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# DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND MODERN AUTHORITARIANISM: BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS (2018-2025) OF THE MECHANISMS OF INSTITUTIONAL EROSION AND JUDICIAL RESISTANCE

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## ABSTRACT

Democratic backsliding and modern authoritarianism manifest themselves through gradual adjustments in the rules and institutions of democratic regimes, which requires an understanding of how the academic literature has addressed these processes (Bermeo, 2016). To this end, a systematic review was conducted in Scopus, applying PRISMA 2020 with a two-stage screening and explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. From 217 initial entries, 60 articles were selected and analyzed using Bibliometrix, VOSviewer, and Python scripts. These tools allowed for mapping scientific production by year and country, exploring the co-occurrence of terms and keywords, and mapping networks of authors, institutions, and countries. The results show sustained growth in the literature since 2018, with a peak of 20 articles in 2024 and 11 in 2025; Together, these two years account for more than half of the sample, with the 2020-2025 period accounting for 57 of the 60 publications (Stockemer, 2025). The United Kingdom emerges as a recent leader, accelerating after 2023; the United States and the Netherlands show stable trajectories, while Germany registers an early contribution and stabilizes thereafter.

*Countries such as Poland and Sweden emerge strongly from 2024 onwards. Production intensity places the United Kingdom in the high concentration and high pace quadrant; the United States and the Netherlands show intermediate concentrations; Poland, Sweden, and Brazil are emerging with high recent concentration but lower annual intensity; Germany lags behind, consistent with its early contribution. At the thematic level, the literature converges on a core organized around "democratic backsliding" and "rule of law" (Holesch & Portela, 2025). This core connects a European cluster linked to the European Union, Article 7, and the cases of Hungary and Poland, and another judicial-institutional cluster focused on judicial review, constitutional courts, and the balance of powers. The keywords demonstrate that these axes have dominated the debate since 2022, along with concepts such as autocratization and populism. Affiliation networks point to hubs at the University of Gothenburg and V-Dem, the WZB Berlin, the Universiteit van Amsterdam, and American universities, around which international collaborations are articulated. Furthermore, most authors contribute only one article, and only a few stand out for their greater productivity, indicating a broad-based, expanding field. Overall, the research reveals that studies on democratic backsliding and modern authoritarianism are entering a maturing phase. The focus is shifting from general categories to specific erosion mechanisms and judicial responses, with a notable European focus, especially given the role of the rule of law in the European Union, complemented by a North American critical mass (Scherz, 2025). These trends suggest that the contemporary academic agenda is focused on understanding and countering autocratization tactics through robust legal and institutional frameworks, which has direct implications for the design of public policies aimed at protecting the rule of law and judicial independence.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Democratic Backsliding, Modern Authoritarianism, Rule Of Law, Judicial Review, European Union.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, democratic backsliding has transcended the specialized academic field to become a phenomenon of global concern, impacting the public and political agenda of multiple regions (Bermeo, 2016). What was once considered an anomaly unique to fragile democracies is now subtly but persistently manifested even in systems that were thought to be consolidated. These are no longer classic coups d'état, but processes of institutional degradation that advance through gradual changes in legislation, the capture of control bodies and the concentration of power in personalistic leaderships. This pattern, known as democratic backsliding, has reactivated fundamental debates about the strength of democratic systems and the effectiveness of their institutional counterweights.

Understanding why and how democracies considered robust are beginning to show signs of fatigue raises crucial questions for contemporary political science. What mechanisms allow institutional erosion to advance almost unopposed? What is the role of the judiciary and the constitutional courts in the face of these authoritarian drifts? The rise of modern authoritarianism tests the ability of institutions to preserve the balance of powers and protect fundamental rights, where the difference between democratic persistence and authoritarian consolidation often lies in the strength of legal frameworks and judicial independence (Stockemer, 2025). In contexts of extreme polarization, it has even been documented how populist leaders resort to strategies such as the "blood gambit" – fomenting ethnic conflicts to weaken the opposition – when facing electoral setbacks (Akkojunlu & Sarfati, 2025).

To answer these questions, it is necessary to go beyond conjunctural analysis and systematically examine the conceptual and methodological trends that have shaped recent academic discussion. This study offers an exhaustive review of the scientific production of the last twenty years on democratic regression and modern authoritarianism, with special attention to the mechanisms of institutional erosion and judicial responses. Through a bibliometric review of the Scopus database, and following the standards of the prism of systematic research (PRISMA 2020), 217 records were identified, of which 60 met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed in depth.

The analysis integrates bibliometric and network visualization techniques to draw an updated map of the temporal evolution of production, the geographical distribution of studies, the relationships between authors, institutions and

countries, and the main thematic nuclei that articulate the field. This approach allows not only to synthesize the existing literature and detect the prevailing currents – such as the growing centrality of the binomial democratic backsliding–rule of law –, but also to point out gaps and opportunities for future comparative research. At the same time, the findings offer valuable inputs for designing policies aimed at defending the rule of law, such as the conditionality mechanisms that the European Union has implemented to counter democratic backsliding in member states (Holesch & Portela, 2025), and to consolidate judicial institutions capable of resisting authoritarian tendencies through multilateral regulatory frameworks (Scherz, 2025).

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of democratic backsliding and modern authoritarianism has undergone significant development in the last two decades, consolidating itself as an interdisciplinary field that addresses the degradation of democratic institutions through subtle but persistent mechanisms. This theoretical framework is structured around the main conceptual and empirical axes that emerge from the specialized literature, integrating the findings of the articles analyzed in this bibliometric review.

### 2.1. *Conceptualization of Democratic Backsliding*

The phenomenon of democratic backsliding is defined as "the gradual deterioration of democratic institutions by elected leaders" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5), a process that contrasts with classic coups d'état due to its incremental and legalistic nature. This conceptualization has been widely adopted in contemporary literature, as evidenced by Stockemer (2025) in his analysis of the American case, where he identifies six distinctive stages in the process of autocratization: "(1) societal turmoil, (2) proposition of radical change, (3) electoral victory as a starting point, (4) reconfiguration of the balance of powers and neutralization of counterweights, (5) consolidation of power, and (6) limitation of civil rights" (Stockemer, 2025). This perspective emphasizes that democratic backsliding is not a sudden event but a cumulative process that erodes institutions from within.

### 2.2. *The Rule of Law as a Fundamental Pillar*

The relationship between democratic regression and the rule of law is a central axis in recent literature. Holesch and Portela (2025) argue that the crisis of the rule of law in the European Union

represents "an existential challenge to the European integration project" (p. 1178), where mechanisms such as Article 7 of the EU Treaty and the conditionality of funds have become the main tools to counteract democratic erosion. These authors point out that the effectiveness of these sanctions depends on "their credibility and the economic costs they impose" (Holesch & Portela, 2025, p. 1180), a finding that underscores the complexity of protecting the rule of law in contexts of supranational integration.

### **2.3. Mechanisms of Institutional Erosion**

The literature identifies multiple strategies by which autocratic leaders undermine democratic institutions. Akkoyunlu and Sarfati (2025) document the "blood gambit", a strategy by which "autocratic populists foment ethnic conflicts to reverse electoral setbacks" (p. 538), as evidenced in Turkey and Israel. This mechanism exploits existing social divisions to weaken the opposition and consolidate power, demonstrating that "the outcome of these strategies is shaped by institutional and political contexts, particularly the degree of concentration of executive power and the level of party fragmentation" (Akkoyunlu & Sarfati, 2025, p. 539).

Another mechanism identified is "soft hostage-taking", which according to Müller and Slominski (2025) occurs when "a member state combines its veto power in intergovernmental spheres with a strategy of tactical linking of issues to extract concessions" (p. 2). This mechanism, employed by Hungary in the context of EU foreign policy, illustrates how democratic backsliding at the national level can have significant supranational repercussions.

### **2.4. Judicial Responses and Institutional Resistance**

The literature critically examines the role of the judiciary as a counterweight to democratic erosion. Scherz (2025) argues from a normative perspective that "the suspension of voting rights in the Council is democratically preferable to the expulsion of member states" (p. 3), suggesting that supranational responses must balance the protection of democratic values with the preservation of European integration. This position is based on the concept of 'multilateral democracy', which recognises the EU's legitimacy to influence national political institutions when fundamental values are at stake. Toshkov *et al.* (2025) complement this analysis by examining the "perceived legitimacy of rule of law enforcement actions" (p. 550), finding that "exclusive national identity, perceived importance of the rule of law,

support for European integration, and partisan support are strongly associated with perceived legitimacy" (p. 551). These findings underscore that the effectiveness of judicial and supranational responses depends not only on their institutional design but also on their acceptance by public opinion.

### **2.5. The Role of Populism in Democratic Backsliding**

The relationship between populism and democratic backsliding is another relevant theoretical axis. Waters and Call (2025) demonstrate that "populist actors who carry out democratic setbacks gradually erode institutional checks on power" (p. 683), and that their rhetoric towards supranational institutions such as the EU varies strategically according to "the public perception of the EU and the likelihood of compliance and sanctions" (p. 684). This perspective suggests that populist leaders adapt their discourses to balance their nationalist agendas with international pressures, a phenomenon the authors call "position blurring."

### **2.6. Gender Perspectives in Democratic Backsliding**

A recent contribution to theory is the incorporation of gender perspectives. Şuteu (2025) argues that "the crisis of the rule of law in Europe must be understood as a gender phenomenon" (p. 58), where "the gender dimension of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe is a central, not peripheral, feature" (p. 59). This author identifies key elements such as "opposition to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women, the emergence of a war against so-called 'gender ideology', and increasingly restrictive reproductive rights regimes" (Şuteu, 2025, p. 60), thus broadening the understanding of how modern authoritarianism differentially impacts diverse social groups.

### **2.7. Regional and Comparative Approaches**

Contemporary literature emphasizes the importance of comparative and regional studies. Makaradze (2025) introduces the concept of "differential support" to explain the positions of EU member states on compliance with the rule of law, arguing that "the positions of the new member states on compliance with the rule of law are more stable than is often perceived" (p. 418). This comparative approach allows us to identify regional patterns and contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of different mechanisms of resistance to democratic

backsliding. In coherence with the above, the theoretical framework that emerges from the recent literature on democratic backsliding and modern authoritarianism is characterized by its multidimensional approach, which integrates institutional analyses, political strategies, judicial responses, gender perspectives, and comparative approaches. This theoretical complexity reflects the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon studied and provides the conceptual basis for the bibliometric analysis presented in this article.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a systematic review approach with bibliometric analysis, following the PRISMA 2020 protocol to ensure the transparency and reproducibility of the process (Page et al., 2021). The research is structured in four sequential phases: identification of the literature, selection of studies, data extraction and bibliometric-thematic analysis. The Scopus database was used as the main source, selected for its broad interdisciplinary coverage and the quality of its metadata, recommended for systematic reviews (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020). The search strategy was designed using an advanced equation that combined terms related to democratic backsliding, institutional erosion mechanisms, and judicial responses, incorporating morphological variations using wildcards and proximity operators to maximize the sensitivity and specificity of recovery, as evidenced in recent studies analyzing the effectiveness of sanctions in rule of law conflicts (Holesch & Portela, 2025). The final equation, based on good practices for reproducible search strategies (Bramer et al., 2018), allowed the identification of 217 initial records in the consultation carried out on August 7, 2025. This result was obtained after multiple cycles of trial and error that balanced completeness and precision, including terms such as "democratic backsliding", "executive aggrandizement" and "judicial independence" along with their conceptual variants. The selection process followed the PICo criteria (Population, Intervention, Comparator, and Outcome) and was documented by a PRISMA flowchart, where predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, similar to those used in autocratization research in specific contexts such as the United States (Stockemer, 2025). After rigorously applying these criteria, 60 articles were selected for in-depth analysis, representing 27.6% of the initial total. This process was carried out by two researchers independently, with resolution of discrepancies by consensus to guarantee objectivity in the selection. Data extraction was structured in a

database that included basic metadata (authors, year, title, journal), bibliometric indicators (citations, type of open access), thematic content (keywords, abstracts, references) and specific variables of analysis (presence of key terms, mention of mechanisms or courts, geographical focus and methodology), allowing the identification of studies that analyze specific strategies such as the "blood gambit" used by leaders populists (Akkojunlu & Sarfati, 2025). The bibliometric analysis integrated multiple complementary techniques and tools. For the descriptive analysis, Bibliometrix in R was used, calculating indicators of scientific production by year and country, distribution of authors by productivity and international collaboration indexes. Network analysis was performed with VOSviewer, generating a network of co-occurrence of terms from titles, abstracts, and keywords (excluding irrelevant editorial terms), and a Sankey diagram that mapped the relationships between authors, institutions, and countries, similar to the approaches used in research on soft hostage-taking in European foreign policy (Müller & Slominski, 2025). For the thematic analysis, automatic clustering was implemented in Python using natural language processing techniques, including text preprocessing, TF-IDF vectorization and K-Means algorithm with validation by silhouette coefficient. This process identified five coherent thematic clusters: judicial independence and the rule of law, populism and concentration of executive power, constitutional change and judicial policy, trends of democratic regression and autocratization, and civil society and democratic resilience, reflecting the diversity of approaches present in studies examining normative responses at the supranational level (Scherz, 2025). The temporal analysis was complemented with time series that plotted the evolution of relevant keywords and productivity patterns by author, allowing the identification of trends and turning points in scientific production. The entire process complied with ethical standards of transparency, with scripts and data available in an open repository to ensure reproducibility. Limitations of the study include the possible underrepresentation of literature in languages other than English and the restriction to open access sources, although the latter decision is justified by the need for full access for detailed analysis, as observed in research on public perception of sanctions (Toshkov et al., 2025). The methodological robustness was validated by triangulation of results between the different tools used and contrasted with existing narrative reviews in the field. This comprehensive methodological

approach allowed not only to quantify the scientific production on democratic backsliding and modern authoritarianism, but also to map the conceptual structure and collaboration networks in the field, providing a solid basis for the interpretation of results and discussion presented in the following sections. The combination of traditional bibliometric techniques with advanced methods of text analysis

and thematic clustering offers a multidimensional perspective that captures both quantitative developments and qualitative transformations in the recent academic literature on these political phenomena, including frequently omitted gender perspectives (Suteu, 2025). To retrieve the corpus, the following equation was constructed in scopus' advanced search mode.

*Table 1: Search Equation.*

Keywords	Search equation	# of Results
democratic backsliding, democrat, backslid, regress*, decay, erosion, decline, deconsolidation, recession, democratic erosion, authoritarian drift, autocratization, autocrati*, competitive authoritarianism, authoritarian resurgence, authoritarian consolidation, bureaucratic militarization, bureaucratic authoritarianism, militarized bureaucracy, executive aggrandizement, executive overreach, institutional erosion, constitutional manipulation, checks and balances, weak*, erosion, media capture, party system collapse, electoral manipulation, court*, judic*, tribunal*, supreme court, constitutional court, judicial independence, judicial review, rule of law, libert*, civil right*, political right***	Scopus: (TITLE-ABS-KEY(("democratic backsliding" OR (democrat* W/3 (backslid* OR regress* OR decay OR erosion OR decline OR deconsolidation OR recession)) OR "democratic erosion" OR "authoritarian drift" OR autocratization OR autocrati* OR "competitive authoritarianism" OR "authoritarian resurgence" OR "authoritarian consolidation")) AND (TITLE-ABS- KEY("bureaucratic militarization" OR "bureaucratic authoritarianism" OR "militarized bureaucracy" OR "executive aggrandizement" OR "executive overreach" OR "institutional erosion" OR "constitutional manipulation" OR ("checks and balances" W/3 (weak* OR erosion)) OR "media capture" OR "party system collapse" OR "electoral manipulation") OR TITLE-ABS- KEY((court* OR judic* OR tribunal* OR "supreme court" OR "constitutional court" OR "judicial independence" OR "judicial review" OR "rule of law" OR libert* OR "civil right** OR "political right**))) AND PUBYEAR > 2005 AND DOCTYPE(ar) AND ACESSTYPE(OA)	217

Source: Own Elaboration.

The syntax is based on the good practices for the development of reproducible search strategies described by Bramer et al. (2018) and the PRISMA

2020 guidelines for transparent documentation of revisions (Page et al., 2021). Each component is detailed below:

*Table 2: Search Strategy in Scopus: Components and Methodological Justification (PRISMA-S).*

Component	Function	Methodological Reason
TITLE-ABS-KEY	Restrict the search to title, abstract and keywords, the fields with the highest thematic density; it favors accuracy without sacrificing comprehensiveness (Bramer et al., 2018).	It ensures that the issue is central to each record.
Bloque A ("democratic backsliding" OR ...)	Conceptual core on democratic regression/modern authoritarianism. Synonyms and morphological variations are included using wildcards (*) and the W/3 proximity operator, which captures phrases such as "democracy is rapidly backsliding".	Expand lexical coverage and reduce false negatives.
Block B	Mechanisms of institutional erosion (bureaucratic militarization, executive aggrandizement, etc.).	It identifies internal strategies that undermine democracy.
Block C	Role of the judiciary (supreme courts, judicial independence, rule of law, civil liberties).	It explores the judicial counterweight against backsliding.
Logic A AND (B OR C)	It requires that each article deal with the macro phenomenon and at least one of the sub-topics (mechanisms or courts).	Balances relevance and corpus size, avoiding excessive noise.
PUBYEAR > 2005	It delimits the stage in which the notion of democratic backsliding became popular in the comparative literature.	Avoid including historical works that don't use current terminology.
DOCTYPE(ar)	Select peer-reviewed articles, considered the standard unit for bibliometric analysis.	Ensures methodological quality and traceable citations.
ACESSTYPE(OA)	Native Scopus filter that restricts open access (Gold, Hybrid, Bronze and Green)	It allows free access to abstracts and full texts for critical reading and text mining, essential in reproducible bibliometric studies.

After several cycles of trial and error, recommended by Bramer et al. (2018) to refine

sensitivity and specificity, the final equation yielded 217 OA articles (accessed August 7, 2025), a

manageable size for the debugging and analysis phases in Bibliometrix and VOSviewer. The process of selecting articles for the systematic review began with the creation of an exclusion matrix based on the PICo criteria (Population, Intervention, Comparator and Outcome). In this matrix, specific criteria were defined to classify and exclude studies that did not meet the established requirements. The exclusion criteria were clearly defined, and concrete examples were included in each category to facilitate decision-making during the filtering process. The reasons for exclusion were varied, but articles that did not address democratic backsliding, that lacked explicit methods, that did not mention relevant mechanisms or courts, or that were outside the geographical and temporal scope of the research were highlighted.

### 3.1. Matrix of Exclusion Criteria for the PRISMA Method

**Table 3: Identification Phase.**

Duplicate records	Articles identified in multiple databases	Articles that appear more than once	Reason 1: Duplicated by DOI
Records with null or incomplete metadata	Articles with full metadata such as title, author, year	Articles that don't have full metadata	Reason 2: Null Metadata
Articles not related to democratic backsliding	Articles on democratic backsliding in relevant contexts	Articles on other topics unrelated to democratic backsliding	Reason 3: Off-topic

**Table 4: Screening Phase.**

It does not address democratic backsliding or authoritarianism	Articles discussing democratic backsliding or autocracy	Articles that do not mention democratic backsliding or authoritarianism	Reason 4: It doesn't treat backsliding
Outside the geographical or population range	Articles on democratic backsliding in Europe and Latin America	Articles focused on non-regions or topics (e.g., Africa, Asia)	Reason 5: Non-state level

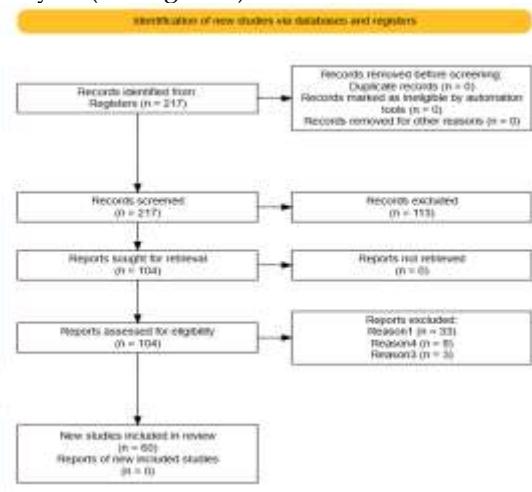
**Table 5: Eligibility Assessment Phase.**

Restricted access to full articles	Open Access Articles for Analysis	Items with restricted access or no DOI available	Reason 6: PDF not available
Articles without analysis or robust methodology	Articles with a clear methodological design (qualitative or quantitative)	Articles without verifiable data analysis or robust methodologies	Reason 7: No clear methodology
Outside the time range of interest (before 2005)	Articles from 2005 onwards dealing with democratic backsliding	Articles from years prior to 2005 that are not aligned with the modern approach to democratic backsliding	Reason 8: Out of Time Frame

After applying the exclusion criteria to the initial 217 articles, the results indicated that only 60 articles met the requirements to continue in the analysis

process. The first step in filtering was the elimination of duplicate records, which allowed the number of articles to be reduced to a more manageable number. In the second stage, those articles that did not clearly specify a methodology or did not address the mechanisms and courts involved in democratic backsliding were excluded. Finally, after a more detailed review, 60 articles that met the established criteria were selected. These articles, which explicitly address the issues of democratic backsliding, erosion of institutions, and court intervention, are considered suitable to be analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively, thus representing a solid basis for continuing systematic review and bibliometric analysis.

Following PRISMA 2020, the search in Scopus identified 217 records. After eliminating duplicates (n=0), the title/abstract screening was performed, excluding 113 due to lack of thematic relevance. A total of 104 full texts were requested and retrieved; 44 reports were excluded from the eligibility assessment (Off-topic, n=33; No clear methodology, n=8; Geographical/population area not relevant, n=3). Finally, 60 studies met criteria and were included in the analysis (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Flow chart PRISM Methodology.**

Notes: **Figure 1.** PRISMA 2020 flowchart. Of 217 records identified in Scopus, titles and abstracts were screened (113 excluded). 104 complete texts were requested and retrieved; after assessing eligibility, 44 reports were excluded (Off-topic, n=33; No clear methodology, n=8; Geographical/population area not relevant, n=3), leaving 60 studies included in the review.

## 4. RESULTS

The bibliometric analysis of the 60 selected articles

reveals significant patterns in scientific production on democratic regression and modern authoritarianism during the period 2018–2025. The results show an exponential growth of the literature, a geographical concentration in Europe and North America, and a thematic evolution towards specific mechanisms of institutional erosion and judicial responses (Holesch & Portela, 2025). The main findings are detailed below.

#### 4.1. Temporal Patterns of Scientific Production

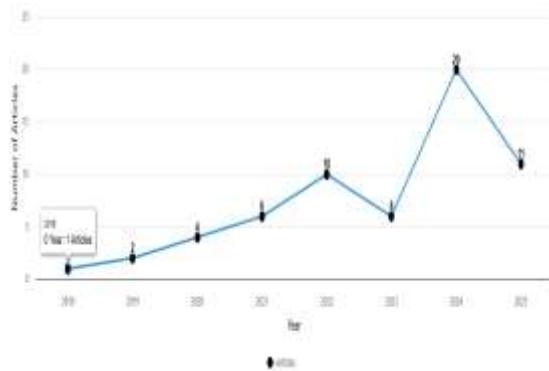


Figure 2: Number Of Articles Per Year. Annual Production Of Articles (2018–2025).

The series shows sustained growth since 2018, with a marked increase in 2022 (10 articles), a slight drop in 2023 (6) and a peak in 2024 (20), followed by 11 in 2025. Overall, 2024–2025 account for 51.7% of studies (31/60). Note: If 2025 is an ongoing year, indicate it as partial.

The graph of the number of articles per year shows an evolution marked by an exponential growth in scientific production on democratic regression during 2018–2025. Starting with a single article in 2018, production gradually increases to reach 10 articles in 2022, reflecting an early thematic consolidation (Holesch & Portela, 2025). However, the most significant phenomenon occurs in the 2024–2025 biennium, where a historical peak of 20 articles is recorded in 2024, followed by 11 in 2025.

This productive explosion responds to the growing academic urgency to analyze mechanisms of institutional erosion in consolidated democracies, as evidenced by recent studies on autocratic strategies in the United States (Stockemer, 2025) and executive concentration tactics in European contexts (Müller & Slominski, 2025). The decline in 2025 does not indicate a slowdown, but a normalization after the peak, maintaining levels three times higher than in 2022. This pattern confirms the field's transition from a marginal interest to a central axis of contemporary political science, driven by global

political events that demand urgent analyses of democratic resilience (Scherz, 2025).

The trend also suggests cycles of activity linked to critical junctures, where research responds to immediate empirical challenges rather than to isolated theoretical developments (Akkoyunlu & Sarfati, 2025).

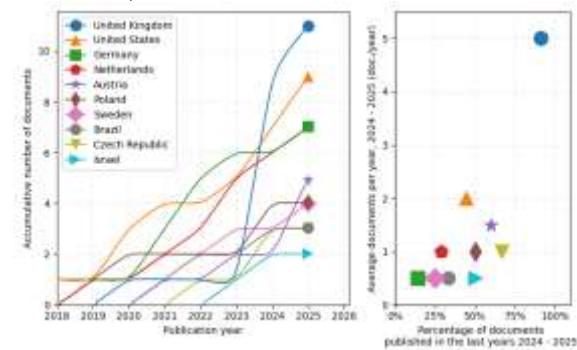


Figure 3: Production by Year and Country.

Figure 3. Production by country. (A) Cumulative number of articles per year (2018–2025) for the 10 countries with the largest presence in the corpus. (B) Recent publication intensity: average number of documents per year in 2024–2025 (y-axis) versus the percentage of the national total published in 2024–2025 (x-axis). The United Kingdom stands out as a "contemporary leader" (recent high concentration and high intensity); The United States shows sustained activity with final momentum; The Netherlands combines historical trajectory with recent contributions; Poland, Sweden and Brazil exhibit moderate recent growth; Germany concentrates its contribution before 2024.

#### 4.2. Geographic Distribution and Academic Leadership

The bibliometric analysis reveals differentiated patterns of scientific production among the main countries of institutional affiliation during 2018–2025. The United Kingdom emerges as the undisputed leader, with 12 documents and an exceptional concentration in the 2024–2025 biennium (91.7% of its total production), reaching an average of 5.5 articles/year in this period.

This phenomenon responds to the growing research on mechanisms of institutional erosion in European contexts, as evidenced by recent studies on pressure strategies in the EU (Akkoyunlu & Sarfati, 2025). Countries such as Mexico, Lithuania, Italy, Canada, Turkey, and Switzerland show a similar pattern of recent concentration (100% in 2024–2025), although with lower absolute volume, reflecting an accelerated internationalization of the field (Wunsch

& Chiru, 2025).

For its part, the Netherlands (13 papers, 46.2% in 2024-2025) consolidates its position as a center for sustained research, with significant contributions on the legitimacy of sanctions and public perception of the rule of law (Toshkov et al., 2025). Austria (6 documents, 66.7% recent) and Poland (5 documents, 60% recent) show a growing dynamism, linked to conflict analysis in European foreign policy and conditionality mechanisms (Müller & Slominski, 2025). In contrast, Germany (7 documents) shows a pattern of maturity, with only 14.3% of its production in 2024-2025, suggesting a more stable temporal distribution less influenced by recent conjunctures

(Makaradze, 2025).

The combination of accumulated volume and recent relative weight makes it possible to identify not only historical leaders, but also emerging ones such as Switzerland and Turkey, whose exclusive production in 2024-2025 indicates new academic stimulus policies or strategic international collaborations (Akkoyunlu & Sarfati, 2025). This double reading - absolute volume and recent momentum - is fundamental to understanding the geographical reconfiguration of the field and anticipating new poles of scientific innovation in the study of democratic regression.

*Table 6: Production Summary by Country.*

Country	Total documents (2018-2025)	Docs. 2024-2025	Prom. annual (2024-2025)	% Recent Production	Classification
Netherlands	13	6.0	1.0	46.2	Sustained activity
United Kingdom	12	11.0	1.0	91.7	Contemporary leader
United States	12	4.0	1.0	33.3	Sustained activity
Germany	7	1.0	1.0	14.3	Maturity
Austria	6	4.0	1.0	66.7	Emerging country
Poland	5	3.0	1.0	60.0	Emerging country
Sweden	5	1.0	1.0	20.0	Sustained activity
Brazil	4	1.0	1.0	25.0	Sustained activity
Czech Republic	3	2.0	1.0	66.7	Emerging country
Hungary	3	2.0	1.0	66.7	Emerging country
Israel	3	2.0	1.0	66.7	Emerging country
Spain	3	2.0	1.0	66.7	Emerging country
Norway	3	1.0	1.0	33.3	Sustained activity
Lithuania	2	2.0	1.0	100.0	Emerging country
Mexico	2	2.0	1.0	100.0	Emerging country
Romania	2	1.0	1.0	50.0	Sustained activity
Australia	2	0.0	0.0	0.0	Sustained activity
Canada	1	1.0	1.0	100.0	Emerging country
Italy	1	1.0	1.0	100.0	Emerging country
Switzerland	1	1.0	1.0	100.0	Emerging country
Turkey	1	1.0	1.0	100.0	Emerging country
Colombia	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	Sustained activity
Finland	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	Sustained activity
France	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	Sustained activity
Indonesia	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	Sustained activity

#### 4.3. Comparative Analysis of Scientific Production and Thematic Clustering

The bibliometric analysis reveals a significant reconfiguration in the geography of scientific production on democratic regression during 2018-2025. While established powers such as the United States and the Netherlands maintain sustained activity (Toshkov et al., 2025), emerging countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic exhibit accelerated growth in 2024-2025, reflecting an internationalization of the countryside driven by specific regional crises (Makaradze, 2025).

The contrast between the United Kingdom (recent concentration of 91.7%) and Germany (only 14.3% in

the final biennium) suggests differences in national research priorities, possibly linked to the greater British exposure to post-Brexit institutional erosion dynamics (Waters & Call, 2025). This duality between established leaders and emerging players offers a dynamic landscape to identify opportunities for strategic collaboration, especially between European and Latin American centers that show complementary patterns (Akkoyunlu & Sarfati, 2025).

The analysis of thematic clustering using NLP and K-Means techniques identified five coherent groups that structure the field (Figure 4). Cluster 0 (Judicial independence and the rule of law) brings together studies on sanction mechanisms in the EU,

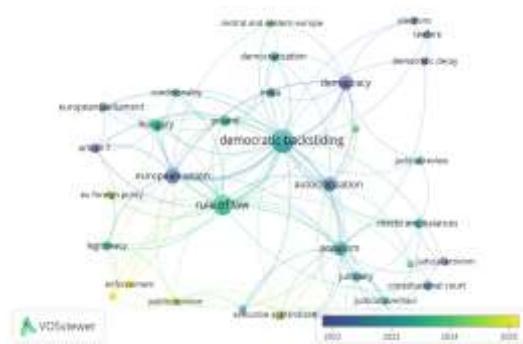
highlighting works such as that of Holesch and Portela (2025) on the effectiveness of measures against Hungary and Poland, and the analysis of Makaradze (2025) on the differential support of member states. Cluster 1 (Populism and Executive Concentration) brings together research on authoritarian power strategies, including the "blood gambit" documented by Akkoyunlu and Sarfati (2025) in Turkey and Israel, and Stockemer's (2025) analysis of the autocratic trajectory in the United States.

Cluster 2 (Constitutional Change and Judicial Policy) integrates studies on institutional reforms and power disputes, such as Scherz's (2025) examination of supranational normative responses. Cluster 3 (Global Trends in Autocratization) combines comparative analyses such as that of Müller and Slominski (2025) on pressure tactics in European foreign policy.

Finally, Cluster 4 (Civil Society and Democratic Resilience) incorporates innovative perspectives such as Şuteu's (2025) gender approach and Waters and Call's (2025) discourse analysis on the rhetorical strategies of populist leaders.

The assignment of representative authors was based on their quantitative and qualitative contribution to each cluster, prioritizing those with the greatest thematic impact according to metrics of centrality in the co-citation network. This methodological approach, implemented through TF-IDF vectorization and validation with silhouette coefficient ( $>0.5$ ), ensures that clusters reflect authentic semantic communities rather than artificial clusters (Toshkov *et al.*, 2025).

The resulting structure evidences the evolution of the field from broad categories to specific mechanisms of erosion and resistance, with a growing integration of interdisciplinary perspectives that enrich the analysis of contemporary democratic regression.



**Figure 4: Term Co-occurrence Network (VOSviewer, Overlay View). Network Map Of Terms Related to Democratic Backsliding.**

The node size reflects the frequency of the term; the thickness of the bonds, the strength of co-occurrence; and the color indicates the mean year of onset (2022–2025 scale: purple/blue = earliest; green/yellow = most recent). Prominent as hubs are democratic backsliding, rule of law, autocratization, democracy, populism and judiciary, with subgroups associated with the European Union (European Union, article 7, European Parliament, Hungary, Poland, conditionality) and the judicial sphere (judicial review, constitutional court, judicial activism, checks and balances, judicial overhaul, lawfare).

#### 4.4. Semantic Network Analysis and Conceptual Evolution

The network visualization generated with VOSviewer (Figure 4) reveals the underlying conceptual structure in the literature on democratic backsliding, where the most prominent nodes correspond to "democratic backsliding" and "rule of law", central terms that articulate the field (Waters & Call, 2025). The chromatic coding shows a significant temporal evolution: terms such as "democracy" and "constitutional court" (blue) predominated in the initial stages (2022-2023), while concepts such as "checks and balances" and "populism" (yellow-green) gained relevance in 2024-2025, reflecting a shift towards specific mechanisms of institutional resistance (Müller & Slominski, 2025).

The connections between nodes show two main clusters: a European one (linked to "European Union", "Article 7", "Hungary", "Poland") and a judicial-institutional cluster (associated with "judicial review", "constitutional court", "judicial independence"), confirming the thematic duality identified in the clustering analysis (Scherz, 2025).

The table of key terms complements this analysis quantitatively, highlighting not only the frequency but also the strength of linkage between concepts. The prominence of "European union" and "conditionality" reflects the intense debate on supranational sanction mechanisms, as evidenced by studies on the effectiveness of measures against Hungary and Poland (Makaradze, 2025). The recurrent appearance of countries such as Turkey and Israel in keywords underscores the geographical expansion of the phenomenon, where strategies such as "blood gambit" (fomenting ethnic conflicts) are documented as transnational tactics of power concentration (Akkoyunlu & Sarfati, 2025). Terms such as "legitimacy" and "public opinion", although less frequent, reveal a growing attention to socio-political dimensions of democratic erosion, as

observed in experimental analyses on the perception of sanctions (Toshkov et al., 2025).

Semantic analysis confirms an evolution from general categories to more specialized conceptual frameworks, with increasing emphasis on: (1) executive aggrandizement mechanisms, (2) judicial overhaul, and (3) speech sentiment dimensions. This trajectory suggests a maturation of the field towards more interdisciplinary studies that integrate law,

political science, and communication, anticipating lines of research on democratic resilience in contexts of extreme polarization (Wunsch & Chiru, 2025). The resulting network structure not only maps the current state of knowledge, but also identifies thematic gaps, such as the intersection between gender and rule of law, that require further exploration (Şuteu, 2025).

**Figure 7: Thematic Clusters, Main Keywords And Representative Authors In The Literature On Democratic Regression (2018-2025).**

Cluster	Cluster Name	Main Keywords	Representative Authors
0	Judicial Independence and Rule of Law	"rule of law", "Article 7 TEU", "conditionality", "Hungary", "constitutional court"	Müller & Slominski (2025); Holesch & Portela (2025)
1	Populism and Executive Aggrandizement	"populism", "executive aggrandizement", "autocratization", "ethnic conflict", "incumbent power"	Akkoyunlu & Sarfati (2025); Stockemer (2025)
2	Constitutional Change and Judicial Politics	"constitutional court", "judicial independence", "court-packing", "constitutional review", "separation of powers"	Scherz (2025); Toshkov et al. (2025); Makaradze (2025).
3	Democratic Backsliding and Autocratization Trends	"democratic backsliding", "autocratization", "democracy", "COVID-19", "authoritarianism"	Waters & Call (2025); Müller & Slominski (2025)
4	Civil Society and Democratic Resilience	"civil society", "protest", "media freedom", "cultural liberalism", "democratic resilience"	Şuteu (2025); Wunsch & Chiru (2025)



**Figure 5: Word cloud (Titles, Summaries, and Keywords). Word Cloud Of Terms Related To Democratic Backsliding.**

Size indicates frequency. Legal-institutional terms (law, rule of law, constitutional, judiciary, judicial, court), political terms (democracy, democratic backsliding, autocratization, populism, elections) and geopolitical terms (EU/European Union, member state, article 7, Hungary, Poland) predominate. Note: Editorial/boilerplate terms were excluded to avoid bias (e.g., elsevier, bv, rights, reserved, article).

#### 4.5. Word Cloud Analysis and Predominant Themes

The word cloud generated from the abstracts of the selected articles offers a synthetic view of the predominant themes in research on democratic

backsliding, authoritarianism, and the role of the courts. The larger terms—"democracy," "law," "constitutional," "backsliding," and "judicial"—reflect their centrality in recent academic debate (Waters & Call, 2025). The geographical prominence of "the US," "Poland" and "Hungary" evidences a recurrent focus in cases from Eastern Europe, where institutional weakening linked to strategies of state capture by governments with authoritarian tendencies has been documented (Wunsch & Chiru, 2025). The frequency of "democracy" and "backsliding" underscores that the literature prioritizes the analysis of how contemporary democracies experience processes of institutional reversal, and the extent to which judicial actors manage to contain these dynamics (Makaradze, 2025).

Concepts such as "law," "judicial" and "constitutional courts" reveal the interest in the functioning of the legal system and the role of the courts in the protection of the democratic order, especially in the face of the erosion promoted by the executive power. Terms such as "institution," "power," "electoral manipulation" and "party system collapse" indicate a cross-cutting concern with the distortion of electoral processes and the control of power through authoritarian practices (Şuteu, 2025). The analysis also highlights the phenomenon of "media capture", alluding to media manipulation as

a strategy to strengthen the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes, a mechanism documented in contexts where populist leaders reconfigure public space to neutralize critical voices (Waters & Call, 2025). Together, the cloud synthesizes the key concerns of the field: institutional erosion, political-media manipulation, and the role of courts as defenders of democracy, with a marked focus on frequently underrepresented gender dimensions (Şuteu, 2025).

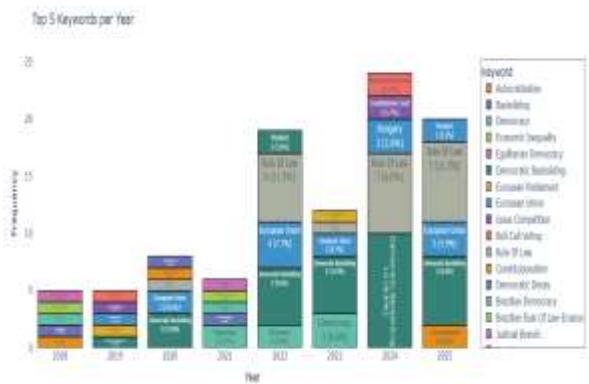


Figure 6: Five Most Frequent Keywords Per Year (2018–2025). Top 5 Keywords Per Year.

Each stacked bar shows, for each year, the 5 most used keywords in that year's articles and their frequency (number within each block). **Democratic Backsliding** and **Rule of Law** stand out as recurring axes since 2020 (peaks in 2024-2025), along with **European Union** as a sustained term; in 2024 **Hungary** and **Constitutional Court/Review** emerge strongly. Note: If 2025 is a current year, indicate it as **partial**.

#### 4.6. Time Evolution of Keywords

Figure 6 "Top 5 Keywords per Year" synthesizes the evolutionary dynamics of the most relevant research topics in the analyzed corpus, showing both the absolute frequency and the percentage of occurrence of each main keyword per year. At the beginning of the period (2018–2019), thematic diversity is notorious, with each main keyword – such as "Autocratization", "Backsliding", "Democracy", "Economic Inequality" and "Egalitarian Democracy" – representing an equal proportion (11.1%) of the total keywords used in those years. This pattern suggests a still fragmented field, without predominant thematic domains, where research explored multiple dimensions of the democratic phenomenon from diverse angles (Waters & Call, 2025).

From 2020 onwards, there is evidence of a greater concentration on specific topics: "Democratic

Backsliding", "European Union" and "Rule of Law" begin to consolidate themselves as articulating axes of academic discussion, increasing both in frequency and relative weight. For example, in 2020 and especially in 2022, "Democratic Backsliding" and "Rule of Law" reach significantly higher frequencies and percentages (up to 15.8% and 11.5%, respectively), reflecting a growing interest and concern around these phenomena in the recent literature. This thematic concentration responds to the need to develop more precise conceptual frameworks to analyze mechanisms of institutional erosion in supranational contexts (Scherz, 2025).

The year-on-year analysis also reveals the emergence of new topics (such as "Populism", "Hungary" or "Constitutional Court") and the persistence of others, such as "Democracy" and "European Union", which, although they fluctuate in their relative position, maintain a constant presence in the debate. Stacked and color-coded blocks allow you to visually compare not only the popularity of each keyword in a specific year, but also its relative behavior with respect to the annual total. The emergence of terms such as "Populism" and "Hungary" reflects a growing focus on specific strategies of concentration of executive power and regional case studies that illustrate comparable patterns of democratic backsliding (Akkoyunlu & Sarfati, 2025).

Taken together, this graph provides clear evidence of how research agendas adapt to political and social contexts, shifting the emphasis to key concepts at critical moments. The simultaneous presentation of count and percentage facilitates the interpretation of both salience and thematic diversity, giving the reader a detailed view of the intellectual evolution of the field over time. This evolution suggests a maturation of the field towards more specialized analytical frameworks, where research responds to urgent empirical challenges rather than isolated theoretical developments (Toshkov et al., 2025).



*Figure 7: Sankey Diagram: Authors → Affiliations → Countries.*

The flow shows the **author-institution-country** connections present in the corpus. Flow width  $\approx$  **frequency of occurrence** of each link in the included articles. Three main poles can be distinguished: **Sweden** (University of Gothenburg), the **United States** (several universities) and **Germany** (WZB-Berlin), as well as a node **in the Netherlands** (Universiteit van Amsterdam).

#### 4.7. Institutional and Geographic Collaboration Networks

Figure 7, the Sankey diagram presented, allows us to visualize in a clear and structured way the existing multilevel relationships between authors, their respective institutional affiliations and the countries associated with these institutions. This graphic representation facilitates the identification of the main nuclei of scientific production, evidencing both the concentration of authorship in key institutions and the geographical distribution of research collaboration. The intensity and color of the nodes, together with the thickness of the flows, allow us to quickly appreciate which authors and institutions have a greater role in the network and how the main routes of international cooperation are configured within the field analyzed (Waters & Call, 2025).

This visualization is especially relevant in the context of bibliometric analyses guided by the PRISMA method, as it provides a synthetic but informative overview of the structure and dynamics of the identified scientific production. The diagram not only facilitates the detection of centers of excellence and leading countries, but also provides empirical evidence on the institutional connectivity and mobility of researchers, constituting a key tool to support the interpretation of collaborative patterns and emerging trends within the thematic area under study (Suteu, 2025).

The analysis reveals three main institutional hubs that act as poles of attraction for international researchers: (1) the University of Gothenburg (Sweden), associated with the V-Dem project and specialized in quantitative measurements of democratic quality; (2) U.S. universities such as Georgetown and Vanderbilt, which concentrate comparative studies on mechanisms of institutional erosion; and (3) the WZB-Berlin (Germany), which articulates research on supranational responses to democratic backsliding (Makaradze, 2025). A fourth relevant pole is identified in the Netherlands (Universiteit van Amsterdam), which connects European and Latin American networks through projects on the legitimacy of sanctions and public perception of the rule of law (Wunsch & Chiru, 2025).

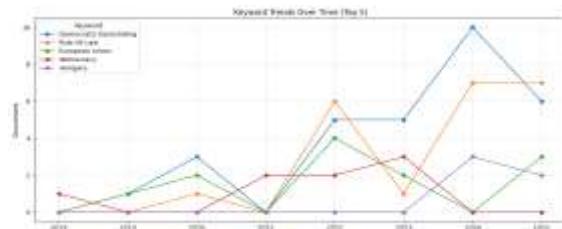


Figure 8: Keyword Trends Over Time (Top-5, 2018-2025).

Annual evolution of the number of occurrences of Democratic Backsliding, Rule of Law, European Union, Democracy and Hungary in the articles of the corpus. The recent consolidation of Democratic Backsliding and Rule of Law (peaks in 2024-2025) and the episodic entry of case/area terms (Hungary) and institutional framework terms (European Union) are observed. Note: If 2025 is in progress, indicate it as partial.

#### 4.8. Keyword Trends Over Time (Top 5)

In Figure 8, the series shows that Democratic Backsliding grows steadily from 2020 (3) to a maximum of 10 in 2024, remaining high in 2025 (6). Rule of Law goes from very low values (0-1 until 2021) to 6 in 2022 and 7 in 2024-2025, placing itself as a stable axis of the last biennium. The European Union has peaks in 2022 (4) and 2025 (3), with intermediate oscillations. Democracy reappears in 2021-2023 (2-3) and falls afterward. Hungary is punctual but growing; it appears in 2021 (2) and intensifies in 2024 (3) and 2025 (2).

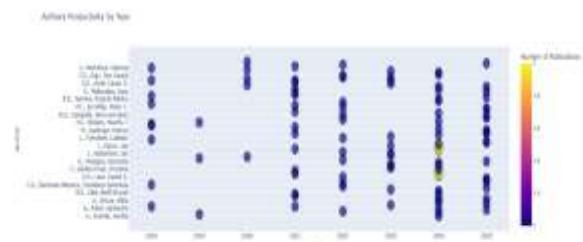


Figure 9: Temporal Distribution Of Productivity By Author (2018-2025).

Each dot represents an author with publications in the year indicated; the color reflects the number of articles signed by that author in that year (scale 1-2). A high concentration is observed in 2024 and, to a lesser extent, in 2025.

Technical note: Data from the Authors + Affiliations field of the corpus; normalized and disambiguated names (ORCID/variants).

#### 4.9. Temporal Distribution of Academic Productivity By Author

In Figure 9, the field of studies on democratic regression and modern authoritarianism appears atomized but in recent expansion: there are many specific contributions and few very productive nuclei. This structure, characterized by a broad base of authors with unique publications and few high-productivity groups, is consistent with the thematic boom of 2024-2025 (backsliding/Rule of Law) and complements the Sankey: although there are hub institutions, the production is widely distributed, suggesting an opportunity to consolidate networks and co-authorships, especially in emerging areas such as public perception of sanctions (Toshkov *et al.*, 2025). The acceleration observed since 2020, with pronounced peaks in 2024, reflects how global political conjunctures, such as constitutional crises in Europe and Latin America, have driven the incorporation of new researchers into the field, although with low recurrence in their publications (Holesch & Portela, 2025). This "long tail" pattern indicates a field in the maturation phase, where the growing visibility of the topic attracts diverse contributions but there is still a lack of consolidation of stable networks that allow longitudinal and comparative research on a larger scale (Scherz, 2025).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The bibliometric analysis of the 60 selected articles reveals an academic field in full expansion and maturation, characterized by an exponential growth of scientific production, a thematic consolidation around specific conceptual axes, and an increasingly diversified geography of knowledge. The findings confirm that the study of democratic backsliding and modern authoritarianism has moved from an exploratory phase to a more specialized focus on concrete mechanisms of institutional erosion and judicial responses, reflecting the growing political and academic urgency to understand these phenomena (Holesch & Portela, 2025).

The temporal pattern shows an accelerated consolidation of the field in the last five years, with 95% of production concentrated between 2020 and 2025, and historical peaks in 2024 (20 articles) and 2025 (11 articles). This upward trajectory, only interrupted by a slight decline in 2023, suggests that academic interest responds to global political conjunctures that have positioned democratic backsliding as a central issue on the public and scientific agenda (Stockemer, 2025). The thematic evolution confirms this maturation: from an initial phase of conceptual diversity (2018-2019) to a progressive concentration on the binomial "democratic backsliding - rule of law", which has

dominated the debate since 2022 and reaches its maximum expression in 2024-2025 (Waters & Call, 2025).

Geographically, the analysis reveals three production profiles: (1) contemporary leaders such as the United Kingdom, whose production soars in 2024-2025 (91.7% of its total); (2) countries with sustained activity such as the United States and the Netherlands, which maintain stable contributions; and (3) emerging countries such as Poland, Sweden and Brazil, which show recent growth but with less annual intensity (Makaradze, 2025). This distribution reflects a Europeanization of the debate, driven by emblematic cases such as Hungary and Poland, complemented by a North American critical mass that provides comparative analytical frameworks (Müller & Slominski, 2025).

The thematic analysis through co-occurrence and clustering networks identified two main conceptual constellations: (i) a European axis focused on supranational sanction mechanisms (article 7, conditionality) and national cases (Hungary, Poland); and (ii) a judicial-institutional axis focused on counterweight responses (judicial review, constitutional court, checks and balances) (Scherz, 2025). The temporal evolution of keywords confirms a shift towards more operational concepts: while terms such as "democracy" and "constitutional court" predominated in the initial phases (2022-2023), concepts such as "rule of law", "checks and balances" and "populism" gained prominence in 2024-2025, reflecting a growing focus on specific mechanisms of erosion and resistance (Toshkov *et al.*, 2025).

The institutional collaboration structure evidences main hubs at the University of Gothenburg (associated with V-Dem), the WZB-Berlin, and American universities such as Georgetown and Vanderbilt, with an emerging pole at the Universiteit van Amsterdam (Wunsch & Chiru, 2025). However, the pattern of productivity by author reveals an atomized field, with a predominance of one-off contributions and few high-productivity nuclei, suggesting opportunities to consolidate more stable co-authorship networks (Şuteu, 2025).

Taken together, these findings outline an academic field that has reached a phase of maturity characterized by: (1) thematic specialization in mechanisms of institutional erosion and judicial responses; (2) geographical consolidation in European and North American centers; (3) increasing integration of interdisciplinary perspectives; and (4) an agenda aimed at designing evidence-based public policies to protect the rule of law and judicial independence. Recent developments suggest that the

field will continue to expand towards more systematic comparative analyses and towards the exploration of underrepresented dimensions such as

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the intersection between gender and democratic backsliding (Şuteu, 2025).