democratic culture (Tilly, 2007). Evidence suggests that bridging different viewpoints in society and counteracting polarisation by deliberative elements, such as public round tables on reforms and visions for a joint future, can play an important role (e.g., Senegal in 2013 and Peru in 2000) (Cooper & Legler, 2005; Fiedler et al., 2020).

4.4 Protecting democracy during democratic regression

Democratic regression is a decisive phase during which reversal to autocracy can be prevented if early action is taken. Evidence shows that actions mapped onto Linz's famous "litmus test" identify "wannabe dictators" with a relatively high degree of certainty even before they come into power (Linz, 1978; Lührmann, 2021). But taking action early can be made difficult by the often incremental process of regression (e.g., Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). When political elites turn into enemies of democracy they typically start opposing international democracy support (Robinson, 1996; Schuetze, 2019). The typical sequence of ways in which democracy is undermined has also been documented, which can help inform hypotheses about effective interventions (Boese, Lundstedt, Morrison, Sato, & Lindberg, 2022). In the first phase, incumbents seek to restrict and control the media while curbing academia and civil society. They often couple these with disrespect for political opponents to feed polarisation while using the machinery of the government to spread disinformation (McCoy & Somer, 2021).

Institutional reforms and actor constellations

Research points to onset resilience, where a strong legislature prevents the onset of autocratization (Boese, Edgell, Hellmeier, Maerz, & Lindberg, 2021). Strengthening horizontal accountability through the legislature should, thus, be expected to make it more difficult for would-be autocrats to attack democracy. Courts can also play an important role in early stages of democratic regression (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018), as well as protecting democratic norms through proactive public condemnation of an elected, pro-autocratic government.

Since evidence points to anti-pluralist parties either acting as a disloyal opposition (Linz, 1978) or coming into power as a critical driver of autocratization (Lührmann, 2021), a related argument is that support directed at both countering the spread of support for such parties and strengthening other parties so they do not follow suit should be effective strategies.

Second, the very nature of international cooperation based on sovereignty presents a challenge. When incumbents who came to power through broad support in democratic elections are agents of autocratization (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018), interventions are more likely to be effective if focused on domestic actors who are willing to defend democracy as well as on transnational actors, such as human rights non-governmental organisations or journalist networks. This is supported by

evidence that “an active civil society ... [makes] democracies more durable in the face [of] such [autocratic] challenges” (Bernhard, Hicken, Reenock, & Lindberg, 2020, p. 17). Safeguarding media and civil society actors requires a different set of actions than democracy support. It ranges from providing alternative channels of information in social media, protecting individual journalists and opinion leaders and upgrading the security of non-governmental organisations, to continued engagement against new legal restrictions (Dupuy, Ron, & Prakash, 2016).

Once democratic regression is on course, democracy protection is likely to depend on a broadened strategy to counter the spread of misinformation and polarisation. It is likely that effective democracy protection should contribute to “active-depolarisation” and “transformative-repolarising” (Somer, McCoy, & Luke, 2021). For example, South Korea turned around autocratization through social mobilisation based on programmatic goals replacing identity rhetoric (Somer et al., 2021).

Polarisation often escalates during election periods (Svolik, 2019), leading to the argument that one of the most well-financed areas in democracy promotion – electoral support – is critical (Hyde, 2011). Likely strategies to effectively counter polarisation during elections are civic education involving individuals from both sides of the polarised spectrum (Finkel & Lim, 2021; Fishkin, Siu, Diamond, & Bradburn, 2021) and coordination of electoral opponents around local contests (Gorokhovskaia, 2019). Additionally, actors in the state machinery and ruling parties can resist polarisation and misinformation (Meléndez & Kaltwasser, 2021). If so, such a “from within” strategy should be expected to be effective for democracy protectors.

4.5 Protecting democracy during transition to autocracy

When leaders have come far enough on the derailment of media, civil society and the idea of a legitimate opposition, they typically start attacks on democracy’s core: elections and other formal institutions (Hellmeier et al., 2021). That marks the start of a reversed transition phase where democratic breakdown is the possible endpoint. Typically, there is nothing such as transparent change of the rules of the game parallel to democratic transition phases. Rather, it is the sum of incremental reforms and changing behaviours that concentrate power in the executive branch and do away with real political competition. Most steps are usually taken “within constitutional limits” (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018, p. 90), making a series of critical junctures of institutional changes altering the political regime (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Fiedler et al., 2020).

For international democracy promoters, signs of a phase of transition to autocracy include when incumbent governments openly weaken or even dismantle democratic institutions and alter rules, such as appointments and electoral systems, in their favour. The phase may end with the clear installation of an autocratic regime unless it is stopped.

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In this phase, the expectation is that effective democracy promotion must resort to a mixed repertoire including coercive means. Research suggests that while sustaining support to pro-democratic actors, democracy promoters can apply conditionalities and sanctions to help avert a breakdown (Nowack & Leininger, 2021). For instance, evidence shows the effects of combining cooperative and coercive means helped to thwart attempts to extend presidential term limits in African countries (Leininger & Nowack, 2021), and coordination among international actors is critical (Crawford, 2001; Fiedler et al., 2020).

Two sets of institutions and actors are expected to be especially relevant during this phase. One is preventing reforms of judicial institutions and the other refers to electoral regulations that guarantee political competition (Landau, 2013). First, evidence points to the need to strengthen

institutional constraints to counter breakdown of democracy (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021), in particular the judiciary as a possible last protective belt (Boese et al., 2021). Incumbents commonly seek to make the judicial system more dependent on the executive, so one likely effective action is to prevent incumbents' efforts to staff the judiciary with their political supporters and intervene in the judicial process (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018).

Similarly, protecting electoral institutions against reforms is critical and challenging especially when reform is conducted using legal means. It is likely that supporting actor constellations who oppose such reform attempts can be decisive during this phase, whether it is opposition parties, the judiciary, the legislature, civil society, media or others.

Regional organisations can also play an important role where regional norms and instruments to protect democracy are strong, such as in the Economic Community of West African States or the Organization of American States (Legler & Tieku, 2010; Leininger, 2015). Undemocratic reform attempts then trigger regional legal mechanisms to defend democracy (McCoy, 2006; Striebinger, 2012). This implies that effective strategies are likely to be based on regional norms that have usually been endorsed or even co-sponsored by the autocratizing state itself. It legitimises democracy protection and encourages new alliances. In these cases, supporting such regional organisations to protect democracy is assumed to be an important intervention.

4.6 Protecting democracy during autocratic deepening

Once a breakdown of democracy is evident, a process of autocratic deepening begins (such as Russia in the 2000s), although it may also start in autocratic regimes that never were a democracy (for instance Lukashenko's regime in 2020). This phase is characterised by key state institutions being under the control of, or dependent on, the incumbent and, thus, any real political competition has vanished.¹⁴ The most extreme form of autocratic deepening comes in the form of coups, such as the one in Myanmar on 1 February 2021.

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Research on how further deterioration in autocratic regimes can be slowed or even halted is scarce. A few empirical insights suggest first that socio-economic grievances resulting from faltering development play a more decisive role than institutions (Way, 2008). One can, therefore, argue that democracy promoters' ability to prevent changes of the core political institutions is very limited when the incumbent leader and party are securely in power and civil society and independent media are repressed. In addition, studies show that dictators adapt and learn how to prevent the subversive effect of international interference (Korosteleva, 2012).

However, research identifies at least two entry points for effective democracy protection even in these contexts. One is to focus on events that open up space for international influence, such as elections. Even in closed autocracies, electoral periods can lead to questioning of the regime, for instance after the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus or the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe (Korosteleva, 2012; Way, 2008). International electoral support turned out to be effective in both cases, suggesting that democracy protection can contribute to slowing autocratization (Lührmann, McMann, & Van Ham, 2017)¹⁵.

14 This does not mean that a turnover cannot happen. It is just very unlikely. But autocrats can make decisive mistakes and rely on false or misrepresented intelligence, as was the case with the Lungu regime in Zambia, which to everyone's surprise ended with a decisive electoral defeat in 2021.

15 It might also foster autocracies by legitimising an authoritarian regime.

Human rights actors are the second entry point. Some authoritarian regimes are sensitive to shaming, and we argue that effective protection includes supporting organisations recording and publicising harassments, torture, disinformation and the like. Evidence shows that support to human rights defenders is a feasible option to hinder autocratic deepening in electoral autocracies but not in closed autocracies (Lührmann et al., 2017).

Coercive measures, such as financial sanctions, isolation and resolutions in international bodies, seem to have worked only in a handful of cases characterised by military coups (e.g., Mali in 2012 and Peru in 1999).

5 Conclusion

This paper is the first attempt to develop a concept of democracy promotion that includes both support and protection. It is also the first to systematically link the study of international democracy support and protection with phases of regime change. In so doing, this paper attempts to explicitly develop the concept of democracy promotion in a way that takes into account current regime trends while at the same time satisfying theoretical considerations. So far, empirical research has focused on whether democracy *support* helped to contain autocratization because of the lack of empirically observable measures of democracy *protection* (Gisselquist et al., 2021; Nowack & Leininger, 2021). Building upon insights from research on democratization and autocratization, it brings to bear findings on empirical dynamics that provide important impulses to act effectively against backward trends in democracies and, therewith, can inform preventive approaches in democracy promotion. Thus, this paper contributes to an integrated theory of democracy promotion by formulating anchor points of how international democracy promotion interacts with typical traits of phases of regime change that can be the starting point for further refinements and hypothesis-building in empirical studies. In addition to focusing on domestic regime trajectories, future theory-building must also consider global influences on democracy promotion (which were not the subject of this paper).

For empirical research, distinguishing different types of democracy promotion and phases of regime change implies that one can better assess why democracy promotion may or may not have contributed to preventing autocratization. From a perspective of operationalisation, one could argue that the options for analysis are limited because democracy promoters do not have a standardised repertoire for democracy protection, and past individual measures were often not reported at all. We, thus, face a lack of reliable, comparable data that could be used for empirical analysis. However, empirical analyses should make greater efforts at combining existing data on democracy support (e.g., the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Creditor Reporting System) with datasets that provide information on coercive measures such as conditionality and sanctions (Felbermayr, Kirilakha, Syropoulos, Yalcin, & Yotov, 2020; Von Soest & Wahman, 2015). Qualitative analyses will be necessary to examine the requirements for institutional reforms and the actor constellations that are typical in different regime phases in specific country contexts. It is particularly relevant to overcome the dichotomous understanding of actors as operating either "inside" or "outside" (domestic or foreign) the political system and replace this framework with an analysis of pro- and anti-democratic forces in more general terms (including actors such as autocracy promoters in China and Turkey).

Beyond this, the study and practice of democracy promotion needs to adapt to three global developments. First, democratic decline in long-standing democracies makes it imperative to

analyse these countries and policies to fully understand democracy protection.¹⁶ Second, the (empirically unsubstantiated) claim that autocracies perform socioeconomically better than democracies is gaining ground. Beliefs that democracies do not perform as well as autocracies can lead both to dismantling of democracy promotion and to increasing contestation of democracy promotion by local actors. Third, the current efforts at deconstructing international norms, such as the International Convention on Human Rights, are likely affecting the legitimacy of democracy promotion. Future research on democracy promotion must bridge the findings on the autocratization of international law, which have thus far mainly been discussed in legal studies, with the research on regional organisations (Ginsburg, 2020; Legler & Tieku, 2010).

The findings of this paper have significant relevance for policy-making. Democracy promoters have begun to elaborate strategies for the protection of democracy, but “theories of change” that describe the mechanisms are still lacking for the design of measures to protect democracy. The theory here on democracy promotion in specific phases of regime change can inform such nascent theories of change.

16 However, academic debates on cross-border and domestic democracy promotion run independently. While domestic democracy support in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries is increasingly framed as “civic education” and, thus, has a very narrow focus (Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999), work on cross-border activities is much broader. Consequently, there is a high but still untapped potential for mutual learning between these two strands of literature.

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