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# THE NEW COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM

EVENT  
SUMMARY



CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL  
PRIVATE ENTERPRISE



FEDN

Free Enterprise & Democracy Network

# BACKGROUND

On Thursday, January 21, the Free Enterprise & Democracy Network (FEDN) held a roundtable with Professor Lucan Way, co-author of two influential Journal of Democracy articles on competitive authoritarianism: *"The New Competitive Authoritarianism (2020)"* and *"Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism" (2002)*. Participants learned about recent trends shaping the competitive landscape and explored what practitioners can do to resist illiberalism, encourage pluralistic competition, and shore up democratic institutions. The conversation centered on building an understanding of newer authoritarian techniques and the vulnerable points of democracy, and considered how they may relate to corrosive and constructive capital, market institutions, and private enterprise. FEDN members shared their insights about countries in flux and their political economy perspectives on reform.

## DISCUSSANTS




Lucan Way is an Associate Professor of political science at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on democratic transitions and the evolution of authoritarian rule in the former Soviet Union and in cross-regional perspective.



Kim Bettcher is the Director of Policy & Program Learning at CIPE, which captures lessons learned in democratic and economic institution-building around the world and shares strategies with an international network of reform leaders.

# KEY OBSERVATIONS



The phenomenon of competitive authoritarianism materialized in the post-cold war era. Whereas the fall of communism signaled the dominance of liberal democracy, crises since then have undermined democracy and nondemocratic countries have become more powerful. China, for example, is a major figure in international trade and Russia actively subverts foreign democracies. Likewise, the “demoralization of the west” (e.g. Iraq War, 2008 financial crisis, European debt crisis, and Brexit) diminishes the influence of liberal democracies. Crises and the failure to solve them make actors question the value of liberal democracy.

Competitive authoritarianism has emerged in this space. While there is still “institutionalized randomness” in electoral outcomes (authoritarians sweat on election night), the playing field has been tilted to favor one side. There has been real backsliding, but there also has been resiliency. Populism, Orbanism, and less influential linkages from the West have undermined democracy.

On the other hand, democracies have survived populist waves and persevered in many countries. There have been limits on authoritarian diffusion. Weak autocrats have failed to combat pluralism. They have a weak party capacity to halt defections, a weak state capacity to suppress protest, and they consequently fail to create a closed autocracy. In the “post-post-cold war era” there have been two outcomes: Democratic regression in key states but meaningful democratic persistence in hard places despite a less liberal international environment.

# Q&A WITH LUCAN WAY

MODERATED BY KIM BETTCHER

## 01. HOW IMPORTANT ARE FREE ECONOMIES?

“When you have complete state control over the economy it is detrimental of course, but oligarchs might defect if they sense weakness in the state. On the other hand, there is no shortage of examples of authoritarian countries with strong private sectors, so markets are not a total panacea. Actors with independent income (whether democratically minded or not) can be a check on autocrats or a source of democratic resilience.”

## 02. IS POPULISM A CHALLENGING MODEL FOR DEMOCRACY?

“Populism doesn't inherently reject competitive elections wholesale in the way that fascism or communism did/does. In fact, some populists might even encourage competitive elections if they feel that they will legitimize their rule.”

## 03. HAS THE PANDEMIC HURT DEMOCRACY?

“It is likely too early to know, and there is conflicting evidence. Lukashenko failed to handle the pandemic well and it led to major protests. Likewise, Trump likely lost because of his failure to handle the pandemic. But there has been no strong data publicly available yet to make a real determination here.”



#### 04. WHERE DO WE PUT OUR EFFORTS? DO WE WANT TO TRY AND HIT EVERY DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGE AS THEY OCCUR, OR DO WE WANT TO BE MORE STRATEGIC?

“ The prudent response is to formulate a plan of action around items no democracy can exist without. Moreover, responses should be framed as democracy versus authoritarianism, not left-wing versus right-wing or some variation thereof. After a competitive election, the new incumbent should be held accountable so there is no continuation or backsliding. The international community faces a dilemma in challenging international authoritarianism through sanctions. Western countries should be crowbars instead of sledgehammers. They should look to drive wedges and incentivize elites to defect instead of going too intensely and forcing the elites to coalesce around the regime. ”

#### 05. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION?

“ We used to have this idea in transitology and comparative politics that two competitive electoral turnovers would set democracy in stone. What we have learned is that democracy is never really consolidated, it is a continual fight, and we cannot let our guards down. Focus on principles, not people. In a healthy democracy you do not know the outcome of elections, but you do know the process. ”

# ABOUT FEDN

The Free Enterprise and Democracy Network (FEDN) was established by CIPE in 2012 to promote international engagement around the principles of free enterprise and democracy and bring private sector voices into global discourse on democracy. The network provides a mechanism for private sector leaders and advocates of economic freedom across the world to exchange ideas and support, and make the case for democratic, prosperous societies.

FEDN's experts serve as advisors for democratic transitions and provide technical assistance to reform initiatives around the world. Our members bring an economic reform perspective to international democracy forums and share their experiences in championing the principles of free enterprise and democracy.

