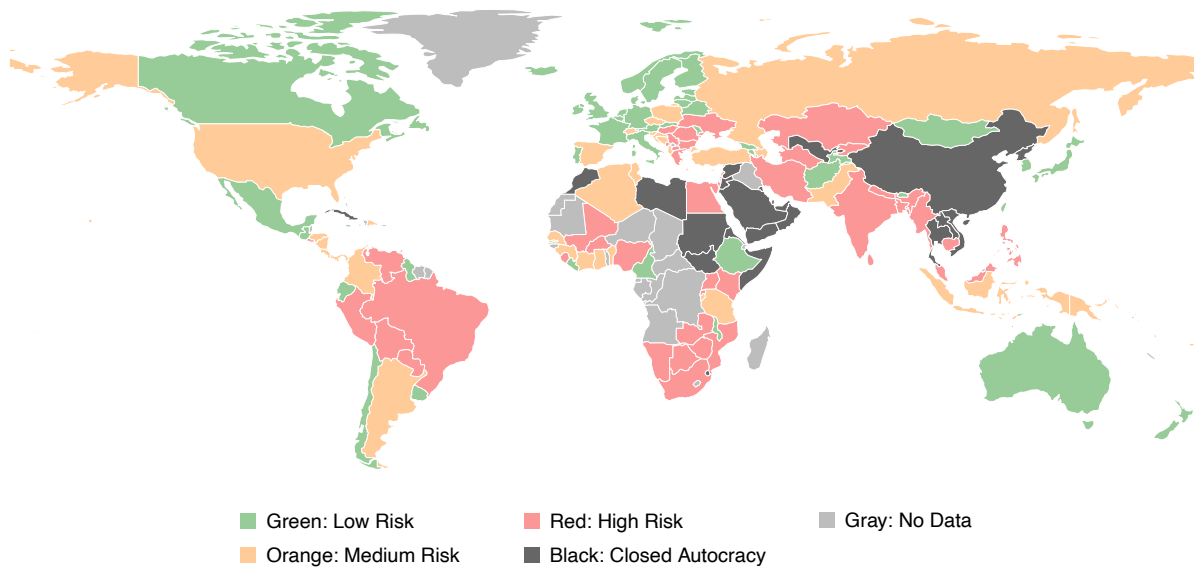


# Pandemic Backsliding: Does Covid-19 Put Democracy at Risk?

## KEY FINDINGS

- 48 countries have a high risk of democratic declines during the Covid-19 pandemic and 34 countries are at medium risk.
- The Pandemic Backsliding Risk Index tracks government responses to Covid-19 and uses V-Dem data to factor in the general risk of democratic declines.
- 47 countries are not at risk of pandemic backsliding demonstrating that responding to the pandemic is possible without jeopardizing democratic standards.

FIGURE 1: PANDEMIC BACKSLIDING RISK INDEX (APRIL 2020)



**On 30 March 2020, the Hungarian parliament ceded extensive powers to its populist Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, enabling his indefinite “rule by decree”<sup>1</sup>. The law further allows for prison sentences of up to five years for reporting about Covid-19. Lührmann and Rooney show that leaders frequently abuse emergency situations, by introducing excessive measures and/or by keeping emergency provisions in place after the situation improves.**

Such developments raise fears that Covid-19 is infecting democracy itself. This is even more alarming in the context of a recent global democratic

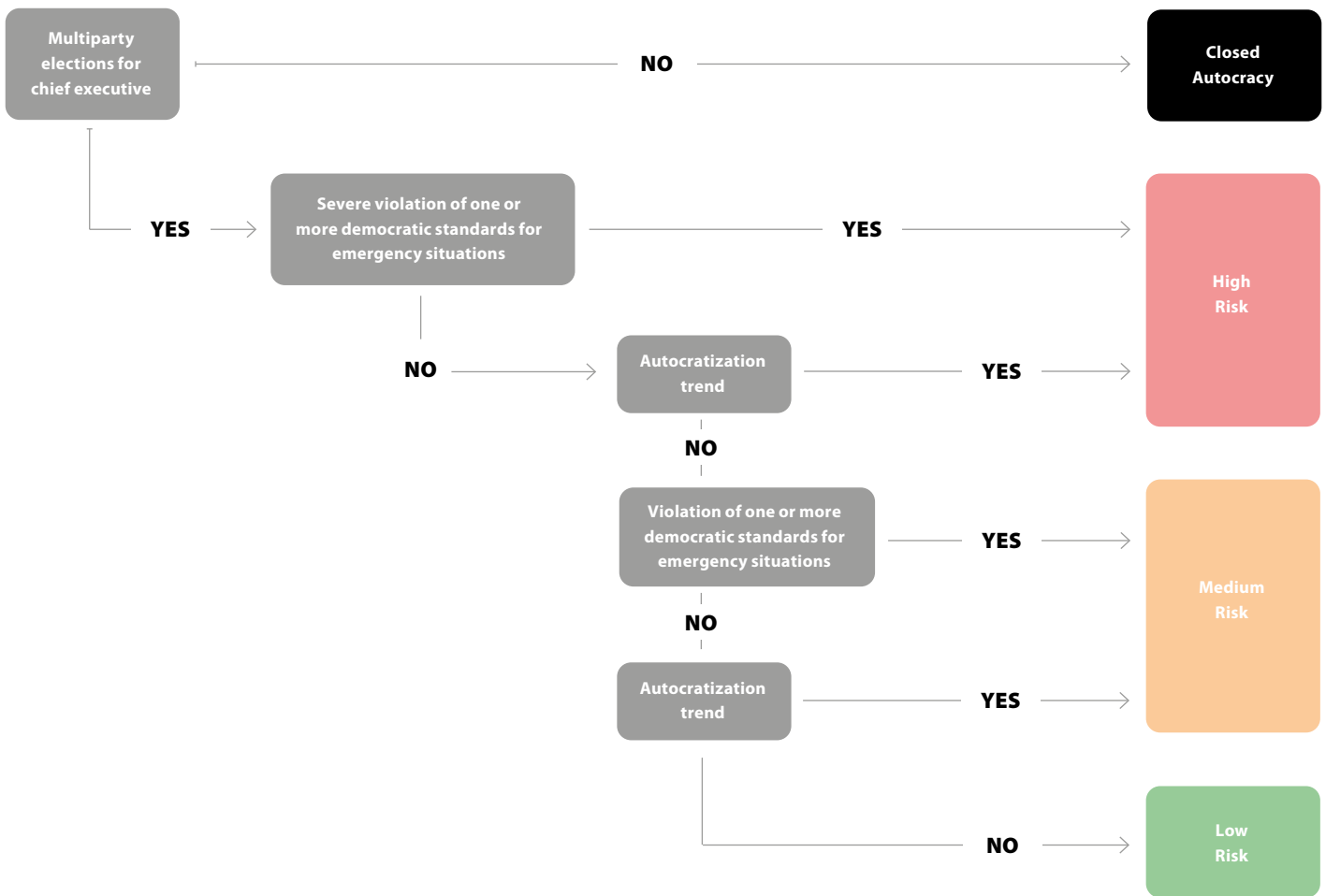
recession. According to our annual Democracy Report at the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), one-third of the world’s population now lives in countries where democracy is in decline, and for the first time in two decades, the majority of countries in the world are autocracies.<sup>2</sup>

Our research shows that government responses to the coronavirus pandemic may accelerate these anti-democratic trends. To track the risk of decline in democracy during the pandemic, we constructed the Pandemic Backsliding Risk Index using data compiled by nearly 30 scholars in early April.<sup>3</sup>

1. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/hungarian-parliament-hands-orban-power-to-rule-unchecked/2020/03/30/cc5135f6-7293-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/hungarian-parliament-hands-orban-power-to-rule-unchecked/2020/03/30/cc5135f6-7293-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc_story.html)

2. Lührmann et al. (2020).  
3. Edgell et al (2020).

**FIGURE 2: PANDEMIC BACKSLIDING RISK INDEX CODING SCHEME**



Note: We identify whether a country holds multiparty elections for the head of the executive using the Regimes of the World measure (Lührmann et al. 2017). The following nine criteria indicate a violation of democratic standards for emergency procedures: Expansion of executive power without sunset clause and oversight; Discriminatory measures; Derogation of non-derogable rights (ICCPR); Restrictions of media freedom; Punishments for violating these restrictions; Limitations of electoral freedom and fairness; Disproportionate limitations of the role of the legislature;

Disproportionate limitations of judicial oversight and Arbitrary and abusive enforcement (Edgell et al 2020). If one (or more) of them is fully fulfilled, this constitutes a necessary condition for a "high risk" of pandemic backsliding. If one (or more) applies to some extent, this is grounds for a "medium risk". Further, we identify an already ongoing, substantial autocratization trend in 2019 based on the procedure described in the V-Dem Democracy Report 2020 (Lührmann et al. 2020).

According to our data, 48 countries (red) have a high risk of pandemic backsliding and 34 others (orange) are at medium risk (Figure 2). Another 25 countries (black) are already closed autocracies, limiting the space for further substantial backsliding.<sup>4</sup>

The good news: addressing Covid-19 is possible while safeguarding democratic institutions. Forty-seven governments (green) have introduced emergency measures that are not likely to pose a threat to democratic standards in the long-run. Democracies like Germany, South Korea, and Taiwan have a good track record in containing the deadly impact of the pandemic. By observing a number of key principles, we can ensure that democracy continues to work during Covid-19.

## Constructing the Pandemic Backsliding Risk Index

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project provides the most comprehensive dataset on democratic institutions and practices based on a yearly survey of over 3,000 country experts.<sup>5</sup> To construct the Pandemic Backsliding Risk Index, we utilized the V-Dem network to collect data on governments' responses to Covid-19 in 142 countries, combining this with existing V-Dem data on democracy and freedom.

For democracy to work, a range of institutions and freedoms need to be in place. If any of these become compromised, democracy is at

4. For a definition of closed autocracies see Lührmann et al. (2018)

5. Coppedge et al. (2020).

risk. That's why we take the maximum level of risk to democracy across 9 indicators of government responses to Covid-19. If any response includes a severe violation of democratic standards for emergency situations, the entire country is rated "red" for a high risk of pandemic backsliding (Figure 1). The same applies for some violations of such standards in the case of "orange" or medium risk countries.

Additionally, using V-Dem data, we identify 26 countries undergoing substantial democratic decline – autocratization – prior to the pandemic, including the U.S., Poland, Turkey, and Czech Republic.<sup>6</sup> For these countries, the "immune system" of liberal-democratic institutions is already compromised, making them especially vulnerable to executive abuses during a national emergency.

We use the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) to identify such countries. The LDI takes into account the free and fairness of elections, rule of law, oversight of the executive, and the protection of civil liberties. We rate countries one level higher on the Pandemic Backsliding Risk Index if the LDI has substantially declined during the last 10 years (Figure 2).

## Establishing Democratic Standards for Emergency Situations

To preserve democracy during a crisis, government responses must be "proportionate, necessary and non-discriminatory."<sup>7</sup> Emergency measures may alter democratic institutions, rights, and proceedings only within certain boundaries. Therefore, countries are rated as "green" only if all indicators for government responses pose a low risk of pandemic backsliding and the country is not already in democratic decline (Figure 2).

For example, while responses to Covid-19 may ensure physical distance by restricting freedom of movement and assembly, they may not touch certain fundamental rights and should not be discriminatory.<sup>8</sup> If they do, we rank the country as high risk. We do the same if a government uses emergency measures to significantly limit media freedom, because these are not necessary to combat Covid-19.

## No Absolute Powers for Executives During Emergencies

Even during an emergency, checks and balances are fundamental to safeguard democracy. While enhanced executive decision-making on narrowly Covid-19 related issues might help countries respond efficiently, vaguely formulated laws governing rule by decree may be abused. Such circumstances produce a medium risk for pandemic backsliding. The indefinite suspension of the legislature – as in India<sup>9</sup> or as

recently suggested by President Trump<sup>10</sup> – constitutes a high risk of pandemic backsliding. A similar logic applies for the High Court.

Likewise, it is considered best practice that emergency provisions have a fixed time limit and are lifted when the situation improves. We consider a country at medium risk if no such sunset clause exists and the legislature or sub-national states cannot force the executive to relinquish expanded powers.

Some emergency measures – like curfews or lockdowns – give security forces extensive enforcement powers. In Kenya, police have killed at least 12 people while enforcing curfews,<sup>11</sup> including 13-year-old Yassin Hussein Moyo while he was on his balcony.<sup>12</sup> In India, migrant workers are sprayed with harsh chemicals.<sup>13</sup> As security forces engage in disproportionate violence, the risk of pandemic backsliding increases.

## Reinventing Democratic Processes During the Pandemic

In countries with a medium or high risk of pandemic backsliding, democratic survival depends on a vigilant civil society that can influence and monitor governments. Now that our time-tested ways of organizing democracy are on hold, we must develop new mechanisms of accountability that match the requirements of the pandemic. As the German constitutional court ruled, limited forms of public protest should remain legal, so long as they comply with distancing guidelines.<sup>14</sup>

To facilitate such democratic processes, it is vital that the legislature and courts continue their work representing citizens' interests. In times where large gatherings are harmful, creative alternative solutions are possible.<sup>15</sup> Twenty-nine legislatures have introduced remote procedures and 18 legislatures now meet in a smaller composition.

Where physical distancing during campaigns and voting are impractical or public concerns will drive low voter turnout, it might make sense to postpone elections as has happened for parliament in Ethiopia and Sri Lanka and 15 state primaries in the U.S.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, unnecessary restrictions on campaigns and voting undermines democracy.

We therefore do not count the postponement of elections as pandemic backsliding risk per se. Decisions about when and how to hold elections should carefully weigh the importance of public health and democracy, while also incorporating innovative solutions like remote voting and campaigning. These must ensure a level playing field for opposition candidates – otherwise elections in the time of Covid-19 may enhance the risk of pandemic backsliding.

6. Lührmann et al. (2020).

7. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25722&LangID=E>

8. Ellena and Shein (2020).

9. [https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-outbreak-03-23-20-intl-hnk/h\\_9ca1e0e579b25b920f6d3f291a515986](https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-outbreak-03-23-20-intl-hnk/h_9ca1e0e579b25b920f6d3f291a515986)

10. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/04/16/adjourn-congress-trump-constitution/>

11. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/kenya-coronavirus-curfew-crackdown-death-toll/2020/04/15/740a8c4e-79be-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/kenya-coronavirus-curfew-crackdown-death-toll/2020/04/15/740a8c4e-79be-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html)

12. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/kenyan-police-shot-dead-a-teenager->

[on-his-balcony-during-a-coronavirus-curfew-crackdown/2020/03/31/6344c70e-7350-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/kenyan-police-shot-dead-a-teenager-on-his-balcony-during-a-coronavirus-curfew-crackdown/2020/03/31/6344c70e-7350-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc_story.html)

13. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/01/extreme-coronavirus-lockdown-controls-raise-fears-for-worlds-poorest>

14. <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/corona-demonstrationsrecht-101.html>

15. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/06/how-will-coronavirus-reshape-democracy-and-governance-globally-pub-81470>

16. <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Policy makers have a variety of options at hand to ensure that democracy remains vital during the Covid-19 crisis including sunset clauses for emergency powers, a continued role for legislatures and the high court, and ensuring a safe space for civil society.
- The Pandemic Backsliding Risk Index identifies those countries, where international and national pressure is particularly needed to prevent lasting damage to democracy during the Covid-19 crisis.
- As the pandemic is likely to constrain public interactions for a while, civil society and state institutions need to develop innovative ways for political participation compatible with physical distancing rules.

## REFERENCES

- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, M. Steven Fish, Adam Glynn, Allen Hicken, Anna Lührmann, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Steven Wilson, Agnes Cornell, Nazifa Alizada, Lisa Gastaldi, Haakon Gjerløw, Garry Hindle, Nina Ilchenko, Laura Maxwell, Valeriya Mechkova, Juraj Medzihorsky, Johannes von Römer, Aksel Sundström, Eitan Tzelgov, Yi-ting Wang, Tore Wig, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2020. *V-Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v10*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds20>.
- Edgell, Amanda B., Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Abdal-hadi Alijla, Vanessa Alexandra Boese, Tiago Fernandes, Adea Gafuri, Dominik Hirndorf, Christopher Howell, Nina Ilchenko, Yuko Kasuya, Jean Lachapelle, Juraj Medzihorsky, Asma Shakir Khawaja, Carlos Shenga, Medet Tiulegenov, Hans H. Tung, Matthew Charles Wilson and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2020. *Democracy and Freedom During Covid-19*, Version 1.0. V-Dem Institute. <https://www.v-dem.net/en/our-work/research-projects/pandemic-backsliding/>
- Ellena, Katherine and Erica Shein. 2020. *Emergency Powers and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Protecting Democratic Guardrails*. IFES. <https://www.ifes.org/news/emergency-powers-and-covid-19-pandemic-protecting-democratic-guardrails>
- Lührmann, Anna and Bryan Rooney. Forthcoming. Autocratization by Decree: States of Emergency and Democratic Decline. *Comparative Politics*. (also published as V-Dem Working Paper 85, 2nd edition). [https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer\\_public/31/1d/311d5d45-8747-45a4-b46f-37aa7ad8a7e8/wp\\_85.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/31/1d/311d5d45-8747-45a4-b46f-37aa7ad8a7e8/wp_85.pdf)
- Lührmann, Anna, Seraphine Maerz, Sandra Grahn, Lisa Gastaldi, Sebastian Hellmeier, Nazifa Alizada, Garry Hindle, Staffan I. Lindberg. 2020. V-Dem Democracy Report 2020. Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows. *V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg*. [https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer\\_public/f0/5d/f05d46d8-626f-4b20-8e4e-53d4b134bfcb/democracy\\_report\\_2020\\_low.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/f0/5d/f05d46d8-626f-4b20-8e4e-53d4b134bfcb/democracy_report_2020_low.pdf)
- Lührmann, Anna, Tannenberg, Markus, Lindberg, Staffan I. 2018. Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes. *Politics and Governance* 6(1)

## ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 19 staff, and a project team across the world with 6 Principal Investigators, 14 Project Managers, 30 Regional Managers, 170 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and 3,000 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest ever social science research-oriented data collection programs.



Department of Political Science  
University of Gothenburg  
Sprängkullsgatan 19, PO 711  
SE 405 30 Gothenburg Sweden  
contact@v-dem.net  
+46 (0) 31 786 30 43  
www.v-dem.net  
www.facebook.com/vdem institute  
www.twitter.com/vdem institute  
www.linkedin.com/company/vdem institute