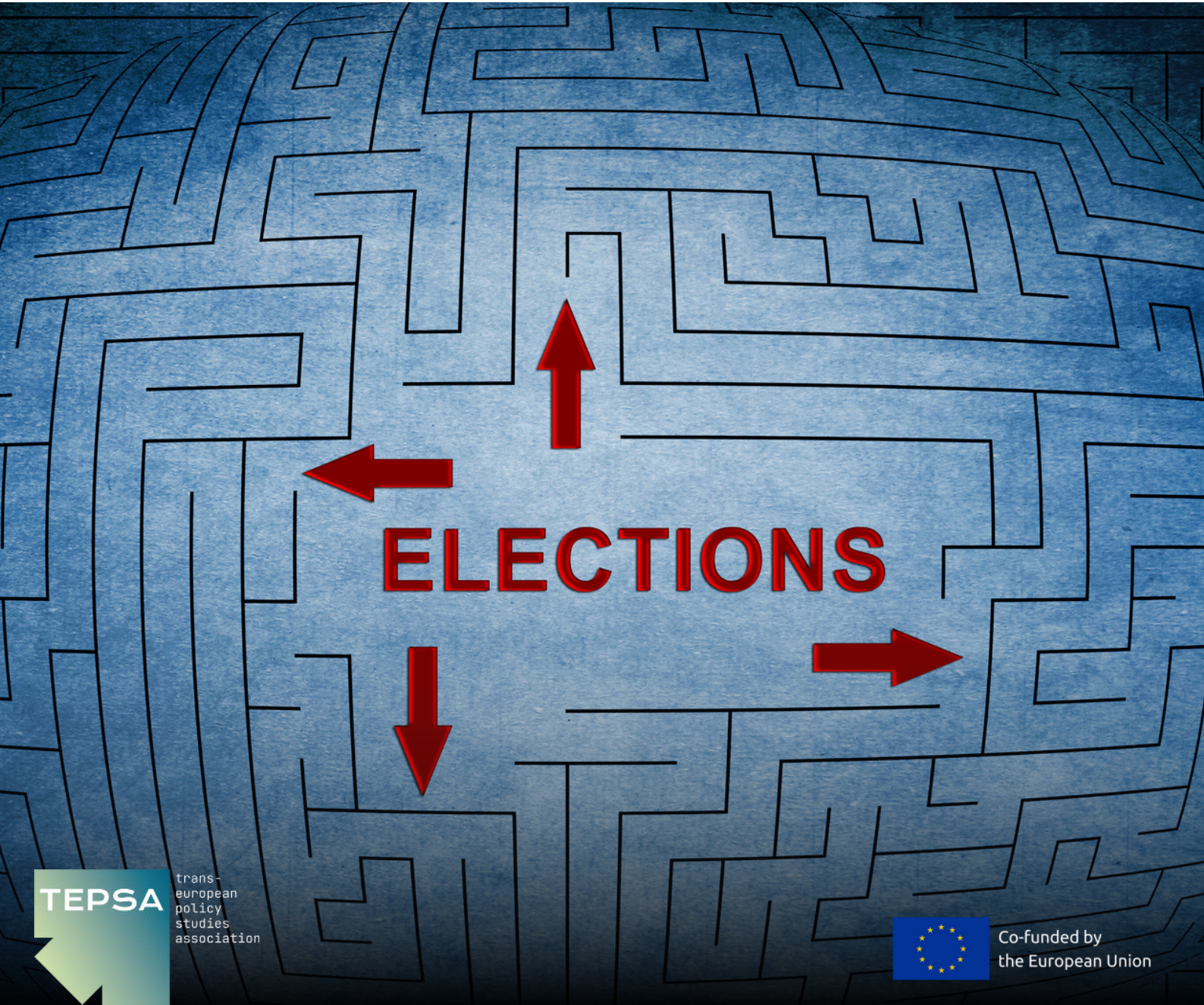


ELECTING ILLIBERAL LEADERS DEMOCRATICALLY: FROM VOTES TO AUTOCRACY

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All over the world, democracy is declining, and flawed elections are holding their fair share of causality in this global backslide. Increasingly, illiberal leaders are coming to power through elections, weakening democracy from the inside out. Disinformation, anti-Western rhetoric and illiberal views are flooding social media and leaving their mark on society. Never has electoral manipulation been so easy to carry out or difficult to counteract. Swift and decisive measures are needed from the side of the European Union (EU). Counteracting disinformation, ultimately oriented on stopping illiberal leaders coming to power is essential for the EU, not only from the perspective of a normative power but as a geopolitical actor, to safeguard its own credibility and influence.

Over recent years, escalating political uncertainty and global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and other ongoing geopolitical and socio-economic challenges, have reshaped the international landscape. These processes set into motion a need for countries to reevaluate their identity and find their place in the quickly changing global order. In parallel, they put democratic institutions under significant strain, challenging their stability and effectiveness. In parallel, they put democratic institutions under significant strain, challenging their stability and effectiveness.

Instrumentalisation of the election process

Sadly, in the face of these pressures, we observe that many politicians are taking advantage of crises and using them as an excuse to implement self-serving policies that erode liberal principles and democratic norms. One of the most common of these strategies is election manipulation. Elections, which are a foundation of democratic legitimacy, are increasingly being used to seize and hold onto power instead of ensuring accountability. This paradox is especially noticeable when democratically elected leaders continue to progressively enact illiberal policies, creating what [Fareed Zakaria called an "illiberal democracy system"](#) in which elected governments maintain their legitimacy through elections while methodically undermining institutional independence, stifling fundamental rights, and eroding constitutional constraints. This inevitably steers a country towards a less democratic and sometimes even authoritarian rule.

According to [Freedom House's 'Freedom in the World 2024' report](#), the manipulation of elections was one of the leading causes of the decline of global freedom for the 18th consecutive year in 2023, driving down scores in 26 countries. Not only was electoral manipulation widespread, but it also took on different forms, including sophisticated disinformation campaigns. The process of loss of democratic norms is no longer limited to being carried out by traditional methods. Instead, it is intensified through the rapid development of digital technologies and social media, which make manipulation of elections, the spread of disinformation and the division of society much easier to achieve and harder to detect and prove.

These new methods are difficult to counter with existing election-monitoring mechanisms. Therefore, we see more and more illiberal regimes holding legitimacy, which allows them to benefit from Western resources and participate in dialogue but erode democratic institutions from within.

After the legitimisation, the nature of this strategy lies in its gradual execution. By the time the public recognises what is happening, key democratic institutions, from the judiciary to the press, have already been brought under government control. The slow speed of the process makes resistance more difficult, since the steps may often appear legally justified and even unimportant in the grand scheme of things, while systematically weakening democratic resilience. One of the most effective tools in this process is the manipulation of public perception through disinformation.

The role of disinformation and election manipulation in promoting democratic backsliding

While disinformation is a historically well-established method of electoral manipulation, the rise of digital technologies and social media has fundamentally changed the circumstances in which it is spread. Nowadays, disinformation holds unprecedented potential to fully undermine liberal democracies. [The V-Dem Institute states](#) that elections during which extensive disinformation tactics were used are closely linked to democratic decline, with countries with high levels of disinformation having a 30% higher rate of institutional decline five years after an election. Illiberal leaders instrumentalise disinformation by using

polarising rhetoric and controversial social topics like migration, LGBTQI+ rights and reproductive rights to divide society and position themselves as the defenders of traditional values.

Often portraying themselves as protectors of the majority through nationalist rhetoric, rather than focusing on economic or governance policies, they use social media to spread populist narratives. Attacking independent media, limiting press freedom by endorsing state-controlled narratives, and stifling dissenting opinions are additional important strategies (the last two being relevant in the case of already holding power and looking for re-election). The use of these methods usually peaks during the pre-election period.

Even established democracies like the United States (U.S.) are susceptible to these methods. Donald Trump ran [a calculated disinformation campaign during the 2016 election](#) during which targeted advertisements were shared on social media. They included inaccurate information on the economy, crime rates, immigration, and other topics. Public opinion was also influenced by Russian meddling through state-sponsored disinformation campaigns on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. While in power, Trump continued his campaign strategy by labelling traditional mainstream media as “fake news” and discrediting all critical reporting, allowing him to strengthen his position. In line with his pattern of strengthening control over media.

Within the EU, among other cases, social media has been an effective instrument for leaders like Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Robert Fico in Slovakia and Viktor Orbán in Hungary to develop and spread illiberal narratives that strengthen their hold on power.

More specifically, in Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party systematically used disinformation as a tool to maintain electoral control since

2010. State-controlled media was instrumentalised to manipulate the public into illiberal and anti-Western perceptions, eventually leading to Hungary's classification as an ["electoral autocracy"](#).

Another notable case is Georgia, a country that was once an example of democratic transformation in Eastern Europe. Since coming to power in 2012, the Georgian Dream Party utilised illiberal policies and rhetoric to gradually entrench anti-Western views in the population. The 2020 elections were widely criticised as undemocratic with [multi-layered disinformation campaigns](#) being one of the causes. However, regardless of these significant violations, the EU approved the election results, encouraging the opposition parties to enter the parliament and collaborate with the government. The country continued its democratic backslide, as the government gradually captured the state all while maintaining its overall pro-Western façade. Just before the 2024 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream party enacted Russian-influenced legislation targeting the suppression of non-governmental organisations. This piece of legislation was only part of a stream of legislation aimed at suppression and dissent of civil society. As a culmination of the backslide, the illegitimate 2024 elections were held with the backdrop of aggressive anti-Western and illiberal disinformation methods, after which the government officially announced its decision to stop EU accession.

One of the greatest challenges is that illiberal leaders play a double game. Once a politician is elected there is usually a two-fold façade of policies. While one set of policies takes on a democratic approach, the other set is used to gradually dismantle the country's democratic pillars that would have helped resistance in the face of democratic backsliding. They go to great lengths to carry out illiberal policy.

Policy suggestions: A stricter strategy for safeguarding democracy

The EU must recognise that its response to the immediate threats of disinformation and the subsequent weakening of democratic foundations such as elections has geopolitical consequences. The EU should not be reactive but proactive in this fight. Apart from protecting democracy within its borders, it risks losing influence in neighbouring regions where it has been carrying out reforms. Therefore, the EU must take a stronger and more immediate stance against electoral manipulation, illiberal leadership, and democratic backsliding by imposing stricter repercussions on governments that violate democratic ideals.

1. Implement stricter conditionality: When governments start to waiver their commitment to democratic norms, the consequences should be immediate and tangible. Linking EU funds and accession advancement to explicit democratic requirements would greatly restrict their intentions. Withholding aid from governments that threaten media freedom, judicial independence, or electoral integrity would be a clear consequence.

2. Strengthen sanctions against illiberal leaders: The political cost of authoritarian behaviour should be high; therefore, it is crucial to apply further sanctions to political figures and groups that undermine democracy.

3. Stop EU funding for regressive governments and reallocate resources: The playing field for governments and opposition groups is almost never level. Especially during pre-election periods, illiberal governments

usually use state funds in an unjust manner to strengthen their positions. Re-allocating resources from corrupt state institutions to opposition organisations, civil society, and independent media that support democracy would help new democratic forces to emerge.

4. Improve election monitoring and oversight: Traditional election monitoring focuses more on the procedure carried out on election day. Manipulation and election rigging start weeks or months before. Including long-term observations of media bias, disinformation, and judicial involvement in EU election observation missions would provide a more accurate assessment.

5. Address disinformation: Create an EU task force to combat state-sponsored misinformation. Disinformation campaigns are not isolated cases of misleading content, but they are carefully thought out in a manner to influence and manipulate public opinion.

Therefore, it is important that the EU also take on a well-thought-out and multi-sectoral approach. It should be treated as a threat to the security of the EU.

6. Develop a democratic resilience framework: Proactive response is important. Putting in place an early warning system that triggers legal and financial penalties when governments violate press freedom, weaken judicial institutions, or stifle opposition would help to reduce the damage and deter authoritarian behaviour before it is entrenched.

Overall, the EU must take firm, decisive, and timely action. Lenient and gradual tactics allow for a decline in democracy while public perception is being heavily manipulated against the EU, aggressively and quickly. Disinformation needs to be fought against with a rigorous enforcement strategy, which will be triggered at the first signs of democratic backsliding, especially during election periods.

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