SCIENTIFIC CULTURE
www.sci-cult.com

SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, Vol. 12, No. 2.1, (2026), pp. 5946-5971
Open Access. Online & Print

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19401466

THE SILENT CONSTITUTION OF EXCEPTION: FROM THE LANGUAGE OF THREAT TO THE LEGITIMACY OF NORMS

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Received: 20/02/2026
Accepted: 30/03/2026

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ABSTRACT

This article conceptualizes a logic of transformation in which democracies are not "destroyed" by coups, but rather rewritten under narratives of external threat. The starting point is this: "External threat" is often not an objective event, but rather functions as a regime of meaning that narrows the horizon of ordinary politics and enables the exception. Over time, this regime touches not only on policy choices, but also on the limits of what are considered legitimate means. The article proposes a five-stage mechanism called Threat-Driven Norm Shift (TDNS): the establishment of the threat framework, psychological activation under uncertainty, normative reweighting (the "conditionalization" of freedoms), legal codification, and the habitus cycle (increased cost of reversal) (Ferejohn & Pasquino, 2004; Pierson, 2000). The method deliberately avoids the claim of "impact measurement with a data set"; instead, it sharpens the boundary conditions of TDNS through two-step comparison and legal-discursive vignettes. Lithuania, as the focus case, examines whether the migration pressure, war context, and hybridizing threat horizon between 2021–2025; Latvia is used to see whether a similar threat produces different legal language and control practices within the most similar system comparison (MSSD); South Korea is used within the most dissimilar system comparison (MDSD) to test the capacity of "anti-state/external enemy" semantics to produce legitimacy for suspending norms in a different democracy. Findings suggest that hybrid threat semantics are conducive to normalizing the exception by generating constant vigilance; conversely, parliamentary and judicial oversight, ombudsman reports, and time limits can break the TDNS cycle.

KEYWORDS: Threat Discourse; State of Emergency; Legitimacy Threshold; Normative Erosion; Hybrid Threat.

1. INTRODUCTION

The fragility of democracy often reveals itself not at the moment of "collapse," but at the moments when it redefines itself. A regime may maintain its electoral calendar; courts may continue to issue rulings; parliaments may convene. Yet the true pillars of the political order, the legitimacy of the opposition, the inviolability of civil liberties, the moral value of pluralism, can quietly shift. This change is the accumulation of seemingly small things: the language of "exception" becomes part of everyday life, 'temporary' measures become habitual, and the justification of "protection" redraws the boundaries of norms. As the literature on democratic backsliding has long emphasized, contemporary authoritarianism often proceeds not through coups but through a "gradual drift" in which elected governments slowly erode institutional checks and advance through legal means (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; Waldner and Lust, 2018). But there is a deeper question here: the erosion of institutions is often made possible by the emergence of legitimacy for tools that were previously considered illegitimate.

The impact of external threats on democracy is usually interpreted through policy choices: defense spending increases, border regimes tighten, intelligence powers expand. This interpretation is not flawed, but it can remain superficial. Because external threats affect not only "what to do" but also what to permit. As a society develops tools to manage danger, it simultaneously redefines the boundaries of "what is legitimate." The critical point here is the shift between instrumental rationality and normative boundaries: the security justification first appears as a preference; then it begins to be spoken of as a truth. The "necessary" gradually becomes the "right." The institutional legitimacy literature, which reminds us that legitimacy is not only interest-based but also a moral and cognitive construction, demonstrates the political significance of this very transformation (Suchman, 1995). This article discusses the impact of external threats on democracy as a shift in the threshold of legitimacy, rather than in terms of "policy outcomes."

Conceptually, this shift is underpinned by a tension between states of emergency and regimes of exception. Modern constitutional orders contain mechanisms that grant broad powers to the executive in times of crisis; these mechanisms are sometimes necessary, sometimes dangerous. Debates on "exceptional law" emphasize that extraordinary powers are not merely a practical tool of governance but a political form capable of redrawing the boundaries of the normative order (Ferejohn and Pasquino, 2004). In security studies, the securitization approach articulates a similar insight in different terms: when certain issues are framed as "existential threats," they are moved outside the realm of ordinary politics; thus, measures that would normally be considered controversial can be legitimized under the guise of "necessity" (Balzacq, 2005; McDonald, 2008). At this point, the issue is not whether the threat is real, but rather in what linguistic and legal forms the threat is constructed: "threat" is not an object, but a regime of interpretation.

Lithuania's experience in recent years has become a conceptual showcase for this theoretical problem, beyond being a "news" topic. On February 24, 2022, hours after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a two-week state of emergency was declared in Lithuania; the President announced that the army would be deployed to the borders in response to "possible provocations and disturbances" due to the military buildup in Russia and Belarus (Sytas, 2022b). This was an understandable example of a constitutional reflex in the face of an external threat: the war beyond the border had given rise to "extraordinary measures" on the other side of the border. However, a few weeks later, on March 10, 2022, the Lithuanian parliament tightened the state of emergency; the regulation, which imposed restrictions on freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly, was interpreted by critics as the harshest restrictions on personal freedoms seen since the Soviet era (Reuters, 2022c). What is noteworthy here is that the perception of threat did not merely produce "security capacity"; it also redrew the normative boundaries of the democratic sphere.

This redrawing reappeared in 2025 with a completely different form of threat. On December 9, 2025, Lithuania declared a nationwide state of emergency due to weather balloons coming from Belarus that disrupted air traffic; Lithuanian officials stated that the balloons were being used for smuggling, that this constituted a "hybrid attack," and that the government wanted the army to be given broader powers to support the police and border guards (Reuters, 2025b). An Associated Press report also emphasized that this "hybrid threat" framework was justified by national security and civil aviation risks, and that strengthening the military's support role in border regions was on the agenda (Associated Press, 2025a). Here, the threat was no longer a classic military invasion; it was an intervention that was ambiguous, low-intensity, and operating in a gray area. Nevertheless, the outcome

raised a similar normative question: At what point does the language of "protection" become the conditionalization of freedoms? As the justification for the exceptional changes, why does the normative effect of the exceptional tend to flow in a similar direction?

This article addresses this question without reducing it to a binary psychology such as "fear–trust." The conceptual framework it proposes is a mechanism called Threat-Driven Norm Shift (TDNS): when the perception of external threat becomes persistent, even if the formal institutions of the democratic order remain in place, the citizen's and the political sphere's perception of "legitimate means" may shift; thus practices such as surveillance, censorship, extraordinary powers, and suppressing dissent in the name of security may cease to be exceptions and begin to be seen as "necessary and right." TDNS argues that democracy can narrow first in the lexicon of legitimacy, not at the ballot box.

The article develops this claim not as an empirical survey test but as a theory-building analysis; it then concretizes it with legal-discursive mini-vignettes. Lithuania will be taken as a case study to show how normative boundaries can be stretched under a "rising/hybridizing threat horizon." The comparative design will be two-tiered: the Lithuania–Latvia pairing will use the Most Similar Systems Design logic to reveal normative and legal differentiation within similar systems; the Lithuania–South Korea pairing will use the Most Different Systems Design logic to test whether traces of the same mechanism can be seen in very different contexts (Lijphart, 1971; Seawright and Gerring, 2008). Thus, the article opens up a discussion on how "threat" is not merely a foreign policy phenomenon, but a political form capable of rewriting the internal norms of democracy.

2. METHOD: THEORY BUILDING, TWO-STEP COMPARISON, AND LEGAL-DISCURSIVE VIGNETTE

This article explores how democracy, under threat, reconstitutes itself in texts, justifications, the language of exception, and the rhythm of normalization of this language. Here, "method" is not a list of techniques; it is a discipline of reading, a logic of comparison, and a tracking procedure that tests the claim of mechanism. Thus, rather than measuring "impact" in the classical sense, the study constructs an explanatory trajectory of how the perception of external threat shifts the normative threshold. Building on Hedström and Ylikoski's (2010) call for mechanism-based explanations and Tilly's (2001) emphasis on process-mechanism, it transforms TDNS (Threat-Driven Norm Shift) into a mechanism map containing sequential stages and feedback loops, rather than a typology.

The first risk of such a theoretical endeavor is the easy expansion of concepts: "threat," "exceptionalism," and "legitimacy" can easily become labels that can be applied to anything, thus explaining nothing. This article considers conceptual rigor a methodological prerequisite to avoid this pitfall. Sartori's (1970) warning about "concept misformation" and Collier and Mahon's (1993) discussion of "conceptual stretching" are not merely references to the literature here; they are a kind of methodological safety belt to ensure that the line claimed by TDNS, threat → norm → legitimacy, remains comparable. Therefore, the study tracks "democratic erosion" not through regime types, but through which discursive and legal moves redraw which normative boundaries and on what grounds. Thus, the "transformation of democracy without a coup" can be captured as the sum of small but cumulative shifts occurring at the margins of what is considered legitimate, rather than as an institutional collapse.

2.1. Theory-Building Strategy: TDNS Is Not a Classification but a Mechanism Design

Rather than establishing a classification language that says "these countries are like this, those countries are like that," TDNS proposes a mechanism that explains how the perception of threat in democratic societies can legitimize authoritarian norms through certain intermediate links. This approach focuses on intermediate processes, legitimacy justifications, regimes of exception, discursive coercion, the persistence of legal forms, rather than explanations reduced to a single cause (Hedström and Ylikoski, 2010; Tilly, 2001). For the same reason, "evidence" for this study is not merely quantitative correlation; it is "diagnostic traces" that suggest a particular mechanism is at work. This is precisely the strength of the process tracing literature: reading small but meaningful pieces of the narrative alongside pre-formulated explanatory expectations (Collier, 2011; Mahoney, 2012). However, process tracing is often used to test direct causal claims; this article pursues a more limited but more disciplined aim: to see whether the discursive and legal markers necessary for the consistent operation of the TDNS mechanism emerge in similar ways in different contexts.

This approach treats discourse not as a "reflection" but as a force that constitutes and

transforms the very functioning of institutions. Schmidt's (2008) discursive institutionalism framework emphasizes that ideas and discourse are not merely policy narratives but the dynamics of institutional change. Krebs and Jackson's (2007) "rhetorical coercion" approach reminds us that legitimacy can be not only a production of consent but also a regime of persuasion/coercion that narrows the "sayability" of competing options. Therefore, TDNS methodologically focuses on how the discourse of threat redraws its normative boundaries through rhetorical and legal tools, without resorting to crude dichotomies such as "fear increased → freedom decreased."

2.2. Case Selection: Two-Tiered Comparison And "Menu" Logic

This article does not limit itself to telling the story of a single country; it tests TDNS's explanatory claim using a two-tiered comparative logic. The classic rationale for the comparative method is this: similarity and difference are not random choices but design tools that enhance explanatory power (Lijphart, 1971; Przeworski and Teune, 1970). Seawright and Gerring (2008) systematize this point with the "menu" metaphor: researchers select cases based on the logic required by the research objective, typical, extreme, deviant, most similar, most different, and the selection is not only about accessibility but also about what type of inference is targeted.

The focus case in this study is Lithuania. Lithuania provides a context that makes visible how perceptions of external threats (such as military risk, hybrid attacks, disinformation, and border tensions) can affect the boundaries of democratic norms, particularly in the transition zone between the "ordinary" and the "extraordinary."

However, examining Lithuania alone reduces TDNS to a "contextual narrative." Therefore, the design proceeds in two stages:

The first stage is established using the Most Similar Systems Design logic. Latvia is selected as Lithuania's "closest twin." This pairing largely keeps the structural background constant: fundamental parameters such as the Baltic geography, the legacy of post-Soviet state-building, EU/NATO membership, security concerns stemming from Russia, and the hybrid threat repertoire are similar. Such a basis of similarity allows for a clearer view of the "mode of operation" of the TDNS, i.e., how the normative threshold is shifted through which legal forms and which legitimation repertoire (Lijphart, 1971). As Anckar (2008) emphasizes, MSSD alone is not the "best design"; but when the research question aims to make certain mechanisms visible, tracing the divergent outcomes within similar systems can be explanatory.

The second tier creates an additional layer of testing with the Most Different Systems Design logic. South Korea is selected as a democracy that is culturally, geographically, historically, and institutionally distinct from Lithuania, but where the perception of external threats has long shaped the political arena. South Korea's chronic security context is conducive to discussing how the boundary between "constant threat" and "exception" can become a permanent language of governance. The aim here is not to compare the same security policy; rather, it is to test whether the core claim of TDNS, that the threat narrative rewrites the normative threshold, produces similar discursive-legal traces in a very different context (Anckar, 2008). This second stage is a "portability" test to narrow or broaden the scope conditions of the theory.

An important byproduct of this design is that it forces caution against selection bias. Geddes's (1990) classic warning is clear: looking only at cases where we "see the outcome" artificially validates the theory. Therefore, case and vignette selection will not focus solely on moments of dramatic constraint; it will also include "negative" examples where withdrawal, limitation, control, or objection are visible. Mahoney and Goertz's (2004) Possibility Principle serves as the ethical principle of the method here: "negative" examples must be selected from contexts where the outcome was actually possible; otherwise, the comparison becomes a showcase that protects the theory rather than testing it.

2.3. Document Corpus and Vignette Logic: Law, Discourse, And Chronology

The empirical basis of this study is not a quantitative data matrix; it is a document corpus consisting of legal texts and discursive performances. The backbone of the corpus consists of four types of sources: (i) binding normative texts such as states of emergency regimes, emergency regulations, national security legislation, and their justifications; (ii) official statements, parliamentary transcripts, and policy documents in which the executive and legislative branches construct the security narrative; (iii) high court decisions, ombudsman/human rights institution reports, and texts produced by oversight mechanisms; (iv) sequences of events documented by reliable news agencies and mainstream news organizations to verify the chronology. The aim is to see both "what" the legal step is and "how" the

discursive justification is constructed, without being confined to a single narrative source.

This material is read by dividing it into small but condensed analytical units called "vignettes." The vignette here is not a hypothetical scenario in survey literature; on the contrary, it is a limited time frame in which the narrative of external threat materializes, a specific legal decision is made, and this decision is legitimized. The boundary of the vignette is usually drawn by a "norm-setting" action such as a legal regulation/state of emergency decision/court ruling; discursive justifications and control reactions produced during the same period are placed around it. This format reveals that law is not merely a result but a vehicle for legitimacy; discourse is not merely "language" but a power that narrows the field of legitimacy of competing norms (Schmidt, 2008; Krebs and Jackson, 2007). Furthermore, vignettes make it possible to distinguish between formal types of extraordinary powers: different "forms of exception" such as executive decrees, legislative authorizations, and security regimes expanding within ordinary law are not lumped together; Ferejohn and Pasquino's (2004) typology of emergency powers methodologically informs this distinction.

2.4. Analysis Strategy: Structured Comparison and Mechanism Consistency

Vignettes are read not with the assumption that "everything is self-explanatory," but with a structured comparison discipline.

George and Bennett's (2005) structured, focused comparison approach is decisive here: the same basic questions are posed to each vignette, and the answers are put into a comparable format. These questions are linked to the TDNS mechanism map: How is the threat named? Which "thing to be protected" (state, nation, public order, democratic order) is central? Which norms are presented as temporary sacrifices, and which become "conditional rights"? How are oversight and sunset clauses designed; how do they work in practice; how is the language of dissent legitimized or marginalized? This set of questions is necessary not only to describe the text, but also to consistently trace the normative threshold shift claimed by the TDNS.

At this point, the study borrows two contributions from the process-monitoring literature but limits its claim. First, the idea of "diagnostic evidence": some texts and decisions carry stronger signals about the mechanism's existence than others (Collier, 2011). Second, the distinction between types of evidence: not all observations carry equal weight; some merely suggest "possibility," while others are of the "necessity" type (Mahoney, 2012). The Bayesian sensitivity emphasized by Fairfield and Charman (2017) is not converted into a technical calculation here; however, it is preserved as a principle: any interpretation that does not systematically exclude alternative explanations is merely a narrative. Therefore, vignette readings are conducted alongside counter-evidence and alternative interpretations as much as possible; in particular, the assumption that the "language of security" progresses not spontaneously but by narrowing down competing normative options is constantly tested.

The critical sentence of this section is: This work proposes a theoretical diagnosis based not on claims of causal effect, but on traces of mechanism consistency and normative thresholds. Diagnosis does not promise clinical certainty; but it requires identifying symptoms, distinguishing patterns, and taking seriously the possibilities that could falsify the mechanism.

3. CONCEPTUAL CORE: THREAT, NORM, LEGITIMACY, DEMOCRATIC PERSONALITY

To construct a theory about how democracies are "rewritten" under threat, one must first define the boundaries of the terms. Because the earliest sign of democratic erosion often not cracks in institutions, but a shift in the conceptual map: what does "security" do, what does 'necessity' make possible, when does "democracy" cease to be a principle and become a decoration? This section defines the four concepts upon which Threat-Driven Norm Shift (TDNS) is based without allowing for ambiguity and clarifies the distinctions between them. The aim is not to write a dictionary entry; the aim is to ensure that each link in the chain of mechanisms to be established in the future carries the same analytical meaning. Warnings about how conceptual "flexibility" in comparative research undermines theory are not merely a methodological footnote here, but a justification for conceptual discipline (Sartori, 1970; Collier and Mahon, 1993).

3.1. External Threat: Not An Objective Danger, But A Regime of Meaning

In this article, "external threat" is not treated as a catalog of objective dangers at a state's doorstep. Rather, external threat is a regime of meaning that redivides the political sphere into 'normal' and "exceptional," makes certain measures discussable, and delegitimizes certain options from the outset. This is precisely where the most productive contribution of the securitization debate in security studies literature emerges: security is not only

"something to be protected," but also a form of politicization that determines "which language legitimizes which tools" (Balzacq, 2005; Stritzel, 2007; McDonald, 2008). Defining the external threat as a "regime" does not mean dismissing it as "fictitious." This is only to preserve the distinction: danger and threat are not the same thing; while danger is a physical or factual situation, threat acquires a political meaning and often operates through the assignment of a "perpetrator," the construction of a "we," and the selection of a "subject to be protected."

Three analytical dimensions of this regime are particularly important. First, the discourse of threat selects a "reference object": sometimes the existence of the state, sometimes the identity of the nation, sometimes the "democratic order" itself is coded as the thing to be protected. This selection also determines which norms can be considered suspendable. Second, the threat regime establishes a time horizon: the threat can be narrated as an acute shock or presented as a permanent "siege." The threat horizon, which gains continuity, tends to transform the exception from a brief interlude into a long-term mode of governance; the emphasis in securitization literature on "transgressing the boundaries of ordinary politics" becomes normatively more acute, especially in the face of this possibility of chronicity (McDonald, 2008). Third, the threat regime produces an economy of uncertainty: ambiguous threat forms such as hybrid attacks, disinformation, and cyber interventions blur the line between what constitutes an attack and what is a routine event; as ambiguity increases, the demand for "more control" becomes easier to justify. The literature on how disinformation and disruptions in communication erode democratic institutions shows that the threat has not only a physical but also an epistemic dimension (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Tucker et al., 2018). For this very reason, TDNS treats the external threat not as a "danger from outside," but as a framework of meaning and permission that constricts normal politics within.

A line must be drawn here: the concept of "external threat" cannot be expanded to encompass every internal conflict or political tension. From the TDNS perspective, the external threat is, at least at the level of discourse, a framework "associated with an external actor" and one that opens the door to exceptional measures through this association. This definition does not naturalize the threat as "coming from outside"; on the contrary, it compels us to examine what normative consequences the danger, assumed to come from outside, produces internally.

3.2. Norm: Not Just a Rule, But the Limit of Legitimate Means

The concept of norm is often used synonymously with "rule" in everyday language; however, a norm is more than a rule. A norm is a set of shared expectations that determine what is considered 'appropriate' or "right" under certain conditions; it is also a boundary line regarding which means are considered legitimate. Classic studies on how norms arise, spread, and become internalized in international relations have shown that norms not only constrain behavior but also construct the meaning of behavior: norms answer not the question "what is done?" but "what is appropriate to do?" (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Legro, 1997). A similar emphasis exists in the institutionalist tradition: institutions operate not only through incentives and sanctions, but also through a "logic of appropriateness"; actors sometimes act based on normative appropriateness before calculating their interests (March and Olsen, 1998).

In the context of TDNS, norms are not merely the "rules of procedure" of democracy; they are the moral boundaries of democracy. Norms determine which tools the state can use in areas such as the scope of freedom of expression, the legitimacy of opposition, the inviolability of minority rights, and the acceptability of arbitrary surveillance and punishment. Therefore, it is insufficient to interpret "norm shift" solely as a change in policy. Policy change can alter direction within the same normative framework; norm shift, however, redraws the framework itself. The literature on norm contestation, which emphasizes that norms are not stable but open to struggle, negotiation, and reinterpretation over time, shows that this redrawing often occurs not through "open conflict" but through shifts in meaning (Wiener, 2004; Acharya, 2004). What TDNS argues is that the regime of external threat can render this contestation field asymmetrical: when the moral weight of the threat increases, the defense of certain norms can be coded as "naivety" or "irresponsibility"; thus, the norm contestation ceases to be a public negotiation conducted on equal terms.

The analytical criterion here is this: the existence of a measure alone does not constitute a normative shift; it is the manner in which the measure is justified and its likelihood of becoming permanent that signals a normative shift. Therefore, in the following sections, this article will focus less on the question "what measures were taken?" and more on the question "which measures redrew which normative boundaries?"

3.3. Legitimacy: Moral Justification, Not Effectiveness

Legitimacy is the most critical concept in TDNS because norm drift often progresses not through overt coercion but through moral consent. Defining legitimacy solely as "it works" misses the most insidious part of democratic erosion. In TDNS, legitimacy is the acceptance of a tool or regulation not merely because it is effective but because it is deemed right. Suchman's (1995) typology of institutional legitimacy is instructive here: legitimacy can be pragmatic (alignment of interests), moral (alignment of values), or cognitive (appearing natural and inevitable). External threat regimes gain power particularly through the second and third channels: when extraordinary measures are presented as "morally necessary" or "inevitable," the debate is no longer confined to the cost-benefit plane; the normative field itself is reorganized.

In the international relations literature, Hurd (1999) has treated legitimacy as the "rightness" of authority and has shown that legitimacy's capacity to produce obedience goes beyond mere coercion. From a TDNS perspective, when this emphasis is transferred to domestic politics, it means that a state exercising extraordinary powers expands not only its capacity but also its claim to justification; as this expansion gains acceptance, the boundaries of norms loosen. At this point, the relationship between "law" and "legitimacy" takes on particular importance. The legalization of a measure does not automatically make it legitimate; however, it often strengthens the cognitive channel of legitimacy: the idea that "since it is in the law, it must be normal" creates a strong foundation for the normalization of the exception. As studies identifying the typology of emergency powers remind us, the "exception" is often established not outside the law, but within it; this is precisely where the problem begins (Ferejohn and Pasquino, 2004). TDNS centrally accepts this legal capacity for legitimacy to understand at what point the language of "protection" turns into "conditionality."

Therefore, legitimacy will be treated in this article not as an outcome but as a process. The regime of threat produces legitimacy; legitimacy stretches the boundaries of norms; stretched norms enable more exceptions. The feedback loop that TDNS will establish in the following section is based on this conceptual grounding.

3.4. Democratic Personality: Not A Measurement, But A Normative Resistance Architecture

The fourth concept of TDNS is "democratic personality." This is not a psychometric claim; nor is it a single scale proposal. Democratic personality is a theoretical component that expresses the normative infrastructure of the democratic order at the citizen level: acceptance of pluralism, viewing civil liberties as a principled limit, belief in the legitimacy of opposition, tolerance of minority rights, and the capacity to live with uncertainty. These components have been examined separately in the literature on political psychology and democratic citizenship; the TDNS brings these components together under a single analytical framework to understand the normative impact of external threat regimes.

The literature on political tolerance has long shown that democracy is not merely majority rule; it is also the capacity to make space for "disturbing" groups and views (Gibson, 1992; Gibson, 2006). This capacity can become more fragile under threat conditions; because the threat regime can frame dissent and difference as "risk," making tolerance appear as an ethically costly virtue. Similarly, studies on deliberative democracy have suggested that "cross-cutting" social contacts can strengthen tolerance and negotiation capacity; when such contacts weaken, group lines become sharper and normative resistance becomes fragile (Mutz, 2002). This reminds us that democratic personality is carried not only by individual but also by social bonds.

The relationship between democratic personality and uncertainty is also critical. Threat regimes multiply uncertainty; when the cost of uncertainty increases, the need for cognitive closure and the search for order may intensify (Webster and Kruglanski, 1994). Literature reading political ideology as "motivated social cognition" has shown that tendencies such as avoidance of uncertainty and threat sensitivity can be linked to more rigid, hierarchical, and exclusionary attitudes (Jost et al., 2003). The authoritarianism literature has also revealed that threat perception can activate certain predispositions, strengthening demands for "strong leadership," "punishment," and "conformity" (Feldman, 2003; Hetherington and Suhay, 2011). TDNS uses democratic personality as a distinguishing concept precisely at this point: under threat, not everyone moves in the "same" direction; some choose caution, others choose submission. Democratic personality is necessary to understand the normative face of this divergence.

One final distinction must be made here: democratic personality is not the "absence of authoritarianism." Authoritarianism often involves

the desire for order and harmony transforming into political preferences under threat; democratic personality, on the other hand, involves the preservation of pluralism and the boundaries of rights under uncertainty. TDNS argues that the regime of external threat not only awakens authoritarian tendencies; it also erodes the components of democratic personality, thereby expanding the legitimacy of authoritarian norms. The mechanism map to be established in the following sections of this article will link these processes of erosion and expansion.

4. THEORY: THREAT-DRIVEN NORM SHIFT

Threat-Driven Norm Shift (TDNS) is not a story of the "collapse" of the democratic order; rather, it is a story of transformation in which democracy's self-preservation reflex quietly recalibrates which tools it considers legitimate. This theory treats external threats not merely as a "fear-inducing emotion," but as a regime of meaning that narrows the boundaries of ordinary politics: Threats may become visible through a specific sequence of events; however, their political impact emerges not so much from the events themselves, but from the way these events are organized within a continuous "language of exception." Precisely for this reason, TDNS establishes the threat → norm → legitimacy line without getting caught up in the "fear/trust" dichotomy; it offers a mechanism map that connects psychology with discourse and law without reducing the erosion of norms to psychology.

The theory's claim is stark: while democratic institutions remain in place, the boundaries of legitimacy shift. A society can still hold elections; but norms carrying democratic ethos, such as the meaning of elections, the legitimacy of opposition, the breadth of the sphere of expression, and the protection of minorities, can be reduced to a "conditional" status. This "conditionalization" is at the heart of TDNS: Freedom ceases to be a principle; it becomes an option that can be suspended in crisis management. This transformation does not occur in a single stroke. The TDNS operates as a five-stage process that feeds into each other: the establishment of the threat, psychological activation, normative reweighting, legal codification, and the habit cycle.

4.1. Establishment Of the Threat: Narrowing of Normal Politics

The first move of TDNS is not the "identification" of the threat, but the political establishment of the threat. By "establishment," we do not mean a simple propaganda technique; we are talking about something more fundamental: the removal of a phenomenon from being debatable within 'normal' politics and its transfer to an "existential" category. According to the classic thesis of securitization literature, when an issue is declared a security issue, normal political balances and procedures give way to the logic of urgency (Wæver, 1995; Buzan et al., 1998; Balzacq, 2005; Stritzel, 2007). This move transforms the question "What are we protecting, and from whom?" into "What is necessary for survival?" Thus, the limits of norms cease to be the subject of debate; they become the technique of decision-making.

At this stage, the threat is often framed as a hybrid attack, anti-state activity, an external enemy supported from within, "systemic infiltration," or "disinformation wars." The common function of these frameworks is to both expand and blur the danger: a conceptual bridge is built between the actor beyond the border and the dissenting voice within the border; criticism is subjected to a "purity test"; objection is coded as risk production. As a result of such a setup, the threat becomes less of an objective event and more of a political logic that narrows the public sphere. Indeed, Uygur and Sever's (2025) discussion of Threat Studies, which adds a critical vein to threat studies, emphasizes that the threat is often not found as an "objective phenomenon"; it is produced and mobilized in historical, institutional, and discursive contexts.

At this point, TDNS makes the following distinction: the question "Is there a threat?" is secondary; what is truly decisive is the extent to which the threat setup constricts ordinary politics. Threats do not merely set the agenda; they define the limits of what can be discussed. Thus, the "norm" itself, that is, the limits of legitimate means, is shifted discursively even before the mechanism begins.

4.2. Psychological Activation: The Need for Order and Reliance on Authority

The second stage is the penetration of the established threat into the inner world of the citizen. Here, the TDNS's claim is not a simple psychological reflex that people become authoritarian "because they are afraid." We are talking about a more technical process: as uncertainty increases, the need for cognitive closure rises; the need for order encourages reliance on signs of authority rather than complex political debates (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; Kahneman, 2011). This does not mean that rational judgment is completely lost; rather, it means that "shortcuts" become more appealing in political preferences.

At this stage, Feldman's authoritarian predisposition approach comes into play: authoritarian tendencies do not function as a constantly visible personality label, but rather as a predisposition that is activated under appropriate conditions (Feldman, 2003). Similarly, Stenner's "authoritarian dynamic" approach shows that authoritarian reactions rise when normative threats and social diversity are perceived as "disruptive" (Stenner, 2005). Hetherington and Suhay's findings reveal that perceived threat strengthens authoritarian tendencies and increases support for security policies, emphasizing that this relationship is particularly pronounced in individuals with a high need for order/conformity (Hetherington & Suhay, 2011). Jost et al. (2003) interpret this tendency within the framework of "motivated social cognition": threat hardens political attitudes through avoidance of uncertainty and the desire for stability.

TDNS establishes a critical link here: the construction of threat is not merely the portrayal of an external enemy; it also creates a basis for politically rationalizing the demand for "order" internally. Relying on authority is not a moral weakness but an adaptation strategy encouraged in an environment where uncertainty is politicized. Therefore, psychological activation ceases to be an individual "reaction"; it becomes an orientation synchronized with the narrowing of the political field.

4.3. Normative Reweighting: The Conditionalization of Freedom

In the third stage, TDNS combines psychological activation with a normative outcome: The boundaries of legitimate means are redrawn. At this stage, the freedom-security trade-off produces not merely a policy choice but a regime of legitimacy. Davis and Silver's classic study of the US public after September 11 shows that as the perception of threat increases, support for civil liberties declines and more restrictions are accepted in the name of security; it also reveals that this relationship can interact with mediating variables such as political trust (Davis & Silver, 2004). TDNS takes this finding further: The issue here is not that "individuals want less freedom"; rather, freedom is no longer treated as a 'principle' but rather as a "conditional reward."

Normative reweighting works in two ways. On the one hand, civil liberties are seen as an area that can be "suspended" when crisis management is at stake. On the other hand, opposition and criticism are drawn into a "semantics of risk." Belief in the legitimacy of opposition may give way to a regime of loyalty tested by the rhetoric of "national unity" and the "home front." This reveals the point at which the concept of democratic personality narrows: pluralism, sensitivity to freedom of expression, the legitimacy of opposition, tolerance for minority rights, and tolerance for uncertainty cease to be "virtues"; they are recoded as potential "weaknesses."

At this stage, the TDNS's divisive claim is this: Normative drift may not come as an explicit declaration of an "authoritarian desire"; it appears in more insidious language: "For now...", "under these conditions...", "extraordinary times...", "temporary measure...". These words do not destroy the core of liberal democracy overnight; however, they reduce it to a conditional contract. Loyalty to democracy is adjusted according to the continuity of the threat, not to norms.

4.4. Legal Codification: Embedding The Exception in Text

In the fourth stage, normative reweighting is translated into legal language. The critical point here is that the exception is institutionalized as a procedure, not as arbitrariness. This is the most dangerous aspect of modern authoritarianism: the law does not disappear; the law is redesigned to carry the exception. Ferejohn and Pasquino's typology of emergency powers shows that in modern democracies, the "state of emergency" often expands through constitutional and legal forms; the exception finds a place within the law (Ferejohn & Pasquino, 2004). Gross and Ní Aoláin's comprehensive study details how law can become a "normalizing" technology in times of crisis; how temporary measures can leave lasting traces (Gross & Ní Aoláin, 2006). Dyzenhaus (2006) discusses this line of thought on a more normative plane: the infiltration of the emergency into the law can increase the law's capacity to "suspend itself," creating a paradox at the heart of liberal constitutionalism.

TDNS does not read codification merely as "new law enacted"; it pursues questions such as: How was the duration of the measures defined? Were oversight mechanisms strengthened or weakened? Is the scope vague or limited? Is the definition of "threat" broad or narrow? Because the exception often grows within the text: vague definitions, broad delegation of authority, data collection powers, increased capacity for intervention in the areas of assembly and expression become normalized under the justification of "emergency." This process intersects with the phenomenon conceptualized by Scheppele as "autocratic legalism": power can erode

democratic balance not by acting outside the law, but by using the law (Scheppele, 2018).

At this stage, the connection between the TDNS and the concept of "legitimacy" becomes clear: legitimacy is not only the production of what is 'effective' but also of what is considered "right." Codification is the institutional form of the claim to correctness. Legal text does not merely grant authority; it also rewrites political morality: which tools are "reasonable," which objections are considered "irresponsible," which oversight is "necessary" ... Thus, the narrowing of norms eventually begins to appear as the natural state of norms.

4.5. The Cycle of Habit: Silence, The Cost of Reversal, And the Invisible Shift

The fifth stage is the most critical but least noticeable stage of the TDNS: the transformation of the exception into a habit. Here, the transformation is not a dramatic break; it occurs through a slow accumulation of costs. As the exception persists, the cost of reversal increases because institutions, bureaucracy, data infrastructure, and political language have been adjusted to the exception. This produces a "path dependence": once established, the security architecture creates self-reinforcing increasing returns (Pierson, 2000). At this point, normative drift continues not only with the state's preferences but also with the habits and expectations created by the new order.

The social face of the habit cycle is silence. Silence is not always approval; sometimes it is a "measured" retreat. Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence approach shows that when people withdraw their opinions for fear of social isolation, the public sphere narrows (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Kuran's preference falsification analysis emphasizes that this withdrawal produces not only individual silence but also a collective illusion: When everyone is silent, everyone assumes that "everyone agrees" (Kuran, 1995). Schauer's discussion of the chilling effect also shows that legal-political pressure can reduce speech without "prohibiting speech"; even the possibility of uncertain sanctions can narrow the space for expression (Schauer, 1978). This is precisely what TDNS refers to as "invisibility": the shift in norms takes hold without being explicitly announced, because the cost of dissent has risen, the legitimacy of dissent has fallen, and the language of dissent has been undermined.

At this stage, the continuity of the threat narrative is decisive. As Uygur and Sever (2025) emphasize, threats are not fixed; they are fluid mechanisms produced, adopted, and habitualized within "force, discourse, emotion, perception." TDNS translates this idea into democratic norms: As the threat becomes continuous, the exception becomes commonplace; as it becomes commonplace, the reflexes of democratic personality dull; as they dull, establishing a new threat becomes easier. The mechanism closes: the cycle reproduces itself.

4.6. Theoretical Expectations Of TDNS: What Are We Looking for in a Two-Tier Comparison?

The aim of TDNS is not a crude diagnosis such as "there is authoritarianism in this country"; it is a tracking logic that captures where and how the normative threshold shifts. Therefore, the theory generates expectations that will test Lithuania in two ways.

The Lithuania–Latvia comparison along the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) line tests how the same geopolitical pressure (Russia-driven military risk, hybrid threat, and possibility of disinformation) produces different normative traces in similar institutional contexts. According to TDNS, even if the presence of the threat is similar in both countries, what determines the speed and scope of the norm shift is how the threat is framed and how the exception is coded. The divergences expected to emerge between Latvia and Lithuania can be traced at three levels: First, the tone and boundaries of the discursive framing; is the threat narrative fixed in an "existential" language, or is it kept within a technical-administrative framework? Second, the form of legal codification: is the exception concentrated in a state of emergency regime, or is it established through permanent expansions within ordinary law? Third, the architecture of control: are sunset clauses, judicial review, and parliamentary oversight brakes that keep the exception temporary, or are they symbolic thresholds? When these distinctions become apparent, TDNS can produce a mechanism-based answer to the question, "Why do norms differ when the threat is the same?"

The Lithuania–South Korea comparison along the Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) line tests whether similar normative traces emerge despite different historical, cultural, and regional conditions. The theory expects that in contexts where external threats are chronic (as in the Korean peninsula), the establishment of the threat can produce a more enduring "anti-state" semantics; this, in turn, creates a legitimacy ground more prone to drawing opposition and criticism into the risk zone. Even if the two countries have different regime traditions,

legal cultures, and media ecologies, TDNS looks for similar signs: the threshold at which national security-based restrictions are considered "right," the normalization of interventions in the areas of surveillance and expression, the response to criticism with a loyalty test, and most importantly, the emergence of self-censorship in the public sphere as a norm of "caution." If these signs emerge in similar ways in distant contexts, the TDNS's claim gains strength: the shift in norms is the result of a mechanism produced by the threat-legitimacy relationship, not by a single type of regime.

Ultimately, TDNS is not a pessimistic theory of fate. The mechanism only works under certain conditions: the perpetuation of the threat, the normalization of the language of uncertainty and urgency, the weakening of checks and balances, and the fragility of democratic personality. Conversely, strong oversight, open legitimacy debates, limited and justified measures, political ethics that preserve the legitimacy of the opposition, and a culture of citizenship with high tolerance for uncertainty can break the cycle. This is the very question that will be explored in the subsequent sections of this article through legal-discursive vignettes: When the threat is established under the name of "protection," at what point does democracy begin to transform into a "conditional" regime?

5. MINI-CASE I: LITHUANIA (FOCUS CASE), 2021–2025 "HYBRIDIZING THREAT HORIZON"

What makes Lithuania the "case study" in this article is that, despite the formal stability of its democracy, it offers a timeframe conducive to observing the rapid diversification of the language of threat and how this diversification has redrawn the normative threshold. The border pressure in 2021, referred to as "instrumentalized migration" via Belarus, the war context that expanded the security regime with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 expanded the security regime with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the hybrid attack rhetoric established through "balloons" in 2025 produced three moments that appear different but are linked by the same logical line: the external threat first narrows the vocabulary of ordinary politics; then stretches the limits of legitimate means; and finally makes the "exception" appear less and less exceptional each time (Bartasevičius et al., 2025; Sytas, 2021; Reuters, 2025b).

This section is not a country monograph; it reads the "traces" left by TDNS (Threat-Driven Norm Shift) in Lithuania through short scenes and the continuity established by the transitions between them. The aim is not to label every step taken by the state as "authoritarianism"; but to reveal how the language of "protection," under certain conditions, accumulates a capacity for legitimacy and what kind of pressure this exerts on the components of democratic personality (pluralism, sensitivity to civil liberties, the legitimacy of opposition, tolerance for minority rights, tolerance for uncertainty).

5.1. 2021: "Instrumentalized Migration" And the Border's Capacity to Produce Exceptions

With the summer of 2021, the Lithuania-Belarus border ceased to be merely a geographical line; it became a scene where the law rapidly intensified. Lithuania's experience, as one of the moments when the "migrant instrumentalization" debate materialized in the Baltic context, was coded as a crisis in both academic literature and institutional reports, where the idea of "organized steering" took precedence over the "spontaneity of migration flows" (Bartasevičius et al., 2025). This framework reveals the "establishment of the threat" corresponding to the first phase of the TDNS: the threat is no longer a singular event but becomes a continuous regime of meaning that constricts ordinary politics.

This regime became visible with decisions such as the declaration of a state of emergency at the border in November 2021; the rationale for the decision was to frame irregular crossings via Belarus in terms of "crisis" and "security" (Sytas, 2021). However, the movement of the normative threshold was not only in the decision itself, but also in the formula of legitimacy implied by the decision: border security made it possible to re-evaluate procedural guarantees related to the right to asylum in favor of "speed" and "order." At this point, counter-voices reminding us of democratic balance also appeared simultaneously. A letter from the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights to the Lithuanian authorities explicitly raised the risks that acceleration and restrictions in asylum procedures could pose in terms of fundamental rights (particularly in the context of the right to an effective remedy and the principle of non-refoulement) (Mijatović, 2021).

Similarly, a 2021 review published by the Lithuanian Seimas Ombudsmen's Office opened a discussion in institutional language about the practices and compliance issues with the rights regime in temporary accommodation facilities for foreigners crossing the Belarusian border (Seimas Ombudsmen's Office of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021a). What is important here is to grasp the

following point from the perspective of TDNS, without getting caught up in Lithuania's "rights violation/no rights violation" dichotomy: when crisis language is established, the boundary between "ordinary law" and "extraordinary governance" becomes blurred not only in practice but also in the perception of legitimacy; rights begin to be thought of as a "conditional" resource rather than a principle.

The crisis was not only experienced at the border; "simultaneous crises" (pandemic management, energy prices, implementation of sanctions, social protests) within the country also fueled the hybridity discourse. Bartasevičius et al. (2025) note that the violence of the protests around the Seimas on August 10, 2021, and the camp unrest during the same period were interpreted within the framework of the Minister of the Interior's "coordinated hybrid attack." This is a critical intermediate bridge on the path to the TDNS's "habit cycle": the threat is reproduced not only externally but also in the language of internal unrest; thus, the exception can spread from a singular domain (the border) to the governing mindset.

5.2. 2022: The Context of War and the Pull of the "Symbol–Expression–Organization" Field into Security Semantics

After February 24, 2022, the threat horizon changed for Lithuania: migration pressure was no longer solely a border issue, but a part of the security order embedded in the language of "existential risk" under the shadow of war. Lithuania's declaration of a state of emergency immediately after Russia's invasion made the second and third stages of the TDNS (psychological activation and normative reweighting) traceable at the institutional decision-making level (Sytas, 2022b).

The tightening of the state of emergency in March 2022 drew the symbolic sphere, expression, organization, public demonstration, into the semantics of "risk." The debates and regulations reported by Reuters showed that the state could introduce stricter restrictions in the name of protecting internal public order in the context of war (Reuters, 2022c). Along the same lines, the April 2022 ban on symbols associated with war propaganda (e.g., "Z") in public spaces redefined the boundary between 'threat' and "expression": expression can now be treated not only as a right but also as a security vector (Reuters, 2022b). The fact that such regulations are recorded in the U.S. State Department's country human rights report shows that these restrictions are not only part of the daily news cycle but also part of institutional monitoring frameworks (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

It would be inaccurate to portray Lithuania as a country condemned to an "exception regime"; however, what is critical from a TDNS perspective is that the legitimacy of these restrictions is becoming increasingly easier to establish. Moreover, this process is not limited to national decisions: EU-level regulations imposing broadcast restrictions on Russian state media (e.g., decisions and regulatory changes concerning RT and Sputnik) have anchored the rationale of "combating disinformation" within a normative framework at the European level (Council of the European Union, 2022a, 2022b). Lithuania's extension of its ban on Russian and Belarusian television/radio broadcasts in 2024 also signals the security temporality of the war, which has shifted from being a "moment" to a "regime" (Lithuanian National Radio and Television [LRT], 2024).

5.3. 2023–2024: The Socialization of the Threat, Passports, Property, Mobility, And the Logic Of "Selective Security"

From 2023 onwards, another facet of the normative threshold shift emerged in Lithuania: the threat began to be embedded not only in events but also in identity categories. In April 2023, the parliament's decision to ban Russian citizens from purchasing real estate directly transferred the security justification to the realm of property; thus, "risk" showed a tendency to become a category associated with status rather than behavior (Reuters, 2023a). National measures that came into force in 2023 and tightened the visa and application regime for Russian/Belarusian citizens also expanded the legal toolkit for the perception of external threats (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023).

During this period, the "border" was redefined within the language of threat not only in terms of migration flows but also in terms of military and paramilitary movements. In the context of rising concerns about the presence of Wagner elements in Belarus, Lithuania's decision to temporarily close some border crossings shows that the threat horizon is now intertwined along the lines of migration-war-hybrid (Dapkūnas, 2023). From a TDNS perspective, what is being observed here is this: while the discourse of external threat narrows the field of "normal politics," it does not merely multiply the tools at the administration's disposal; it also lowers the threshold for the normalization of these tools.

From the perspective of democratic values, these years have another meaning: while security intensifies, democratic identity components such as

pluralism and minority rights continue to exist as contentious issues in domestic politics; however, they carry a constant risk of being "deprioritized" in the agenda hierarchy. For example, the progress of the civil union bill in parliament in 2023, and the intense opposition it faced, demonstrated the internal tensions of normative pluralism in Lithuania (Lithuanian National Radio and Television [LRT], 2023). The fact that the 2024 presidential election campaign largely revolved around the Russian threat and security issues is a strong indication of how this "security-centered political time" shaped the agenda (Sytas, 2024).

5.4. 2025: Legal Externalization and the Spread of the "Hybrid" Across the Country, The Balloon Crisis, Media Debates, Tests of Pluralism

In 2025, Lithuania sought to reframe the 2021 migration crisis not only through the security narrative but also on the basis of international law. Lithuania's announcement that it was filing a case against Belarus at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) demonstrates the codification of the threat narrative through "legal externalization": here, the threat becomes not only a justification for internal order but also the language of international responsibility (Reuters, 2025c). This move has a dual meaning in terms of TDNS: on the one hand, it is a quest to legitimize exceptional practices with international legal arguments; on the other hand, it is a move to consider "threat" as a permanent administrative category.

The declaration of a nationwide state of emergency in December 2025, allegedly originating in Belarus and involving "balloons" used for smuggling, exemplified the spatial generalization of the threat under the label of "hybrid." According to Reuters, the government requested broader powers, such as movement restrictions, stop-and-search, identity checks, detention of suspects, and use of force, to enable the army to support the police and border forces; the European Commission President's characterization of this as a "hybrid attack" also reinforced the discursive framework at the supranational level (Reuters, 2025b). As emphasized by sources such as the Financial Times and AP, the disruption of air traffic, airport closures, and the spread of security operations across the country created a moment where the "state of emergency" became visible not only at the border but also in the infrastructure of daily life (Financial Times, 2025; Associated Press, 2025a).

What is striking in this picture is that the discourse of external threat not only expands security institutions but also creates an environment that can exert pressure on other veins of the democratic sphere. The 2025 European Commission Rule of Law Report notes that the general framework in Lithuania safeguards media freedom and pluralism but also notes that discussions surrounding the funding model of the public broadcaster LRT and certain internal steps within the institution are causing concern. the same report also records that legal changes concerning LRT in 2024 provided additional guarantees for transparency and independence (European Commission, 2025b). During the same period, press freedom organizations and broadcasters' associations published assessments raising the alarm about political pressure and regulatory attempts on LRT; these texts provide important insights into how the components of democratic personality, namely "sensitivity to freedom of expression" and "legitimacy of opposition," are defended on an institutional level (European Broadcasting Union, 2025; European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, 2025; Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

Finally, tensions observed in domestic politics in the last months of 2025 highlight the "democratic character" dimension of TDNS: minorities, social tolerance, and public language. As reported by Reuters, protests surrounding the conviction of a coalition partner party leader for hate crimes against Jews and the coalition's decision to continue with the party nonetheless serve as a reminder that Lithuania is undergoing tests of pluralism alongside its security agenda (Reuters, 2025e). Such events show that external threats alone do not produce "authoritarian norms"; rather, they leave the question of how tolerance for "the other" and the legitimacy of dissent can be preserved in the public sphere on more fragile ground.

The Lithuanian vignette illustrates precisely why the TDNS is not a deterministic "collapse narrative"; rather, it shows how small shifts at the normative threshold can accumulate over repeated crises to transform into a new regime of legitimacy. Ombudsman reports, European institutions' rule of law monitoring mechanisms, courts, and civil society's capacity for objection appear as restraining factors against this accumulation (European Commission, 2024b, 2025b; European Court of Human Rights, 2025b; Seimas Ombudsmen's Office of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021a, 2021b). However, at the same time, the line stretching from 2021 to 2025 shows that as the "type of threat" changes, the "language of protection" can also expand, and the

extraordinary can appear less extraordinary each time.

6. MINI-CASE II: LATVIA (MSSD COMPARISON), SIMILAR THREAT, DIFFERENT LEGAL LANGUAGE?

Latvia, located just north of Lithuania, is a state situated in the same fault line of the Baltic geopolitics: part of the same alliance system (EU/NATO), surrounded by the same neighboring authoritarian regimes, carrying the same post-Soviet memory burden, and possessing similar demographic-tension lines (particularly the size of the Russian-speaking population). Therefore, the irregular crossings that rose in the summer of 2021 via the Belarus border were interpreted not as a "new wave of migration" but as a form of 'instrumentalization' and "hybrid pressure," as the European institutions also put it (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022; Forti, 2023). It is precisely this similarity that produces the value of the comparison: the claim of TDNS (Threat-Driven Norm Shift) is not so much about the existence of the threat, but rather how the threat is framed and which normative threshold it legitimizes. The Latvian case is therefore not a "country story"; it is a brief but intense trail traced through legal texts, executive language, and institutional responses.

In Latvia, the exception was first drawn on the map; then it was carved into the text. With the Cabinet of Ministers' decision dated August 10, 2021, a state of emergency was declared in certain administrative regions near the Belarusian border (Ministru kabinets, 2021). Up to this point, the picture was the same as that of its Baltic neighbor; the difference appeared in the legal language of the exception. The consolidated text clearly defined the task of the security apparatus, including the Armed Forces and the police, not as a limited "surveillance" authority with border guards, but as the authority to 'immediately' order a person to stop crossing the border or to "immediately" return when an illegal crossing attempt is detected (Ministru kabinets, 2021). This "return" order functioned not merely as an administrative directive but as a normative signal expanding the catalog of legitimate means. This is because the text also stipulated that physical force and "special means" could be used in cases of "galējās nepieciešamības" (extreme necessity) if the order was not obeyed (Ministru kabinets, 2021). The exception here was not established with an abstract "if necessary" clause, but in a legal verb tense, in the form of an enforceable instruction. From a TDNS perspective, this means that the threat not only produces authority in law but also determines which tools can be considered "normalized."

A more critical threshold emerged with the narrowing of the right to asylum in relation to administrative geography. The same decision stipulated that applications for "refugee or alternative status" would not be accepted at institutions located in the declared state of emergency zone; only border crossing points and the detention center for foreigners in Daugavpils were exempted (Ministru kabinets, 2021). This is not merely a "procedural" change from a legal perspective: Normatively, it shifts the asylum procedure from being a universal right to a spatially conditioned privilege. Here, the normative shift occurs not through a crude statement like "the right is suspended," but through the cold technicality of the phrase "applications will not be accepted." The thesis of TDNS is precisely the political weight carried by such technicalized sentences: The exception is made permanent not by dramatic rhetoric, but by a bureaucratic sentence.

The text's arrival on the ground created a simultaneity that amplified the legitimacy of the language of security. Reuters' August 11, 2021 report from the field recounts how Latvian border guards turned back groups crossing irregularly towards Belarus hours after the state of emergency was declared; this practice was justified within the framework of "hybrid warfare" and "weaponization" (Sytas, 2021). On one side, there is the scene of children shivering and people waiting in the forest; on the other, there is the state's determination to label this scene a "strategic attack" rather than a "humanitarian emergency." This intersection is important for TDNS: When the language of threat merges with legal text, "protection" no longer regulates only the border; it also regulates which rights will be visible at the border.

This first phase did not merely extend over time; it was revised within the law to make it more sustainable. The continuity of the exception does not always remain as harsh; it is often made more bearable with touches of "humanization." In the Latvian example, the decision text was expanded with provisions regarding the provision of food and basic necessities and the provision of emergency health services (Ministru kabinets, 2021). Such additions serve two different purposes: on the one hand, they reduce the actual burden in the field; on the other hand, they increase the moral defensibility of the exception. However, this does not mean that the normative threshold has been lowered. On the

contrary, reducing rights to the level of "minimum humanitarian aid" acts as a kind of "legitimacy amortizer" for the exception to be sustainable over the long term. The European Parliament's LIBE delegation's fact-finding visit to Vilnius and Riga in 2022 also bears the institutional mark of this period of border management debates at the EU level (European Parliament, Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, 2022). Therefore, in Latvia, the exception is not merely a national decision; it has settled into an area woven with mutual observation and implicit approval/objection regimes within the EU's border policy.

However, the same period also opened institutional channels for a strong counter-narrative regarding the "legitimacy" of the exception. In an August 2022 letter, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights called on Latvian authorities to conduct an investigation into reports that refugees and asylum seekers were being violently blocked at the Belarus border, held in inhumane conditions in the forest, and denied access to asylum procedures (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). From a TDNS perspective, such interventions demonstrate that "norm drift" is not automatic; the exception is always established within a legitimacy struggle. The exception is not merely declared; it is also constantly defended, criticized, and re-justified.

The highest legal stage of this legitimacy struggle has come to the fore in the agenda of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The record of the Court's hearings in February 2025 shows that there are numerous cases concerning allegations of "pushbacks" at the Belarusian border between the summer of 2021 and the summer of 2023; one of these is the H.M.M. and Others v. Latvia, in which the applicants allege that they were pushed back at the Latvia-Belarus border starting on August 11, 2021 (European Court of Human Rights, 2025a). This information is significant in two respects: First, the practice of exception has not remained merely a political choice but has become the subject of legal adjudication. Second, it means that the normative threshold established by Latvia's "return" orders will be re-examined within the European legal order through categories such as "collective expulsion" and "effective remedy." The "legal codification" phase of the TDNS now moves to the next stage: codification itself faces supranational judicial review.

In this context, Latvia's similarity to Lithuania is not limited to its response to the border crisis; the "hybrid" language of the threat quickly spread to other areas. One of the most striking examples of the transition from the border to the information sphere is Latvia's revocation of the license of the independent Russian television channel TV Rain on the grounds of a "national security threat" (Reuters, 2022a). This incident alone is not proof of "authoritarianism"; however, from a TDNS perspective, it shows what types of expressions can be drawn into the security category with what type of "risk" semantics. When the field of expression is discussed not within narrow frameworks such as 'misinformation' or "ethical violation," but within the category of national security, the legitimacy scale naturally works differently.

A similar shift emerged in the field of language and citizenship. As reported by Reuters in 2023, Latvia introduced requirements such as a Latvian language exam for certain Russian passport holders to remain in the country; this step was presented within a security narrative linked to Russia's justification of its invasion of Ukraine as "protecting Russians abroad" (Reuters, 2023b). In a way, symbolic threats (identity, language, belonging) and realistic threats (external intervention, security risk) were linked in the same sentence. A Reuters report stating that Moscow reacted harshly to these regulations in 2024, claiming they were "contrary to human rights treaties," shows that this tension also resonated in the foreign policy sphere (Reuters, 2024b). The "normative reweighting" phase of TDNS becomes clear right here: If language policy is designed not only for integration but also as an extension of the security reflex, the democratic personality's tolerance for minority rights and pluralism is more easily stretched.

The institutional traces of this tension can also be read in the European Commission's Rule of Law reports. The 2024 country section emphasizes that the Latvian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and that the media regulator operates independently; at the same time, it reports that the National Security Concept adopted in 2023 includes a proposal to restrict the production of Russian-language content in public media from 2026 onwards, which has been criticized by journalism organizations (European Commission, 2024a). This point is the most subtle aspect of the TDNS: the shift in norms is often achieved not through crude forms of censorship, but through concepts with positive connotations, such as "security of the information space," and through language itself. The 2025 report, on the other hand, states that the civil society sphere remains generally "open and stable," but notes that the online environment has deteriorated and that online attacks against journalists have increased

(European Commission, 2025a). This dual picture, the overall robustness of the institutional framework and the expansion of security language, shows why Latvia, along with Lithuania, is suitable for a "similar system" comparison: even when the democratic infrastructure has not completely collapsed, the norm threshold can quietly shift.

Ultimately, the Latvian mini-case shows how the exception can be established with different "legal grammars" in two similar systems sharing the same threat horizon with Lithuania. In Latvia, the state of emergency regime has codified the exception earlier and more explicitly by relatively directly incorporating the "return" order, the use of physical force, and the spatial restriction of asylum applications into the text (Ministru kabinets, 2021). This severity does not mean that a shift in norms is inevitable; on the contrary, it accelerates the struggle for legitimacy and produces a more intense area of scrutiny within the EU-Council of Europe-ECHR triangle (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022; European Court of Human Rights, 2025a). The implication for TDNS is this: a "similar threat" may elicit a similar response; however, what determines where the norm threshold will settle is not merely the existence of the threat, but the language of the legal code, the reflexes of the oversight institutions, and how comfortably the security justification can circulate in the public sphere. This section lays the groundwork for the next step: the divergence observed in two "very similar" countries allow for a more incisive discussion of the boundary conditions of TDNS (institutional oversight capacity, severity of discourse, level of continuity of the exception).

7. MINI-CASE III: SOUTH KOREA (MDSD SCOPE TEST), SUSPENSION OF INTERNAL NORMS IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE EXTERNAL ENEMY

South Korea's story never allowed us to forget the older shadow lurking behind the label of "stable democracy": the fact that once declared, the extraordinary could change not only the streets but also the language. South Korea therefore provides a fertile testing ground for a "very different system" comparison (MDSD) with Lithuania. The geography is different, the history is different, the architecture of institutions is different; but the figure of the external enemy serves a similar function: it produces the capacity to shift the normative threshold by translating internal political conflict into the semantics of "the survival of the state." In this country, North Korea is not merely an actor beyond the border; it is a repository of meaning that serves to constrain the "inside" using the language of the "outside" in public discourse (Green & Denney, 2024; Shin, 2024).

The starting point of this vignette is law; because in South Korea, the politics of exception is discussed through intra-rule rather than extra-rule means. The Constitution links martial law to the condition of "war, armed conflict, or similar national emergency"; and it also explicitly stipulates that in a state of emergency, "judicial warrants are required for searches and arrests" and that "special measures" may be taken with regard to freedom of expression, press, assembly, and association (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1987, art. 77). This provision does two things at once: it defines martial law as an exception; but at the same time, it incorporates the idea of suspension into legal language by specifying which freedoms can be suspended and on what grounds.

When this textual possibility is combined with an older and more enduring security law, the channels through which the language of external threats can touch internal norms multiply. The National Security Act (NSA) establishes a broad teleology in its purpose clause: to protect "state security" and "the existence and freedom of the nation"; moreover, the text also contains a warning against "unreasonably restricting fundamental rights" and "broad interpretation" in practice (Republic of Korea, National Security Act, 1948/2016, art. 1). However, the same law, after defining the category of "anti-government organization," also contains provisions that directly make internal expression and contact areas objects of security: for example, it punishes acts such as "praising, inciting, or propagating" the activities of "anti-government organizations" and relationships established with the knowledge of harming the "democratic fundamental order." (Republic of Korea, National Security Act, 1948/2016, arts. 7–8). Thus, relations with external enemies produce legal risk not only at the level of actual collaboration but also at the level of symbolic circulation and contact; the boundaries of "threat" expand from actual action to speech (Green & Denney, 2024).

The 2016 counterterrorism regime also proceeds with a similar double standard: on the one hand, it includes assurances such as "not violating fundamental human rights" and constitutional compliance; on the other hand, it deepens institutional authority. The "Act on Anti-Terrorism for the Protection of Citizens and Public Security" particularly emphasizes respect for human rights in

some of its articles; however, the same text also opens the door to capacities such as gathering information about "terror suspects" and sharing data with relevant institutions; this architecture enables the security apparatus to establish a broad information regime even in "normal" times (Republic of Korea, Act on Anti-Terrorism for the Protection of Citizens and Public Security, 2016). This corresponds to the fourth stage of TDNS (legal codification): the tools of the extraordinary become a permanent repertoire within ordinary politics.

This ground witnessed small but instructive fractures in the "expression–security" tensions in the early 2020s. A regulation passed in 2020 criminalizing the sending of propaganda brochures to North Korea was overturned by the Constitutional Court in 2023 on the grounds that it violated freedom of expression (Reuters, 2023c). The decision was akin to a renewed institutional affirmation of the "tolerance of the legitimacy of dissent and uncomfortable expression," a component of democratic character. However, during the same period, local authorities in border regions attempted to effectively prevent similar actions on grounds of security and public order, demonstrating that the threat had returned at the level of "practical administration" (Reuters, 2024c). This dual movement, judicial correction and administrative deterrence, suggests that the shift in the normative threshold is not linear but rather a state of constant tension.

The dramatic rupture in this tension came on the night of December 3, 2024. The text of the martial law decree published by Reuters concentrates the TDNS's "normative reweighting" and "legal codification" loops into a single document: the decree aims to halt activities ranging from political party activities to legislative activities; to ban collective action forms such as meetings, demonstrations, and strikes; and placing the media and publishing sphere under the control of the martial law command (Reuters, 2024a). What is critical here is not only the scope of the restrictions but also the language used to justify them: the executive branch used the claim of "protecting the liberal democratic system" as the key to legitimizing the suspension of fundamental freedoms. In other words, democracy was brought onto the stage, not as a "rule" this time, but as a "justification for suspension."

However, the same event also showed that martial law does not always work in one direction. Martial law was withdrawn within about six hours after the National Assembly quickly rejected the decision and parliamentarians under pressure breached the security cordon to reach the building; a chronology published by Reuters a year later details the speed of this process and the simultaneous forms of institutional resistance (Reuters, 2025a). Shin's assessment emphasizes that this rapid reversal shows that South Korea's democratic "immune system" still works; however, this immunity operates on the backdrop of polarization and erosion of norms that had been building up for some time (Shin, 2024). Here, the real "trace" from a TDNS perspective is not the failure of martial law, but it's very possibility: the language of external enemies and "anti-state forces" was used as a powerful semantic resource to frame ordinary executive-legislative tensions within a "national emergency" framework (Reuters, 2025a).

The events of 2025 also revealed how democratic oversight worked "after the fact." As reported by Reuters, in April 2025, the Constitutional Court ruled that Yoon's declaration had "no justifiable grounds" and that constitutional obligations had been violated, confirming his removal from office. Yoon, however, continued to defend himself with the rhetoric of "anti-state forces" and faced a judicial process on charges of insurrection (Reuters, 2025f, 2025g). An Associated Press report at the end of 2025 stated that even interim leaders who served during the crisis could be investigated and indicted on charges such as negligence and false statements; it also reported that "independent investigation" mechanisms had been expanded under the new administration (Associated Press, 2025b). This process shows that the "habit cycle" in the fifth stage of the TDNS is not automatic; in some contexts, rather than the exception being prolonged, the exception itself can be transformed into a heavy political and criminal cost.

However, the South Korean vignette is not merely a story of "resistance," as the normative threshold was already controversial before the crisis. Human Rights Watch notes that even before Yoon's martial law initiative, the administration intensively used "criminal defamation" mechanisms against critics, and that the December 3 decree contained comprehensive restrictions on media, expression, and association (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Freedom House's digital freedom reports also point to the capacity of the defamation regime to produce heavy criminal penalties, particularly in online spaces; such a punitive environment can lower the cost of "self-censorship" in society while creating a backdrop that facilitates the social acceptance of extraordinary discourse (Freedom House, 2024, 2025). Therefore, the functioning of the TDNS in South Korea is not an overnight phenomenon: the 2024 martial law could be legalized so quickly

because it built upon pre-existing normative constrictions; at the same time, it could be reversed so quickly because institutional oversight was strong (Han, 2025).

Finally, the conceptual contribution of the Lithuania–South Korea MDSD comparison is this: in both contexts, the "external threat" does not merely produce security policy; it redraws the boundaries of political legitimacy. In Lithuania, the hybridized threat horizon opened the door to the expansion of extraordinary measures by leaning on the language of "protection"; in South Korea, the North Korean threat and the "anti-state" lexicon functioned as a semantic apparatus that could present an executive crisis as a "national emergency." From a TDNS perspective, this points to a core mechanism independent of geography: the threat, before breaking the rule, shifts the boundaries of "acceptable means"; sometimes institutions stop this shift, sometimes they cannot. The South Korean example is particularly powerful for testing the scope of the theory: the withdrawal of the exception does not diminish the political-psychological significance of the moment when the exception can be legitimized; on the contrary, it lays bare the possibility of democracy being "rewritten."

8. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: THE BOUNDARY CONDITIONS OF TDNS

This section refuses to elevate the previous vignettes to the level of "proof." It reads them as stress tests to see under which conditions TDNS (Threat-Driven Norm Shift) accelerates and under which conditions it hits a wall. Because the most honest way to construct a theory is to make visible not only where it works, but also the thresholds where it stumbles: When is the exception a "temporary tool," and when does it become "regime language"; which brake mechanisms can halt this transformation; and why does the semantics of "hybrid threats" produce a particularly high-risk climate for democratic norms?

8.1. When Is the Exception a Temporary Tool, And When Does It Become The "Language of the Regime"?

The state of emergency is often designed in democracies as an "engineering solution": short-term, limited, targeted; a tool that is supposed to be withdrawn once the crisis is over. This optimistic design rests on a tension long debated in the literature: the promise to keep the "exception" within the law simultaneously produces the authority to stretch the boundaries of the law (Ferejohn & Pasquino, 2004; Gross & Ní Aoláin, 2006). This tension creates a critical threshold for the TDNS. As long as the exception remains a "tool," even if norms are suspended, the language of legitimacy is limited to temporariness; however, as the exception is repeated and broadened each time, crisis management begins to transform into a style of governance. Here, the transformation does not appear as a 'coup'; it appears as a "habit", in the minds of both institutions and citizens.

In the Lithuanian example (the focus case), the traces of this threshold become clear. Following Russia's invasion on February 24, 2022, the state of emergency declared in March 2022 evolved into a stricter regime, with discussions of "the harshest restrictions" in the areas of expression and peaceful assembly reflected in the public sphere; and measures such as blocking access to a media outlet for up to 72 hours on the grounds of "disinformation/war propaganda" were envisaged (Reuters, 2022c). This demonstrates that the "limits of legitimate means", that is, the norm, can be redrawn according to the language of crisis: freedom of expression is no longer formulated as a principle but as a variable subject to conditions.

This threshold reappeared in a different form in the nationwide state of emergency declared in December 2025 over "balloons" allegedly originating from Belarus. Here, the threat shifted from an ostensibly criminal domain such as "smuggling" to the semantics of a "hybrid attack," bringing to the fore demands for broader search, movement restriction, and detention-like powers in support of the military/police (Reuters, 2025b). The important point from the TDNS perspective is this: as the type of threat changes (migration–war–hybrid), the repertoire of language that makes the exception possible expands; the "protection" narrative gains the capacity to render "reasonable" tools that would not normally be considered legitimate. This capacity is established each time by declaring "this time it is truly necessary"; however, the repetition itself erodes the claim of temporariness (Pierson, 2000).

Therefore, the transformation into the "language of the regime of exception" must be sought not in a single moment of decision, but in three concurrent processes: first, repetition (the perpetuation of the threat horizon); second, scope expansion (the shifting of tools: from borders to information, from information to opposition); and third, the increasing cost of reversal (the politically high cost of the claim that security vulnerabilities will arise if the exception is withdrawn). This third dimension is captured in the literature by the concepts of "increasing returns"

and path dependency: once established, authority and institutions tend to reproduce themselves (Pierson, 2000). Silence/self-censorship is the social mechanism that renders this path invisible (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Kuran, 1995).

8.2. Institutional Brakes: What Can Break the TDNS Cycle?

The TDNS argument is not deterministic: the perception of threat does not always translate into a shift in norms. What determines the speed and depth of transformation is the capacity of both institutional and discursive "brakes." The report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on states of emergency clearly recalls the classic inventory of these brakes: strong legislative oversight, judicial review, time limits and "sunset clauses," avoiding restrictions on freedom of expression as much as possible, and constant access to independent media (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2009). Similarly, the Venice Commission compilation emphasizes that the scope of extraordinary powers must be clearly defined, that mechanisms for extending their duration must be subject to democratic oversight, and that principles such as proportionality and predictability must not be "suspended" during the exceptional period (European Commission for Democracy through Law [Venice Commission], 2020).

A 2021 report published by the Seimas Ombudsmen's Office in the context of migration in Lithuania provides a concrete example of how these brakes can work within the "legal language." The report addresses the protection of human rights and freedoms in temporary accommodation facilities within the framework of torture prevention obligations (OPCAT) and explicitly notes that the practice may create tension with the standard of human dignity (Seimas Ombudsmen's Office of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021a). Such reports break the "habit cycle" of the TDNS in two ways: first, they break the silence that normalizes the exception; second, they reintroduce the vocabulary of 'rights and "proportionality" into the language of legitimacy. The same braking logic becomes visible in EU law: The CJEU's June 30, 2022, decision C-72/22 PPU discussed the incompatibility of practices such as the practical blocking of access to asylum applications on the grounds of a state of emergency with EU asylum procedures (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2022). Thus, the restrictive effect of the language of "threat" is tested by a supranational regime of rights.

In Latvia, the ombudsman institution establishes a similar brake function more directly through the demand for 'proportionality' and "alternative solutions." The Latvian Ombudsman's letter dated January 27, 2023, highlights the need for regular reassessment of the extension of the state of emergency in the context of the Belarus border, which has been ongoing since 2021, the burden of providing publicly justifiable reasons, and issues of compliance with EU law; and also implies that as the crisis drags on, the persuasiveness of the "no other solution" rhetoric should diminish (Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia, 2023). This is a critical warning from the perspective of the rule of law: the real danger in a chronic exception is not so much the restriction itself, but rather that the restriction becomes a "default" that no longer requires explanation.

Another nuance is important here: institutional brakes alone are not enough; the brakes require a foundation of "acceptability," that is, a social legitimacy ecosystem. When independent media, civil society, and academia fail to produce a "public deliberation" that questions the language of the regime of exception, oversight mechanisms can be reduced to mere procedure. Therefore, it should be noted that the debates in Lithuania in the fall of 2025 regarding the governance of the public broadcaster LRT and the spillover of these debates into the streets along the axis of "independence" are not a minor detail for TDNS, but a sign of where the line of legitimacy is drawn (Reuters, 2025d).

8.3. Why Is the Semantics Of "Hybrid Threat" Particularly Dangerous?

The most vulnerable point of TDNS is that the threat takes on an 'uncertain' and "continuous" form. In NATO's strategic documents, hybrid threats are defined as a set of methods that target the vulnerabilities of democratic societies through the simultaneous use of non-military means (cyber-attacks, disinformation, economic pressure, proxy actors) (NATO, 2022). The European Commission's 2016 "countering hybrid threats" framework similarly treats hybrid threats as a form of attack with blurred boundaries, multiple actors, and widespread effects (European Commission, 2016).

This semantics poses a particular risk in terms of democratic norms: Hybrid threats are not like events with a clear end point, such as "war"; they are more like a climate. Climate, in turn, produces constant vigilance. Constant vigilance narrows the "normal" debates in the political arena, because every debate is linked to the question "does it create a security vulnerability?" Uygur and Sever's discussion of the

concept of threat is directly relevant here: threat is often not objective data, but a set of interpretive practices that can expand the security regime; the vagueness of the concept can allow the "security" category to swallow everything (Uygur & Sever, 2025).

The "information" dimension of hybrid threats is particularly sensitive in terms of norms and legitimacy, because freedom of expression and the legitimacy of opposition are tested precisely in this area. The possibility of imposing temporary restrictions on media access on the grounds of "disinformation/war propaganda" in Lithuania's 2022 regulations tightening the state of emergency is an example of the security discourse being transferred to the epistemic sphere (Reuters, 2022c). In Latvia, too, in 2022, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, media restrictions and website blockages increased on the grounds of national security through "war disinformation"; these moves were recorded in the Council of Europe's media monitoring mechanisms (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2022).

At this point, TDNS goes beyond the classic "freedom-security" trade-off debate: the issue is not merely the temporary restriction of certain rights; it is the rewriting of the line between what speech is 'legitimate' and what speech is "threatening." The text of the martial law decree announced in South Korea on December 3, 2024, provides an extreme example of this: Provisions such as the prohibition of "all political activities," including the National Assembly and political parties; the prohibition of "fake news, public opinion manipulation, false propaganda"; and the subordination of "all media and publications" to the control of the martial law command were formulated under the pretext of protecting "liberal democracy" (Reuters, 2024a). Here, the shift in norms is not only about the severity of the measures but also about the moral justification for that severity: while democracy is "protected," politics itself can be suspended. This echoes Agamben's famous paradox about the state of exception: the exception, in the name of protecting the law, transcends the law (Agamben, 2005).

In the literature, the securitization of disinformation extends this danger to a broader plane. While Bennett and Livingston's discussion of the "disinformation order" shows that disruption in the information ecosystem can weaken democratic institutions (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), a new body of literature has emerged suggesting that securitized responses to this disruption also carry the risk of narrowing the space for expression (Vériter, 2025). TDNS's warning becomes clear here: When hybrid threat semantics replace the "enemy" with "hostile information," the opposition can easily be pushed into the "manipulation" category. Thus, the shift in the normative threshold occurs not only in law but also at the boundaries of public discourse.

8.4. Expected Boundary Conditions from the MSSD And MDSD Comparison

In the comparison of most similar systems design (Lithuania–Latvia), the expected divergences arise not from the existence of the "threat" but from how the threat is translated into legal architecture. Both countries saw debates on "instrumentalization" and extraordinary regimes in the context of the Belarus border; however, the Latvian Ombudsman's insistence on "regular reassessment," "search for alternative mechanisms," and "proportionality" in the face of extensions can be read as a brake on the automaticity of the exception (Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia, 2023). In Lithuania, the ombudsman's report (2021) making local practice visible through the language of human rights and the CJEU ruling (2022) drawing a supranational line show two different channels of oversight that could break the TDNS cycle (Seimas Ombudsmen's Office of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021b; Court of Justice of the European Union, 2022).

In the comparison of the most different systems (Lithuania–South Korea), similar traces are sought not in the similarity of the tools, but in the form of justification. In the South Korean example, the state of emergency was withdrawn very quickly, and the constitutional court then produced a severe political consequence: Yoon's declaration of martial law was deemed an abuse of constitutional authority, he was removed from office, and the election process was triggered (Reuters, 2025g). This demonstrates two things simultaneously from the perspective of TDNS. First, strong legislative-judicial checks can halt the process before the "habit cycle" begins. Second, despite this, enemy language such as "anti-state forces" and the rhetoric of "protecting liberal democracy" can provide a common vocabulary that legitimizes suspending norms even in very different historical-institutional contexts (Reuters, 2024a). Thus, seeking a "similar trace" in the MDSD comparison is not about finding the same result, but about tracing the emergence of the same legitimacy logic in different systems.

8.5. The Limits of Theory: What Does "Diagnosis" Promise?

The conclusion of this section is a warning: The

existence of states of emergency is not a sufficient condition for TDNS; what is truly decisive is the form of discourse over time and the control ecology of the exception. The "sunset clause" highlighted in the 2009 PACE report, along with brakes such as legislative-judicial oversight and media freedom, are not merely procedures; they are "public memory" mechanisms necessary for the normative threshold to remain fixed (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2009). The hybrid threat climate, however, erodes this memory because constant alarm legitimizes the idea of constant exception. What TDNS does here is not to claim "causal effect"; it is to diagnose at which points democratic norms begin to become conditional, that is, where the limits of legitimate means lie. This diagnosis does not produce "results" from vignettes; but it turns vignettes into the boundary stones of theory.

9. CONCLUSION: LIVING UNDER THREAT OR BEING GOVERNED BY THREAT?

This article has not followed how a regime was "overthrown," but how a regime was rewritten. Because contemporary democracies often transform not under the shadow of tanks, but under the shadow of words: when "threat" ceases to describe a phenomenon and becomes part of the language of politics, it also defines the boundaries of debate; the intuition about which means are considered "excessive" slowly shifts. The threat itself is not a fixed object; when it becomes a category that is constructed, circulated, and politically mobilized (Wæver, 1995; Buzan et al., 1998; Uygur & Sever, 2025), the fragility of democracy ceases to be merely a matter of whether institutions "function or fail to function": it becomes a matter of the legitimacy threshold.

The mechanism of TDNS (Threat-Driven Norm Shift) begins precisely at this threshold. The threat is first established as a framework that narrows the "normal politics" field; it then produces psychological activation through uncertainty and the need for order; this activation accelerates a normative reweighting that tends to view rights and plurality not as 'principles' but as "conditional privileges"; and finally, the exception becomes codified through legal texts and procedures and turns into habit through repetition (Ferejohn & Pasquino, 2004; Gross & Ní Aoláin, 2006; Pierson, 2000). This cycle produces its own silence at every step: as the cost of citizen protest rises, the public sphere leans toward the language of "conformity"; from the outside, the regime appears to be "standing still," while from the inside, a democracy with thinner boundaries is experienced (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Kuran, 1995). Therefore, the TDNS claim differs from the commonplace observation that certain rights may be restricted in times of threat: the issue is not the restriction of rights, but the perpetuation of the way in which the restriction is deemed justified.

We tested this theoretical line with three vignettes, not to produce "evidence" but to sharpen the boundary conditions. The MSSD comparison (Lithuania–Latvia) showed that even under similar geopolitical positions and similar border pressures, the legal grammar of the exception can change. A similar threat horizon did not automatically lead to the same tools; the tone of the text, the words used to describe the authority, how continuity was justified, and the extent to which oversight bodies (ombudsman, judiciary, time limits) were involved affected the normative threshold. This finding implies that when discussing states of emergency, the question "what was done?" alone is insufficient; the question "in which language, with which justification, and with which oversight architecture was it done?" is fundamental (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2009; European Commission for Democracy through Law [Venice Commission], 2020). In other words, it is not a case of "the same response to the same threat," but rather "different legitimations of the same threat through different legal languages."

The MDSD comparison (Lithuania–South Korea) revealed something even more striking: even when institutions and historical paths are fundamentally different, the "external enemy/anti-state" semantics can activate the repertoire of legitimacy for suspending internal norms with a surprisingly similar logic. This similarity did not mean that the outcomes would be the same; the South Korean example confirmed that the TDNS is not deterministic by showing that strong legislative-judicial checks can quickly reverse the exception and that the attempt at exception can incur a heavy political cost (Ackerman, 2004; Dyzenhaus, 2006). However, the same example is disturbing from another perspective: when the claim of "protecting liberal democracy" becomes an elastic discourse capable of justifying the suspension of democratic politics itself, democracy can wound itself with its own words. This reminds us why the risk of "authoritarianism within the law" in modern literature is not only related to institutions but also to the discourse of legitimacy (Scheppele, 2018).

At this point, the real question is no longer "is there a threat?" but "should we live with the threat or be governed by it?" Living with the threat means

that democracy can take security seriously while preserving its normative core: thinking of freedom not as a concession but as the moral limit of risk management; not pushing opposition into the 'risk' category; considering plurality a source of resilience rather than a burden, even in times of crisis. Being governed by threat, on the other hand, means that security becomes the common language of politics, pulling every debate into the logic of "urgency"; it means that hybrid semantics, which produce uncertainty and constant vigilance, easily normalize the exception (Aradau & van Munster, 2007; Bennett & Livingston, 2018). The diagnosis of this study ends here: TDNS demonstrates a logic of transformation that operates without waiting for a coup; behind seemingly "normal" tools, it reminds us that the definition of "normal" can change.

The future research agenda should translate this diagnosis into empirical testing. First, the micro-level functioning of TDNS can be tested with panel data and experiments manipulating threat frames; in particular, the effects of framing on who produces "caution" and who produces "compliance/conformity" can be systematically measured (Druckman, 2001). Second, normative threshold shifts can be traced through linguistic markers (urgency, demonization, conditionality, rhetoric of protecting "liberal democracy") in legal texts, parliamentary transcripts, and leader speeches using a "text-data" approach; thus, allowing the "legal codification" phase of TDNS to be mapped more finely at the discourse level (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Third, from a comparative perspective, the combined use of MSSD and MDSD can be expanded to test patterns of "similar threats–different legal language" and "different systems–similar legitimacy logic" across more country pairs; this transforms the menu logic of case selection into a more robust theoretical testing tool (Lijphart, 1971; Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Such an agenda finally moves the TDNS beyond being a "warning diagnosis" and transforms it into an analytical framework capable of capturing the early stages of democratic erosion.

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