Democratic Erosion in Central Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Autocratic Mechanisms in the Visegrád Group Countries

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Abstract: *Central Europe, long considered a model of successful post-communist democratic consolidation, has undergone a dramatic transformation in the early twenty-first century. This study analyses democratic backsliding in the Visegrád Group countries in the period 2023–2026, identifying four key mechanisms of autocratisation: media capture, the securitisation of political repression, the dismantling of institutional checks and economic state capture. The theoretical framework synthesises three complementary concepts: Scheppele's autocratic legalism, explaining how democracy is dismantled through formally legal procedures; Innes's theory of state capture, illuminating actor motivations; and Bermeo's executive aggrandisement, describing its temporal dynamics. Košař and Šipulová's typology of court-packing (expanding, emptying and swapping) supplies the operational tools. The study reveals marked variation: Hungary is a consolidated autocracy, Slovakia accelerated towards repression after the 2024 assassination attempt, Poland shows the difficulty of democratic restoration after the 2025 presidential election, while the Czech Republic exhibits signs of blocked hybridisation. The findings demonstrate that European integration alone cannot prevent backsliding once domestic safeguards are weakened, and that the principal weakness of the EU response lies not in a lack of instruments but in the political reluctance to deploy them. The study contributes a new hybrid model, 'Digital Sovereign Corporatism'.*

Keywords: ***democratic backsliding, Visegrád Group, autocratic legalism, state capture, media capture, securitisation, institutional dismantling, court-packing***

Introduction

When the Visegrád Group countries acceded to the European Union in 2004, their entry was accompanied by optimistic expectations. European integration and the adoption of the acquis communautaire were expected to create irreversible institutional barriers against any return to authoritarianism. This teleological narrative, the assumption that democratic consolidation is a one-way process, has proven to be mistaken.

Recent years have brought watershed events across the entire region. In June 2025, the candidate backed by the Law and Justice party won the Polish presidential election, thereby blocking the process of democratic restoration initiated in 2023. In Slovakia, the dismantling of the rule of law has continued following the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico in May 2024, which the government instrumentalised to push through repressive legislation. In the Czech Republic, the October 2025 elections produced a governing coalition that includes the ANO movement of the oligarch and former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, signalling a potential shift towards autocratisation.

The period 2023–2026 is selected as the analytical frame precisely because it concentrates a cluster of region-defining ruptures within a single electoral cycle. The starting point of 2023 is not arbitrary: it marks the return of Robert Fico to power in Slovakia (October 2023), the inauguration of the reconstruction government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk in Poland (December 2023) following eight years of Law and Justice rule, and the activation of the EU budgetary-conditionality dispute over Hungary that culminated in the partial unfreezing of funds in December 2023. These three developments (an accelerating autocracy, an attempted democratic restoration and a test of the EU's enforcement resolve) unfolded almost simultaneously, making 2023 a natural baseline against which the subsequent trajectory of the region can be measured. The frame closes in spring 2026, with April 2026 as the empirical cut-off for the events analysed below.

This study seeks answers to two interrelated research questions: through what specific mechanisms does democratic erosion proceed in the Visegrád Group countries, and what structural and contingent factors explain the region's susceptibility to autocratisation?

Theoretical framework and conceptual tools

Before turning to the analytical apparatus, it is necessary to clarify the central terms, which are frequently used interchangeably in the literature but are not synonymous. Following Bermeo (2016), *democratic backsliding* is understood here as the state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy. *Democratic erosion* denotes the gradual, incremental sub-type of backsliding that proceeds through a series of discrete, individually legal measures rather than through an abrupt rupture such as a coup; it is the dominant mode in the contemporary EU context and the primary object of this study. *Autocratisation* (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019) is the broader directional concept describing any substantial movement away from democracy along the regime spectrum, encompassing both the erosion of established democracies and the further hardening of already hybrid or authoritarian regimes. In what follows, 'backsliding' and 'erosion' describe the process in the four states under examination, while 'autocratisation' is reserved for the overarching regional trajectory.

The theoretical foundation is built upon a synthesis of three mutually complementary conceptual frameworks. To understand contemporary developments in the Visegrád Group, it is essential to abandon the outdated notion of authoritarian coups. Contemporary democratic erosion proceeds quietly, procedurally, through formally legal steps.

The concept of autocratic legalism was originally formulated by Javier Corrales (2015) on the basis of his analysis of Venezuela, in which he identified three mechanisms: the use of law to expand executive powers, the abuse of law through selective interpretations, and the non-use of law. Kim Lane Scheppele (2013, 2018) extended this framework to the EU context. Her contribution lies in the metaphor of the *Frankenstate*, a state formation combining elements of democracy and authoritarianism that together function undemocratically, and in the concept of *systemic violation*, whereby individual legal norms may technically comply with EU law, yet their cumulative effect produces a system that violates the fundamental values of the EU.

State capture was comprehensively developed by Abby Innes (2014) in the Central European context. Unlike traditional corruption, it involves the systemic restructuring of institutions for the benefit of a narrow group of actors, while the new rules remain formally legal. Innes distinguished between partisan state capture (ideologically motivated elites seeking a political monopoly) and corporate capture (domination by business elites). Recent developments, however, reveal a significant convergence of these two models.

Executive aggrandisement describes the gradual concentration of power in the hands of the executive through legal changes. Nancy Bermeo (2016) demonstrated that this is an incremental process in which each individual step may appear legitimate, yet their cumulative effect leads to the fundamental disintegration of democratic institutions. The key feature is gradualism, which complicates timely identification and response. David Waldner and Ellen Lust (2018) emphasise that erosion often proceeds below the threshold of visibility, with institutions formally existing yet their autonomy being gradually hollowed out.

The comparative legal analysis of David Košař and Katarína Šipulová (2023) provides the operational typology of court-packing: *expanding, emptying* and *swapping*.

The *expanding* strategy denotes increasing the number of judges and filling new positions with loyal candidates; it is effective because it allows the claim that existing judges are not being removed but that the institution is merely being enlarged. The *emptying* strategy denotes restricting the legal competences of the court, for example by excluding certain categories of legislation from review; it leaves courts formally independent but effectively paralyses them. The *swapping* strategy denotes the replacement of sitting judges through lowering the retirement age or through disciplinary proceedings.

None of the presented concepts is without problems. Autocratic legalism has been criticised for paying insufficient attention to actors outside the executive. The concept of state capture faces criticism for its static character, and since 2014 a significant hybridisation of these models has occurred. Executive aggrandisement neglects the fact that erosion can also proceed through the legislature. Despite these limitations, the concepts provide a valuable analytical apparatus when used complementarily: autocratic legalism explains the mechanism, state capture illuminates the motivation and executive aggrandisement describes the temporal dynamics.

One further limitation, however, requires emphasis, because it bears directly on the EU context examined throughout this article. Theories that stress the formally legal character of autocratisation risk obscuring an equally important dimension: in practice, formally lawful measures have repeatedly been accompanied by manifestly illegal and unconstitutional conduct. The assumption that democratic backsliding occurs *only* through legal means is, in the European setting, only partly accurate. Both the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) have found that core elements of the Polish judicial 'reforms' did not merely strain legality but breached it outright: in Reczkowicz v. Poland (2021) and in the pilot judgment Wałęsa v. Poland (2023), the Strasbourg Court held that bodies staffed through the politicised National Council of the Judiciary did not constitute a 'tribunal established by law', while in Xero Flor w Polsce v. Poland (2021) it reached the same conclusion regarding the reconstituted Constitutional Tribunal. The analytical framework adopted here therefore treats autocratic legalism and manifest illegality not as alternatives but as layered and frequently co-occurring techniques: formally constitutional measures pave the way towards a de facto one-party-dominant state, while overtly unlawful acts accompany them where the legal route proves too slow or too constraining.

Historical context: The Visegrád Group 2010–2025

The Visegrád Group countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, shared a similar starting position after 1989. All underwent a relatively peaceful transformation, built democratic institutions and joined NATO (1999–

2004) and the EU (2004). By 2010, all four exhibited solid democratic indicators (Freedom House 2025; V-Dem Institute 2025, 2026).

Why did precisely the Visegrád Group countries succumb to autocratisation? The answer requires an analysis of the structural factors that make the region specifically susceptible. The first is the comparative weakness of civil society, with low levels of participation, distrust in institutions and a low organisational density of the non-profit sector. This is a legacy of the communist suppression of autonomous association documented by Howard (2003) and revisited in the regional context by Greskovits (2015), who links it directly to the fragility of post-accession democratic commitment. The second is the specific form of post-communist capitalism, in which rapid privatisation created a high dependence on foreign capital alongside close ties between economic and political elites (Innes 2014). The third is a historically conditioned distrust of liberal institutions: the repeated traumas of the twentieth century created a cultural predisposition to perceive liberal institutions as foreign imports. The fourth is the high volatility of party systems, which facilitates the rise of populists capable of mobilising voters against traditional parties. The successive annual rule-of-law reports of the European Commission (European Commission 2025, 2026) document how these structural predispositions translated, country by country, into concrete institutional vulnerabilities.

Structural factors create susceptibility but do not explain the temporal sequence. To understand the temporal dynamics, it is essential to analyse the role of external shocks: the 2008–2009 financial crisis discredited governing elites in Hungary, the 2015 migration crisis provided a pretext for constructing an existential threat, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 weakened civic mobilisation and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had ambivalent effects.

The pivotal moment was the Hungarian parliamentary election of April 2010, when Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán (prime minister of Hungary since 2010), won a constitutional majority (Kornai 2015), 68 percent of the seats with 53 percent of the vote. The first wave of reforms (2010–2011) included the adoption of a new constitution, the Fundamental Law, the reduction of the Constitutional Court's powers and a media law. The second wave (2012–2014) consolidated control over the economy.[1]

Poland followed the Hungarian model with a time lag. In October 2015, the Law and Justice party (PiS), led by its chairman Jarosław Kaczyński, won an

1 The analysis presented in this article reflects the situation up to early April 2026. The parliamentary elections of 12 April 2026 produced a fundamental rupture in the Hungarian trajectory: Fidesz, after sixteen years of uninterrupted government, was defeated by the centre-right TISZA party (*Tisztelet és Szabadság*), led by Péter Magyar, which secured a constitutional supermajority. The institutional residue of the Fidesz era, analysed throughout this article, now constitutes the principal obstacle to any rapid restoration of the rule of law, providing a second empirical test of the concept of institutional hysteresis discussed in Section 6. A full analysis of the post-Fidesz transition lies beyond the temporal scope of the present study.

absolute majority in the Sejm. Lacking a constitutional majority, it opted for a strategy of sub-constitutional changes, attacking the Constitutional Tribunal and the Supreme Court and establishing the Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court, together with a new disciplinary regime for judges that exposed them to sanction for the content of their rulings (Sadurski 2019).

The Slovak trajectory was more volatile. Over the period 2012–2018, the social-democratic Smer-SD governed, combining populist rhetoric with clientelism but without a targeted effort to restructure institutions. The murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in February 2018 (OCCRP 2018) triggered mass mobilisation and led to the fall of Fico's government. Subsequent anti-corruption governments (2020–2023) launched investigations into corruption networks.

The Czech Republic represented a model of corporate state capture without systematic autocratic restructuring (Hanley & Vachudova 2018). The entry of oligarch Andrej Babiš into politics (founding the ANO movement in 2011) embodied a personification of conflict of interest (Kopeček 2016), yet no fundamental assault on institutional checks occurred.

The period 2023–2026 brought a significant acceleration. In Slovakia, Robert Fico's regime, following his return to power (October 2023) and the assassination attempt (May 2024), shifted towards a hard form of illiberal democracy (Mesežnikov 2025). The Czech Republic likewise shifted towards illiberal tendencies after the October 2025 elections (Český statistický úřad 2025), which brought a victory for the ANO movement; it formed a coalition government with the SPD movement and Motoristé sobě on an explicitly sovereigntist programme, signalling the onset of 'soft autocratisation'.

Four mechanisms of autocratisation

Although the four mechanisms examined below (media capture, the securitisation of public space, the dismantling of institutional checks and economic state capture) are analytically distinct, they operate as an interlocking system. Each is presented in turn, with attention to the variation across the four countries.

Media capture

Media capture represents a systemic process in which media outlets are pushed out of independence through a combination of economic, legal and political instruments. Formal freedom of speech is preserved, yet the media's actual capacity to fulfil their watchdog function is deliberately undermined (Reporters Without Borders 2024).

Péter Bajomi-Lázár (2013) formulated the concept of 'party colonisation of the media', which encompasses three dimensions. The economic dimension includes direct media ownership by politically allied oligarchs, selective state advertising directed exclusively to loyal media, and regulation of the advertising market. The legal dimension includes media laws with vague terminology, politically controlled regulatory bodies and defamation laws creating the threat of financially draining lawsuits. The personnel dimension concerns the rules for appointing the leadership of public service media, the protection of journalists and access to information.

Hungary represents the most fully developed such case in 2026, having transitioned from a phase of 'ownership consolidation' to one of 'systemic intimidation'. The first phase (2010–2011) established a repressive framework through the Media Council. The second phase (2012–2017) employed 'financial starvation', with the bulk of state advertising redirected to pro-government media. The third phase (2018) brought centralisation through the KESMA foundation, encompassing nearly 500 titles. Since 2024 a fourth phase is observable: the regime has shifted resources to the Megafon project, a network of state-subsidised 'influencers' on social media. Simultaneously, the Sovereignty Protection Office (Venice Commission 2024) investigates independent media for suspected receipt of foreign grants, labelling them a national-security threat.

In Slovakia, the transformation of the public broadcaster RTVS into the new institution Slovak Television and Radio (STVR), legislated in June 2024, took effect on 1 July 2024. This legislative step enabled the government to circumvent the functional terms of the original management and to initiate personnel purges. The private sector also underwent dramatic change, particularly TV Markíza, which succumbed to combined pressure, resulting in the departure of key figures and the effective suppression of critical journalism. The governing coalition continues to maintain a boycott of selected critical media outlets (SME, Denník N, Aktuality).

The Polish case in 2026 illustrates the complexity of 'democratic reconstruction'. During its tenure, PiS transformed public service media into an instrument of party propaganda. The attempt at rectification, initiated by Donald Tusk's government in December 2023, encountered deep institutional entrenchment. Because President Andrzej Duda vetoed legislative changes, the government resorted to an emergency mechanism: placing public service media into liquidation.

The Czech Republic has so far been distinguished by the absence of complete governmental capture of public service media; Czech Television and Czech Radio have maintained their editorial independence. Their financial stability was strengthened by the major media amendment of 2025, which increased licence fees. The private sector is highly concentrated: PPF controls TV Nova, and Czech Media Invest (Křetínský) dominates print and radio. A crucial change was the sale of the MAFRA publishing house (MF DNES) by Andrej Babiš to the Kaprain group, announced in 2023 and completed in early 2024. The iconic daily *Lidové* *noviny* ceased its print edition in August 2024. This represents a deeper phenomenon than reports of mere economic optimisation suggest. The demise of the oldest Czech printed daily is a symptom of the collapse of traditional media gatekeeping in the region. Traditional media and publishing models inherently required structured editorial processes ensuring at least rudimentary standards of journalistic balance; their gradual degradation and eventual demise open the public arena to an entirely new type of digitally native political entity. The clearest Czech example is the Motoristé sobě movement and its absorption into the executive following the October 2025 elections. The centre of gravity of such entities' communication is no longer a coherent ideological programme but predominantly algorithmic microtargeting, deliberate affective polarisation and the targeted fragmentation of public discourse in an unregulated online environment. This algorithmic entropy erodes traditional media plurality and impedes the formation of coherent civic opposition, facilitating the executive's pursuit of controversial agendas.

With the full entry into force of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) (European Parliament 2024) in August 2025, the European Union acquired a formally enforceable instrument for the protection of media independence. The law covers three pillars: the transparent appointment of public service media leadership and stable financing; the protection of journalists against spyware and vexatious lawsuits; and ownership transparency. The real power of EMFA, however, confronts the limits of implementation: the European Commission's sanctioning mechanisms are slow, and autocratic tendencies seek ways to circumvent the letter of the law (European Commission 2025).

Whereas traditional media capture in the first decade focused on ownership structures and personnel purges in newsrooms, the phenomenon observable in the Visegrád Group after 2024 represents a qualitatively new level of control: digital authoritarianism. Governing elites in Hungary and Slovakia have adapted their strategies to the era of fragmented attention, in which it is unnecessary to censor information: it suffices to flood the information space and control the distribution algorithms. The analysis reveals three pillars of this strategy that had become established in the region by 2026.

First, the *privatisation of cybersecurity*: under the pretext of defence against hybrid threats, governments outsourced key security tools to entities linked to governing parties. An example is the Slovak amendment to the Cybersecurity Act (2025), which enabled the National Security Authority (NBÚ) to block 'harmful content' without a court order on the basis of vague criteria of 'protecting democratic foundations'. This mechanism, originally designed against disinformation, was subsequently used to block the websites of investigative journalists during critical pre-election periods under the pretext of 'spreading alarmist reports'.

Second, *algorithmic clientelism and information overload*: governing parties in Hungary and Poland (before 2023) invested massively in the data market. Through networks of allied digital agencies (for example the Hungarian Megafon network or the Slovak network of allied 'alternative media'), microtargeting occurs that not only mobilises their own voters but effectively demobilises the opposition by inducing apathy and informational chaos. This is not classical single-message propaganda but a strategy of information flooding, which makes it far harder for ordinary citizens to orient themselves in the public space.

Third, *spyware as an instrument of domestic political struggle*: as demonstrated by the use of Pegasus software in Hungary and Poland, and by newer Predator variants in the region after 2024, digital surveillance has shifted from the fight against terrorism to the fight against the 'internal enemy'. The legalisation of these practices through new intelligence-service laws has severely curtailed the right to privacy for journalists and opposition leaders, creating a powerful chilling effect as sources fear communicating with journalists.

Securitisation of public space as a means of suppressing the opposition

Securitisation is a process in which governing elites construct existential threats and subsequently legitimise extraordinary measures serving primarily to weaken democratic opposition, independent media and civil society.

Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde (1998), within the framework of the Copenhagen School, defined securitisation as a process in which an actor declares that a certain phenomenon constitutes an existential threat and implements extraordinary measures. The process comprises three components: the construction of an existential threat, its discursive elaboration through speeches and campaigns, and the adoption of extraordinary measures. Securitisation is not an objective response to threats but a political act: a choice to present an issue as a security matter rather than an ordinary political one. In the context of democratic erosion, it is a determining mechanism because it enables the legitimisation of repression as the 'defence of democracy'.

The Hungarian securitisation strategy in 2026 has settled into a comprehensive system of permanent mobilisation against a 'three-headed threat': migration, gender ideology and foreign influence. The third, the fight against foreign influence, has become the primary instrument for dismantling civil society. The Sovereignty Protection Office (established in December 2023) operates largely outside judicial oversight. It issues 'sovereignty reports' that de facto destroy the reputations of investigated entities, and it exploits powers to breach banking secrecy and monitor communications without a court order, publishing any foreign funding as evidence of 'betrayal of national interests'. The result is a chilling effect whereby donors and advertisers withdraw their support from independent entities out of fear of stigmatisation.

The Office's activity has not gone unchallenged at the European level. The European Commission opened infringement proceedings against the Sovereignty Protection Act, referring the matter to the Court of Justice (Case C-829/24, Commission v. Hungary), and in her Opinion of 12 February 2026 Advocate General Kokott concluded that Hungary had infringed EU law by adopting the Act, in particular the freedom to provide services, data-protection guarantees and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, holding that Article 4(2) TEU cannot shield such a measure from EU scrutiny. The Opinion, while not binding on the Court, signals the likely direction of the forthcoming judgment and exemplifies the recurring lag between the identification of a violation at the EU level and any effective remedy on the ground.

The Slovak securitisation strategy underwent a transformation from a rhetorical figure into a form of institutionalised repression following the assassination attempt on Robert Fico (May 2024). The government instrumentalised the act to push through a package of laws known as Lex Atentát (Amnesty International 2024), which by 2026 has become a far-reaching constraint on civil society. The threat construction rested on a narrative of the 'collective guilt' of the opposition and the media. The enforcement practice in 2026 manifests primarily in three executive dimensions. First, there are drastic spatial restrictions on the constitutionally guaranteed right of assembly, in the form of a blanket perimetric prohibition of protests within a fifty-metre radius of key state and judicial institutions, including the residences of protected persons. Second, there is an unprecedented statutory privileging of the senior executive, embodied in the unconditional granting of a lifelong annuity and permanent state protection for the prime minister and other constitutional officials. Third, there is a deliberately arbitrary redefinition of extremism in the amended Criminal Code, which provides the security forces with a disproportionately broad scope for the pre-emptive monitoring of online communication metadata and enables the extended detention of government opponents without direct judicial oversight.

Two crucial events from late 2025 must be highlighted. The constitutional amendment of September 2025 (the national-identity clause): on 26 September 2025 the Slovak parliament adopted Constitutional Law No. 255/2025, the controversial twenty-third amendment to the Constitution, introducing an explicit provision on national identity into the constitutional order. The amendment, centred on Article 7, empowers Slovak authorities, including the courts, to assess whether and to what extent EU law applies in Slovakia, asserting national sovereignty over matters of 'national identity' and purporting to allow domestic law to take primacy over international law, including EU law and the European Convention on Human Rights, in those areas. Sharply criticised by the Venice Commission for its vagueness and procedural deficiencies, the amendment functions in practice as a constitutional safeguard against the delegation of competences to European Union bodies in culturally and ethically sensitive areas. It applies autocratic legalism directly, instrumentalising the principle of national constitutional identity into a tool for inoculating domestic law against the primacy of EU law. The European Commission responded by opening infringement proceedings, issuing a letter of formal notice on 21 November 2025 on the ground that the amendment, by empowering national authorities to disapply EU law and CJEU rulings, is incompatible with the principle of primacy and with Article 4(3) TEU.

The Criminal Code amendment of December 2025 (restriction of freedom of expression and the Beneš Decrees): a further drastic step followed on 11 December 2025, when the governing coalition, in an accelerated legislative procedure and by a vote of 76 to 60 amid physical altercations and obstruction in parliament, pushed through an amendment to the Criminal Code in the section concerning extremism and incitement to war. The new provision criminalises anyone who publicly denies or questions the 'settlement of affairs' established after the Second World War, a clear reference to the so-called Beneš Decrees, on the basis of which collective guilt was applied, together with mass deportations and the expropriation of the property of the Hungarian and German minorities. Questioning these decrees, which remain the legal basis for uncompensated ethnic expropriations, is now a criminal offence in Slovakia carrying a maximum sentence of six months' imprisonment.

The Polish securitisation strategy of 2015–2023, focused on constructing an internal enemy ('gender ideology', German influence), left deep traces. The original PiS rhetoric, which dehumanised the LGBTQ+ community, culminated in the era of so-called 'LGBT-free zones'. These resolutions were largely revoked by 2025 under strong economic pressure from the EU. With the advent of the new government there was a shift from securitisation towards normalisation; in late 2025 and early 2026 the governing coalition advanced a registered-partnership bill, still under parliamentary debate, intended as a symbolic break with the era of state-sanctioned discrimination, though it had not yet been enacted. The security discourse has not disappeared, however; it has merely shifted to external hybrid threats on the border with Belarus and Russia.

The Czech Republic, long considered a country of low-intensity securitisation, entered a phase of selective and instrumental securitisation following the assumption of power by the ANO, SPD and Motoristé government (October 2025). The previous cabinet had focused on combating hybrid threats from Russia; the new government abandoned this direction. Security rhetoric has changed: the governing coalition employs the narrative of a 'threat to national existence' in the context of migration and European integration. Unlike in Hungary, however, the effort to anchor repression in legislation encounters strong institutional resistance. The Senate and President Petr Pavel function as effective brakes, confirming the Czech Republic's status as a 'blocked hybrid regime'.

A recurring thread across these national cases is the abusive use of emergency and quasi-emergency powers. The instrumentalisation of exceptional legal regimes, originally designed for genuine crises, has become a favoured technique for compressing the time available for deliberation and judicial scrutiny. Hungary's open-ended 'state of danger', repeatedly extended and used as the basis for rule by decree under the 2020 Authorisation Act and its successors, is the most developed example; Poland's 2021 state of emergency on the Belarusian border restricted media access to the affected zone; and the Slovak Lex Atentát package, although not formally an emergency statute, replicated the same logic by invoking an acute security shock to justify the accelerated adoption of permanent repressive measures. In each case the temporal exception becomes, in Bermeo's terms, a means of bypassing the slow incrementalism that backsliding would otherwise require.

Dismantling institutional checks

The third mechanism is the systematic erosion of institutional checks and balances: constitutional courts, independent judiciaries, ombudspersons, anti--corruption bodies and other oversight institutions. In liberal democracies these represent safeguards against the abuse of power by the executive or a parliamentary majority, and their weakening or capture enables governing elites to act without effective oversight. Historical authoritarian regimes proceeded openly and brutally, dissolving courts by force and annulling constitutions by decree. Contemporary autocratisation within the European Union, by contrast, is characterised by sophistication, proceeding through formally legal procedures (Pech & Scheppele 2017): Hungary increased the number of constitutional--court justices through an act adopted by a constitutional majority, Poland lowered the retirement age of judges through legislation, Slovakia abolished the Special Prosecutor's Office by a vote of parliament. Each individual step has formal democratic legitimacy: the problem lies in their cumulative effect, and, as Section 2 noted, in the manifestly unlawful conduct that has repeatedly accompanied it.

Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq (2018) documented that autocrats proceed in a specific sequence: they first attack constitutional courts (capable of overturning autocratic steps), then prosecutorial offices and police (capable of investigating corruption), and finally ombudspersons and oversight bodies (capable of criticism). This sequencing has an internal logic: constitutional courts can annul the laws dismantling other institutions and must therefore be neutralised first; prosecutorial offices threaten the personal wealth and security of autocrats and must be captured second. There is nothing accidental about this order; it reflects a strategic rationality apparent in each of the four examined countries. Dismantling usually begins not with the media, where it would be easily visible, but with the legal system, where it can proceed under the guise of technical-legal reform.

Expanding (Košař & Šipulová 2023) was most consistently employed by Orbán in 2010, when he enlarged the Hungarian Constitutional Court from eleven to fifteen justices, and subsequently by Kaczyński through the creation of the Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court. *Emptying*, restricting a court's powers, for example by excluding budgetary laws from review, leaves courts formally independent but effectively paralyses them. *Swapping*, replacing judges by lowering the retirement age or through disciplinary proceedings, enabled Hungary to force out roughly ten percent of its judges by lowering the retirement age from seventy to sixty-two. No country employs a single strategy alone; they are always layered combinations.

Hungary represents the most systematic case of dismantling institutional checks in the European Union. The process unfolded in four coordinated phases. The first (2010–2012) neutralised the Constitutional Court: legislation expanded the number of justices from eleven to fifteen; the new positions were filled with loyal nominees; the court's powers were curtailed by excluding the review of budgetary laws; and justices' terms were extended from nine to twelve years, ensuring a long-term preponderance of Fidesz nominees. The Venice Commission found that the combination of these steps constituted a systemic weakening of constitutional review (Venice Commission 2011). The second phase (2012–2014) targeted the ordinary judiciary: the retirement age was lowered from seventy to sixty-two, enabling the forced replacement of roughly ten percent of judges. Although the CJEU ruled the measure discriminatory (CJEU 2012), the dismissed judges were not rehabilitated. The third phase, from 2015, was one of consolidation: Prosecutor General Péter Polt (in office since 2010) functions as a 'gatekeeper' who prevents any case threatening government leaders from reaching court. The fourth phase (2024–2026) brought a qualitative shift, relocating the centre of repression to the Sovereignty Protection Office, which possesses intelligence-service powers and can investigate anyone without judicial authorisation. The V-Dem Institute's index of judicial constraints on the executive (v2x_jucon) for Hungary fell from 0.89 in 2010 to 0.47 in 2025 (V-Dem Institute 2026), by some margin the steepest decline recorded among EU member states over the period.

A crucial component of the Hungarian strategy was legitimisation by reference to Western democratic models: the expansion of the Constitutional Court was justified by comparison with Germany, and the restriction of budgetary-law review was presented as an echo of the British tradition of parliamentary sovereignty. Kim Lane Scheppele designated this approach the *Frankenstate* tactic (2013): the assembly of elements of constitutional law taken from functioning democracies, unproblematic in themselves, which autocrats extract from their institutional environment and recombine in a manner that eliminates the balancing of power. The German Constitutional Court is independent because Germany also has independent prosecutorial offices, pluralist media and coalition governments; the Hungarian 'German model', stripped of these complementary components, becomes an instrument of autocracy.

The Polish case differs fundamentally from the Hungarian one. Law and Justice never obtained a constitutional majority, so changes had to be carried out through sub-constitutional steps, which increased their legal vulnerability and enabled resistance from the judicial community. The first step was an assault on the Constitutional Tribunal (Sadurski 2019): in December 2015 the newly elected Sejm refused to swear in three judges lawfully elected by the previous parliament and instead elected its own nominees to the same posts. This did not create a symmetrical situation of 'two groups with equally legitimate claims', as is sometimes loosely described. The legal position is settled: in Xero Flor w Polsce v. Poland (2021) the European Court of Human Rights held that the participation of these irregularly elected 'doubled judges' meant that the Constitutional Tribunal was not a 'tribunal established by law' within the meaning of Article 6 ECHR, and in its judgment of 18 December 2025 (Case C-448/23, Commission v. Poland) the CJEU Grand Chamber confirmed that, on account of serious irregularities in the appointment of three of its judges and of its president, the Constitutional Tribunal cannot be regarded as an independent and impartial court for the purposes of EU law. The three judges lawfully elected in 2015 were never sworn in; the three persons installed in their place were appointed in breach of the Constitution.

Subsequent steps targeted the ordinary courts. The Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court was granted powers to prosecute judges for the content of their decisions. The National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), the body responsible for judicial appointments, was politicised by having its judicial members elected by parliament rather than by judges. The CJEU repeatedly ruled that the Polish reforms violated EU law (CJEU 2021, 2023), and Poland faced daily fines of one million euros.

Donald Tusk's new government (December 2023) had a mandate to restore the rule of law, but implementation was complicated by President Duda's stance, and the situation was fundamentally aggravated by the victory of Karol Nawrocki in the presidential election. Nawrocki, the PiS-backed candidate, prevailed in the decisive second round on 1 June 2025 with 50.89 percent of the vote (10,606,877 voters) over the liberal mayor of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski (Civic Coalition), who received 49.11 percent (10,237,286 voters) (National Electoral Commission 2025). The margin was a mere 370,000 votes, on a record second-round turnout of 71.63 percent, the highest in a Polish presidential election. On 1 July 2025 the Supreme Court confirmed the validity of Nawrocki's victory.

Crucially, that confirmation was issued by the Extraordinary Review and Public Affairs Chamber, a body created during the PiS tenure and staffed by persons irregularly appointed on the recommendation of the politicised KRS. The government of Donald Tusk and Minister of Justice Adam Bodnar challenged the legitimacy of this arrangement, pointing to the irregular appointment of its members and demanding that the validity of the election be determined by a lawfully composed chamber, a demand the 'neo-judges' rejected. The cabinet thus faced an unprecedented paradox: a body which both the CJEU and the European Court of Human Rights had held *not to be a tribunal established by law*, not merely a body whose independence had been 'questioned', but one found to fall short of the very definition of a lawful court (see Cases C-791/19 and C-204/21; Reczkowicz v. Poland 2021), nevertheless acted as the arbiter certifying the election of the head of state. In Case C-204/21 the CJEU held that Poland had failed to respect judicial independence and that the disciplinary regime for judges introduced by PiS was incompatible with EU law. This vividly illustrates the phenomenon of institutional hysteresis, whereby judicial bodies captured by a former autocratic regime remain functional after its electoral defeat and continue to shape the political process, a living manifestation of Scheppele's Frankenstate.

After his inauguration, President Nawrocki continued to block judicial reforms through the presidential veto. Poland thus became an example of a situation in which the democratic reversal of autocratisation collides with the institutional structures left behind by the previous regime; democratic elections alone may not suffice to restore the rule of law where the autocrat has succeeded in filling key institutional positions. Part of the judicial community nonetheless built resilient structures: the Supreme Court and a number of ordinary courts refused to recognise the validity of appointments made on the recommendation of the unlawfully composed 'neo-KRS', in line with the European Court of Human Rights' pilot judgment in Wałęsa v. Poland (2023), which characterised the defective appointment process as a systemic violation requiring structural remedy rather than a mere irregularity. The Polish Judges' Association Iustitia played a crucial role, coordinating resistance and providing legal support to judges facing disciplinary proceedings (Iustitia 2023). The v2x_jucon index for Poland stands at 0.51 (V-Dem Institute 2026), reflecting an unstable situation of institutional paralysis. Read alongside the World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index (World Justice Project 2025), which records Poland's constraints-on-government and fundamental-rights scores only beginning to recover from their 2023 low, the Polish trajectory underscores how much slower restoration is than capture.

In Slovakia, the process in 2024–2026 focused on securing institutional impunity, with a targeted focus on the prosecutorial service and its capacity to prosecute corruption. Following the murder of Ján Kuciak in February 2018, the prosecutorial service and police had launched extensive investigations uncovering vast networks connecting organised crime with politicians. These investigations became the target after Smer's return to power in October 2023. The crucial step was the abolition of the Special Prosecutor's Office in March 2024, precisely when it was conducting the greatest number of investigations into persons close to Smer. In parallel, the National Criminal Agency (NAKA) was effectively dissolved at the end of August 2024, its elite units divided and its investigative teams dispersed. The amendment to the Criminal Code then reduced penalties for corruption, shortened limitation periods and abolished certain offences, enabling the discontinuation of dozens of pending cases. The Slovak Bar Association issued critical opinions on the incompatibility of these amendments with rule-of-law standards (Slovenská advokátska komora 2024).

The assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico (15 May 2024) was a far-reaching turning point: the government used it to adopt repressive legislation restricting freedom of assembly, expanding the definition of extremism and strengthening the powers of the security forces. The Constitutional Court of Slovakia has so far maintained greater independence than its Polish or Hungarian counterparts, but as the terms of its justices expire (2026–2027) the gradual election of loyal justices is anticipated. The v2x_jucon index for Slovakia declined to 0.62 (V-Dem Institute 2026), indicating accelerating erosion.

The Czech Republic has so far maintained the most functional institutional checks of the four countries; this is corroborated by the WJP Rule of Law Index (World Justice Project 2025), which continues to place the Czech Republic well above its regional peers on judicial independence and constraints on government power. The Constitutional Court has repeatedly ruled against governmental proposals (annulling parts of pandemic legislation, ruling on electoral reform and protecting minority rights), and the Senate functions as a safeguard against the most radical interventions, owing to its staggered electoral cycle (one-third elected every two years) and majoritarian electoral system. Although the new governing coalition commands a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, it encounters firm institutional barriers. The decisive factor of resilience is the distribution of forces between President Petr Pavel and the Senate, where the governing parties do not hold a majority, creating an effective block against constitutional change. After President Pavel exercised his informal constitutional brake and declined to appoint Filip Turek (Motoristé) to a ministerial post, the coalition did not pursue a confrontational course against the head of state; rather than forcing the issue, it left the ministry temporarily in the hands of the Motoristé leader before nominating the more pragmatic deputy Igor Červený, who likewise opposes core elements of EU climate policy. This step illustrates institutional corrosion: formal respect for constitutional procedure obscures the material continuity of the governmental objective. Pressure has shifted towards the public prosecution, where the coalition has prepared an amendment enabling the easier dismissal of the Supreme Public Prosecutor. The v2x_jucon index has held at 0.87 (V-Dem Institute 2026), a markedly more stable trajectory in the regional context.

The comparative analysis reveals a predictable order of dismantling. The first target is always the constitutional courts, in Hungary (2010–2012) and Poland (2015–2016), capable of annulling the laws that dismantle other institutions. The second is the prosecutorial offices and police, in Slovakia (2023–2024, abolition of the Special Prosecutor's Office) and Hungary (control through Péter Polt), which directly threaten autocrats' assets. The third is ombudspersons and oversight bodies. Control of public service media runs throughout. The sequence reflects strategic rationality: first neutralise the institutions capable of revocation, then those capable of investigation, finally those capable of criticism.

Beyond the sequence, the analysis reveals clear mutual learning among autocrats. The Polish model of capturing the Constitutional Tribunal drew on the Hungarian tactic of expanding the court; Slovak post-assassination legislation references Hungarian precedents of securitisation. A significant factor was the long-standing tolerance of the European Union: The European People's Party kept Fidesz in its ranks even after the Hungarian authoritarian trajectory was evident; suspension came only in 2019, and Fidesz departed in March 2021. This tolerance signalled that a degree of autocratisation would be accepted (Kelemen 2020).

The disintegration of institutions did not always meet passive acceptance, and the analysis identifies four factors of resistance. The first is the professional identity and solidarity of the judicial community, strong in Poland, weaker in Hungary. The second is international support, as CJEU and ECtHR decisions provided resisting judges with legal backing. The third is an active civil society capable of organising protest. The fourth is institutional architecture: bicameral systems with different electoral cycles (the Czech Republic, Poland) provide additional safeguards relative to unicameral systems (Hungary). A crucial role is played by the broader legal community, non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Transparency International documented violations, and their reports served as a basis for decisions by the European Commission and the CJEU (International Commission of Jurists 2025).

Economic state capture

The fourth mechanism is economic state capture: the systematic redirection of public resources, subsidies, public contracts and regulatory advantages to politically allied actors, creating a system of mutual dependency.

Economic state capture differs from ordinary corruption: it is a systemic practice embedded in the functioning of institutions; it produces a stable network of mutual dependencies between political power and economic elites; and it provides the governing party with an enormous financial advantage funded from public resources, thereby distorting electoral competition.

Hungary presents the most developed model in 2026, though one that has had to evolve. The original model, based on 'siphoning' EU subsidies, encountered the limits of the EU's rule-of-law mechanisms; the resulting shortfall in European funding is being offset by massive Chinese investment in the battery industry and by state loans. The central figure remains Lőrinc Mészáros, whose empire has moved from construction to the monopolisation of services and retail. The government deliberately employs so-called 'extraordinary taxes' (Transparency International Hungary 2024) and regulatory harassment to drive out foreign capital, so that the vacated market space can be cheaply occupied by loyal oligarchs. This architecture is not secured by the Sovereignty Protection Office, whose remit lies in the domain of civil society and public discourse rather than economic regulation; rather, it rests on a network of captured regulatory and oversight bodies (among them the competition authority, the media regulator, the public-procurement authority and the State Audit Office) whose selective enforcement entrenches the position of allied firms. This is the institutional core of what Bálint Magyar (2016) termed the 'post-communist mafia state': a system in which the relationship between the government and oligarchs has shifted from clientelism to one of mutual guarantee, with oligarchs becoming the holders of strategic infrastructure.

Slovak economic capture has a different structure in 2026. Whereas Fidesz built a new oligarchy from scratch, Slovak structures rest on the continuity of business-political clans rooted in the Mečiar era. Robert Fico's return to power (2023) and the subsequent legislative blitz (2024) resolved this 'problem' systemically: the abolition of the Special Prosecutor's Office and the drastic reduction of criminal penalties functioned as a de facto amnesty for allied oligarchs. The specificity of 2026 is a transformation in the character of capture: no longer a 'mafia state' in the traditional sense but a state of legalised impunity, in which control over the intelligence service and the police enables the pre-emptive elimination of investigations.

The Czech Republic represents a specific model of corporate state capture that rests less on systematic corruption than on a massive conflict of interest. The central figure is Andrej Babiš and his holding company Agrofert (Kopeček 2016). Although the holding divested its media division in 2024, it continues to dominate agriculture, food processing and the chemical industry, with annual revenues exceeding CZK 200 billion. With Babiš's return to the prime minister's office in autumn 2025, the conflict of interest returned in full force; Agrofert remains one of the largest recipients of agricultural subsidies and public contracts. The fundamental difference from the Hungarian model lies in the role of the judiciary. The Czech judiciary has maintained its independence but has encountered the limits of the political cycle: with Babiš's re-election as a deputy, his immunity was reinstated and his criminal prosecution had to be suspended, leaving the country in a state of 'deferred justice'. In 2025, the new government, through Minister of Industry and Trade Karel Havlíček, presented an 'economic strategy' whose central pillar is the full state takeover of the energy group ČEZ. The plan envisages a compulsory buyout of minority shareholders, which would make the state, and by extension the current executive, the sole owner of the country's largest energy corporation, at an estimated cost of up to CZK 250 billion. Presented as a means of gaining manoeuvring room for energy investment, it conceals a substantial risk of extreme centralisation of economic power. The combination of vast state influence in energy with a private agrochemical monopoly creates an unprecedented structure of corporate state capture that completes the mosaic of Czech 'soft autocratisation'.

A crucial aspect of economic state capture in 2023–2026 is the transformation of the sources from which autocratic regimes finance their clientelistic networks. During this period the European Union activated its rule-of-law conditionality and budgetary mechanisms, but with markedly uneven effect. In the Hungarian case the amounts at stake were considerable: in December 2022 the Council suspended approximately EUR 6.3 billion in cohesion funding under the general conditionality regulation, while far larger sums, some EUR 22 billion in cohesion funds under the horizontal enabling conditions and a further EUR 10.4 billion under the Recovery and Resilience Facility, remained frozen on rule-of-law and judicial-independence grounds. The Commission's decision of December 2023 to allow Hungary to request reimbursement of around EUR 10.2 billion, on the contested basis that it had satisfied judicial-independence 'super-milestones', became itself the subject of litigation: in Parliament v. Commission (Case C-225/24) the European Parliament sought the annulment of that decision, and in her Opinion of 12 February 2026 Advocate General Ćapeta proposed that the Court annul it, on the grounds that the Commission may not disburse withheld funds until the required reforms are genuinely in force and applied. Slovakia, by contrast, has had no significant volume of EU funds actually suspended under these mechanisms to date: although the Commission opened infringement proceedings over the 2025 constitutional amendment and the European Parliament urged it in April 2026 to trigger the conditionality mechanism, no freeze has in fact been imposed, a disparity that points less to the design of the instruments than to the political discretion governing their use. As Western funding became conditional, the regimes in Budapest and Bratislava responded by replacing the shortfall with investment and opaque loans from China and Russia – for example in battery gigafactories. This marks a new phase in the development of the state-capture phenomenon described by Innes: whereas Western capital required at least formal respect for rule-of-law principles, Eastern 'geopolitical rent' imposes no such conditions, demanding instead a strong, centralised executive that guarantees investment stability regardless of environmental or labour standards. Autocratic elites thereby acquire a new form of external legitimacy for the further consolidation of power.

By 2026, then, a 'dual economy' has emerged across the Visegrád Group (with the exception of Poland): a sector connected to Western markets (automotive, services), under pressure from regulation and taxation, and a privileged sector connected to Eastern capital and state contracts, which serves as the regime's economic base and a source of campaign finance.

A new hybrid model: Digital Sovereign Corporatism

The four mechanisms analysed above do not merely coexist; in their most advanced form they fuse into a distinctive hybrid configuration that this study terms *Digital Sovereign Corporatism*. Because the claim to have identified a distinct model carries a substantial analytical burden, the concept is set out here with its constitutive criteria made explicit, rather than asserted in passing.

Digital Sovereign Corporatism is proposed as an ideal-type defined by the conjunction of four necessary features, no one of which is by itself novel but whose combination is. First is a *sovereigntist legitimating discourse* that frames the control of the information space as the defence of national sovereignty against external (typically EU, NGO, or 'globalist') interference, the discursive register of the Hungarian Sovereignty Protection Office and the Slovak national-identity clause. Second is *corporatist intermediation*, whereby the state does not censor directly but channels resources, advertising and regulatory advantage through a network of nominally private but politically dependent intermediaries (oligarch-owned outlets, the Megafon influencer network, allied 'alternative media'). Third is *algorithmic distribution control*, whereby influence is exercised not over the legality of speech but over its reach: microtargeting, information flooding and the cultivation of platform-native movements such as Motoristé sobě. Fourth is *the economic starvation of legacy gatekeepers*, whereby traditional editorial institutions are allowed to wither commercially rather than being suppressed, vacating the public arena for the algorithmic ecosystem.

These criteria distinguish the model from its closest neighbours. It is narrower than 'media capture' in the classical sense (Bajomi-Lázár 2013), which centres on ownership and personnel and need not involve algorithmic distribution; it differs from accounts of 'censorship through noise' or post-truth authoritarianism, which describe an informational effect without specifying the corporatist institutional architecture that produces it; and it is distinct from surveillance-capitalist analyses, in which the controlling agent is the platform rather than the sovereigntist state. The Czech case best illustrates the model's genesis: the demise of the printed *Lidové noviny* in August 2024 is not an isolated market episode but the commercial starvation of a legacy gatekeeper, and the rise of

Motoristé sobě, a movement generated less by a political programme than by the algorithmic induction of anger against symbols such as the Green Deal and 'Prague elites', exemplifies the platform-native entity that fills the vacated space. The model thus describes an evolution from censorship (state capture 1.0) to algorithmic entropy and information pollution (state capture 2.0), in which governments can plausibly claim not to restrict freedom of speech while controlling the capacity of information to influence opinion. Hungary remains the paradigmatic case, in which all four features are simultaneously present and mutually reinforcing.

The EU enforcement deficit: A problem of will, not tools

The comparative evidence assembled here points to a conclusion about the European Union's response that diverges from the common reformist reflex. The persistence of autocratisation within the EU is often read as evidence that the Union's instruments are inadequate: that Article 7 TEU, paralysed by its unanimity requirement, and the budgetary conditionality mechanism need to be redesigned, for instance by shifting to qualified-majority voting. These tools can certainly be refined, but recent scholarship, including the work on which the present study draws, suggests that this diagnosis is largely misplaced. As Closa (2016), Kelemen (2024), and Pech and Scheppele (2017) have argued, the existing toolbox (infringement actions under Articles 258 and 260 TFEU, interim measures and penalty payments, the conditionality regulation and the recovery-and-resilience framework) is, on paper, more than sufficient to address the violations documented above.

The binding constraint is political rather than legal. The decisive failures of the period were failures of will: the Commission's reluctance to pursue infringement actions promptly and to their conclusion; the Council's unwillingness to advance the Article 7 procedure against Hungary beyond its hearings; and, most strikingly, the release of some EUR 10.2 billion to Hungary in December 2023 at a moment of acute negotiating leverage over Ukraine, a decision driven by geopolitical expediency rather than by any genuine satisfaction of the rule-of-law conditions, and now contested before the Court. The asymmetry between the substantial sums frozen and released in the Hungarian case and the absence of any comparable suspension in the Slovak case, despite a comparable deterioration, reinforces the point: the instruments are applied selectively, according to partisan, geopolitical and intra-institutional calculations of expediency.

The practical implication is correspondingly reoriented. The priority is not the lengthy renegotiation of treaty provisions, which would itself require the political consensus whose absence is the root problem, but the prompt, sustained and depoliticised use of the instruments that already exist: the systematic deployment of interim measures, the swift escalation of infringement actions, the rigorous and evidence-based application of conditionality irrespective of the offending government's geopolitical usefulness, and the implementation of the systemic-violation approach (Pech & Scheppele 2017) so that the cumulative effect of measures, rather than each provision in isolation, becomes the object of enforcement. Where reform energy is available, it is best directed at insulating these decisions from the political discretion that has hitherto blunted them, and at the direct financing of the legal community and watchdog organisations in the affected states.

Conclusion

Democratic erosion in the Visegrád Group in 2026 reveals itself as a deep but non-linear systemic trend. The analysis has identified four interconnected mechanisms (media capture, institutionalised securitisation, the dismantling of institutional checks, and predatory economic capture) whose intensity varies across countries but whose structural essence is shared. The region's susceptibility flows from a combination of weak civil society, a traumatic historical memory that casts liberalism as a foreign import, and a specific clientelistic capitalism.

Three findings stand out. First, autocratisation exhibits a pronounced institutional hysteresis: court-packing leaves behind judicial bodies that continue to block democratic reform long after the autocratic regime has lost power, as the Polish experience after June 2025 demonstrates, so that the speed of disintegration far exceeds the slowness of restoration. Second, contingent crises can collapse the gradualism that Bermeo's theory of executive aggrandisement presupposes; the Slovak Lex Atentát package, adopted in an accelerated procedure after May 2024, shows how a shock can substitute for slow, inconspicuous salami-slicing. Third, the fusion of sovereigntist discourse, corporatist intermediation, algorithmic distribution control and the starvation of legacy media produces the hybrid model set out above as Digital Sovereign Corporatism, of which Hungary is the fullest realisation. The common denominator is that autocratic legalism is not merely a tool of attack but also a durable defence: institutional mines, shock-era legislative precedents and algorithmic infrastructure remain functional even after electoral defeat.

The Central European experience of 2026 therefore serves as a cautionary lesson for the wider Union. The decisive variable is not the adequacy of the EU's instruments but the political will to use them promptly and consistently. Once oligarchic capital becomes intertwined with national populism and algorithmic infrastructure, the dismantling of democracy becomes highly efficient and exceedingly difficult to reverse; a European response governed by expediency rather than principle leaves the residue of capture firmly in place.

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