PEOPLES’ social networks, especially in the democratic West, have been radically altered, even reconfigured. The patterns of acknowledging and recognizing authority—both political and scholarly—have turned from a relatively hierarchic orientation (where authority is recognized to reside “at the top,” as, for example, in the political elite or expert community) toward a shape that is characterized by more nonhierarchic or horizontal—i.e., peer group—flows. A major contributor to these transformations has been the effect of social practices enabled by social media platforms. This has opened up the space for new types of politicians, politically expressed emotions, and patterns of identification. New ways of campaigning for elections have opened up avenues for large-scale external influencing of Western democracies. These new politically expressive practices further feed the polarization of citizens. Political regression at home—the weakening of widely shared social bonds and common identifications—has become possible in new, qualitatively different, and even politically empowering ways. Furthermore, this disruptive agitation opens up vectors for external powers to meddle and disrupt based on their own regressive motivations.

In many ways, President Donald J. Trump’s election campaign in the 2016 presidential election was a clear watershed. Meddling in elections by external actors is not a novelty as such. However, it became clearly recognizable in the new methods used by these actors during and in the dramatic aftermath of the 2016 elections. The Trump campaign utilized
new algorithmic tools to aggressively spread new types of news content and systematically used the slogan “fake news” against the established professional media. Either coincidentally or by design, Russian actors co-opted the “leak” method to meddle in the election process at the time. “Leaks” as a notable method was by then well established in the aftermath of the Iraq War scandals and the Edward Snowden revelations. It was recognized as a legitimate source of mainstream news. When Russia hacked the Hillary Clinton campaign and released stolen information through third parties such as WikiLeaks, new forms and tools of external meddling were in use. At the same time, people who believed in the progressive vision of the arc of history bending toward justice, democracy, and truth were left surprised as it became increasingly clear how easily tools that were meant to promote direct democracy and transparency could be utilized for opposite, nefarious purposes.

It seems that the multifarious algorithms and their ecosystems created by large corporations, large state actors, and public–private partnerships are increasingly starting to govern the pulse of polities as well as daily life around the globe. Some types of political spontaneity have receded to the background as multidimensional polarization agitates the political field, while new characteristics of the overall political scenario, including new uncertainties and unpredictabilities, have emerged driven by factious identity and loyalty expressions. Besides the forces of global value chains, the new emergent qualities challenge the traditional shapes of legitimacy, notably traditional territorial states and the stability of polities within their bordered confines. Ideologies, or at least deeply felt quasi-ideologies, have popped up as a solution to the bewilderment of citizens.

Digital platforms are an integral part of the lives of billions of people, and by using them, they are increasingly replacing, or at the very least coexisting with, older forms of global and local governance based on established multilateral institutions and political practices. Peoples’ lives—especially in the digital sense—can appear regular and orderly irrespective of the relative absence of state and international authorities governing the digital realm. This regularity of daily patterns of life is not, however, evenly distributed. The interactions are intensifying, and feedback loops and emergent qualities prevail here and there over the traditional legacy practices. The open digital domain is historically concentrated in (though not exclusive to) democracies, thereby transforming the existing political expectations, such as, for example, the institutionalized division of power between different branches of government. However, at the internal level,
the symmetry between democracies and autocracies is also being reconfigured through practices such as hybrid influence and meddling. Autocracies are enjoying newly discovered political appeal among democratic polities and their voters.

One characteristic of the overall change is time, especially the transforming tempo of events. Sequences of events, and interference in and resonation between them, seem to have become more tangible than before. Single political episodes are deeply felt. They combine reactively with other episodes. Tempo is heightened—it becomes increasingly captivating and stimulating. Clearly, the flow of events is not characterized by only their spatial modality. Time and tempo are accentuated by digital platforms in particular, where events and influencers show effects swiftly, one after the other. The speed at which global life pulses has ramifications on the various maps where life is being represented (more on this below), in markets as well as election booths. Bringing the analytic examination of power politics back to the fractious and feverish rough ground where events are given their meanings reintroduces the complexities of time and temporality into our conceptualizations about how unevenly global life is trending. Temporal processes and trajectories, which seem messy and fickle, are an important part of the meaning given to multifarious events around the globe. At this level, there are other geometries that need to be considered besides the static shapes of states—encircled by political borders—that we see on the traditional world map, or even the topological connectors within states or crossing international spaces, such as shipping lanes, flight routes, railways, roads, or undersea data cables that can be found in more complex cartographic representations. What should be noted are the regressive trajectories based on stimulation and agitations as well as the mixed tempos of acceleration and deceleration in democratic polities.

Quickening temporal processes characterized by agitated cognitive flows and downward-sloping spirals of polarization are becoming increasingly defining of the political twists and turns in established democracies. It can be argued that these tempos are emotionally both engaging and contagious. They can signify complications and entanglements and open up possibilities of regressive slides. They signal disintegrative forces instead of integrative gravitational pulls. Outside democracies, in places of polarization and state failure, where regression has shaken the very foundations of safe and secure life, these dynamics are not only questions of abstract analysis, but are painfully felt. Overall, they can be processes of contagion, as in the case of the Arab Spring that saw the contagion
of a cognitive frame, or an interpretative mindset, that spread through much of the Middle East and North Africa leading to political upheavals and serious reprisals. Or, they can be processes like the currently ongoing political winter in Western democracies with increased polarization and growing doubts over traditional norms, practices, and sources of legitimacy. For example, in terms of the legitimacy of political representation, this includes surprise, doubt and suspicion about election results, which has become a challenge in the heartlands of the Western.

Shapes, curves, and geometries, such as polarization and factious bubbling, of domestic and international politics, as well as their entanglements, are many. For example, Special Counsel Mueller’s investigations came to a dramatic and ambiguous halt in the spring of 2019. It was followed by President Trump’s call to the Ukrainian president in July, which led to the initiation of the impeachment process of the President in the Fall. This was followed by the targeted killing of a key leader of Iran in early January 2020 by the US, and the fog of escalation led to the shooting down of a Ukrainian airplane above Tehran by Iran a few days later. Also in January, President Trump’s political fate was being decided in the trial held by the US Senate. This flow of events was broken by the rapid spread of Covid-19 and the subsequent freezing of societies. Dramatic twists and turns keep people engaged with such a political drama in which internal and external politics entangle in surprising ways. What should be noted is that polities can be influenced by the ongoing digitalization, the emergence of algorithmically managed discussion platforms, and by even strategic external manipulation. The meddling has not been disrupted even by the shock of Coronavirus. The manipulation has continued via the social media platforms.¹ These shapes and tempos of cognitive flows are increasingly either unpredictable or accelerating. From the perspective of the Thucydidean framework, this leads to a concern that internal as well as external downward-spiraling processes are becoming increasingly likely.

It should be remembered that the overall political regression is a situated scenario with multiple overlapping and entangled characteristics: (1) The polarization of electorates, the fragmentation of party politics, and the weakening of the political centers are creating new realities in democracies; (2) Leaderless political movements are popping up regularly in multiple regions with unclear but loud and disrupting messages; (3) Political clashes are leading to abrupt regime changes; (4) Violent governance

¹E.g. Gitter et al. (2020).
failures are creating societal black holes in places like Somalia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where external actors are intervening and ultimately gaining entanglements that they find difficult to manage or disengage from; and (5) Diversionary actions are becoming more common as major states struggle to sustain their democratic and autocratic forms of government. These characteristics of political regression can be approached from the perspective of constituting one overall dramaturgy that takes different shapes in different situations and localities.

In the regression of democracies, the progressive vision has been partly defeated by cyber tools, biased algorithms, virulent misinformation, and shadow cognitive flows. New forms of mobilization are being crafted by strategic design, as demonstrated by the Trump campaign’s use of shady analytics provided by a private intelligence company, Cambridge Analytica, and intentional or unintentional help received from the Russian government’s hacking, misinformation, and leaking operations. The reversal of the belief at the end of history, that Western liberal democracy represents the final and universally accepted form of government, was accompanied by a revolution in political information technology. This prompts a few important questions: What other interactions, reversals, and surprises are in store as the sustainability of democracies is both facilitated and undermined by innovations in political engineering? What conceptual frameworks can shed light on such regressive—yet also partly strategic and power-political—processes that are venues for both internal as well as domestic upheavals? Ancient classics, Thucydides in particular, can arguably be of use here.

Back to the Thucydidean Basics

In classical writings, the political sphere is often defined as an intermediate terrain, as a human space, the solidification, broadening, and sustenance of which is the purpose of politics, both internal and external. Inside this political space, humans can effectively deliberate and institutionalize their political interactions in order to influence and manage the continuity of their communities and their destinies. This manageable political space opens up in between of randomness of physical surroundings and, on the other hand, harsh and brute recurrence of human violence. Thus, there are, on the one hand, happenings that are random, where there is no pattern. Political communities can be hit by natural disasters, diseases such as Covid-19,
and other forms of unknown unknowns and known unknowns. Accidents and surprises do happen, and human interaction itself contains a tendency toward entropy. Incremental and carefully thought out political deliberation can reduce the likelihood and impact of at least some of the more harmful forms of destabilizing unpredictability. Polities can be, to use a modern term, resilient. Through timely deliberation and reiteration, they can be prepared and hold sway over the multifarious accidental characteristics of their surroundings.

One the other hand, there are regular occurrences of regression that are highly patterned, historically conditioned parts of human existence. These brute and grim facts come in forms of domestic and international political regressions, wars, conflicts, and other forms of political violence. Today, terms such as hybrid war, election meddling, and destabilization operations are part of the harsher international environment. These characteristics provide law of the jungle type of conditions for political life. Human nature or the bending of history experiences violent accelerations under some conditions. Wars break out with their own rough logic. States are drawn to abuse each other’s weaknesses and vulnerabilities. These regularly occurring patterns should be avoided by healthy political communities, and if they recur, preparations for them should have been made through careful political deliberation based on well-maintained political memory.

As said, classical political theory places much emphasis on the need to keep the political space as open as possible and, where and when possible, to widen and expand it against these two types of externalities. The aforementioned limits—the randomness of surroundings and patterns of historical violence—should be guarded against and, if possible, the political sphere should expand in a secure way. That is to say, solidity and sustainability of the political space remains dependent on human will, legitimate leadership, and strategic calculation. Well-designed political systems with inclusive practices for deliberation are seen as mitigating the chances that randomness and regularity of violence will have a negative impact on the human possibilities of a good life.

In his *Laws*, Plato (1984: 628a) refers to domestic wars and internal violent conflicts as the most dangerous types of war. Thucydides is famous for his historical accounts of how a major large-scale war can break out and spread, wreaking havoc far and wide, causing episodes of domestic collapse and violent clashes between communities. Political regressions in their extreme form constitute regressive nexuses and initiate an overall
environment that sets the conditions for the spread of both international hostilities and domestic instability. They also lower the resilience of polities against the second major category of regression, disasters, and catastrophes.

The classical conceptualization refers to the possibility that domestic regression can link up with external surroundings and draw in its major actors, thereby escalating hostilities between them. For Thucydides, the circumstances of war were one “grand movement,” *kinesis megiste*. This kinetic vortex and its various side whirls were conceptualized as an overall kinesis (Greek: *ekinethe kineo*) and the width and depth referred to the scope for cross-cutting. The “grand movement” is imagined by Thucydides as a “chaos, terrible flux, a destructive kind of motion” that starts from milder destabilizing motions and grows by feeding off the further political emotive agitations that come in its horizontally widening and vertically deepening path (Monoson and Loriaux 1998). The overall Thucydidean model contains sentiment. When moving through the pages of Thucydides’s *History*, it is very difficult to not be touched by the writer’s deeply felt sense of compassion (Stahl 1966). He seems to be suggesting that, for an observer, a sense of compassion is natural when faced with such a violent grand movement. He feels for the states—especially for the small poleis—that were engulfed by the maelstrom of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides, together with his empathic reader, feels for the world that is caught in the tidal wave of war (Brunt 1967: 278). There seems to be a deeply felt longing for a mode of peace that allows for a steadier adjustment to the prevalent power hierarchies.

International conflicts fuel and are fueled by internal political regressions as well as external diversions and meddling. Regression of all types begets regressions at different levels and in different localities. It is possible that the post-post-Cold War era is witnessing the emergence of such an overall regressive political climate. The regressive sequences of actions in one place make it more likely that some form of regression will happen somewhere else—in other words, political regressions link up. For a historically aware theoretical examination of these linkages and contagions, it is relevant that international rivalry and internal regressions are said to be intimately related in their conceptual underpinnings. It is also highly relevant for the argument in this work that domestic regressions can come in different shapes and sizes according to Thucydides, and that political regression can have stages, starting from a healthy state where the polity is in rest or in a steady movement
going through increasing polarization and factionalization, and ending up with a full-blown domestic/internal conflict, stasis, with a strong external component.

The influence of Thucydides on the premodern and ultimately contemporary way of understanding regression is easily detectable. Evidence for the link is not hard to find. To begin with, Hobbes’s paradigmatic association of the state of nature with a state of war was heavily influenced by Thucydides’s dramatic portrayal of the extremely violent stasis that politically annihilated the city of Corcyra during the Peloponnesian War (Manicas 1982: 676). At least from this perspective, the image of war-like behavior is seen as related to that which can take place inside an increasingly and rapidly dis-eased political community under extreme conditions. Given the influence of this paradigm, which cuts across classical, premodern, and modern political theory, it is not surprising that external and internal political regressions are often seen as linked. Internal collapses do not happen in a contextless international vacuum, nor do international conflicts take place without the increased likelihood of domestic regressions, failures, and collapses. However, the potential implications of such historical and conceptual imaginary are often ignored because modern thinking contains another, even stronger paradigm. It is the progressive political imaginary of a liberal variety that has been in vogue, especially after the end of the Cold War.

Despite these tendencies, Thucydides has clearly come back into fashion in recent years. Contemporary writing often brings up Thucydides in connection with the possibility of a large-scale war. The concept, Thucydidean Trap, in particular, is used to analyze the world order dynamics between the existing global superpower, US, and its rising rival, China. Thucydides seems to fit our times in the sense that the US is possibly facing its first peer competitor since the fall of the Soviet Union. The world order drama has led to the popularity of Thucydides, who diagnosed the emergence of a hegemonic clash and provided a prognosis if such events were to happen again. He wrote his book as a diagnostic manual for future generations so that they could see the early signs of overall regression—both domestic and international—and avoid conflict, or at least be better equipped to try to avoid or survive it.

2 See, e.g., Allison (2018).
Contemporary times are uncertain. Much seems to be in flux, and the flux has spread to the heartland of the democratic West. The progressive narratives, expectations, and perhaps even somewhat naive wishes of the post-Cold War era are gradually receding to the background. Brute destabilizations and grim political disunity are spreading. At least for the time being, states are diverging/de-normalizing, democracy is no longer spreading, markets are not opening up, multilateralism is in trouble, and interdependencies can be used as power-political tools or weapons. Regressive linkages and processes are no longer left unattended. In regressive times, when progressive notions are failing, answers can be sought from older, more turbulence-aware conceptualizations whose temporal resilience can provide clues that the trending political paradigms have dangerously forgotten. The discursive materials of the “shadow” area of regressive processes in the classics are relevant, not only because classical thinkers focused on them, but also because the modernists have tended to ignore them as anachronistic anomalies in the grand progressive flow of history. Thucydides made a valuable contribution to our understanding of regressive political dynamics in the overall context of escalating enmities.

**From Democracy to Autocracy**

The concept of the “Thucydidean brink” refers to a stage of regressions whereby the regressive slides of states become dangerously interlinked and coupled. The regressive process involves both push and pull factors. As the general international security scenario becomes disrupted and the prevailing order international order regresses, the actors experiencing internal problems are first likely to externalize their internal tensions through different types of diversionary tactics. They can do this in various ways, such as through a military campaign to create a rally round the flag effect and waves of patriotic identity cohesion. The aim is only partly to gain foreign geopolitical successes and achievements, for such tactics also seek, and in some cases primarily, to enhance domestic cohesion and solidify identity management to legitimize the ruling in-group’s hold on power.

The key to this work is that meddling in democratic processes through cyber-enabled cognitive operations via social media as well as with the help of other forms of hybrid influencing that can destabilize democracy

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3 See, e.g., Freedom House (2019) and Linn (2018).
will result in coupling of regressive processes, between the meddling state and target state of the meddling. Furthermore, these intensive contexts are also likely to be characterized by diversionary externalizations of domestic political tensions and anxieties. They mainly stem from autocratic states with regressed characteristics, such as suppressed oppositions and controlled societies.

Paradoxically, these meddler states are dependent on the existing world order. Russia’s largely unmodernized economy is based on a very postmodern and networked shadow financial system, whereby a large part of the national wealth is invested in the more steadily rising markets of the West. China’s rise has not been based on an alternative model of global order, but, rather, on the process of relocating globally significant production functions from the market areas in the US and the EU to China. Although both states, Russia and China, have a high degree of dependency on the prevailing order and have vested interests in the West, they undermine the order either by acting as spoilers (Russia) or by gaining access and competitive edge through other means, such as industrial espionage (China). Western capitals can be seen in the context of their desired spheres of interests. From this perspective, election meddling and other hybrid influence operations have rational underpinnings. On the other hand, there are also deeper, more quasi-cognitive, and power-driven processes at play that are highlighted by the systemic worries in Russia and China about the sustainability of their situations, both domestically and internationally. One strategic desire seems clear. The weakening of democracies and disrupting their mutual solidarities toward each other appear to be in the interests of both Russia and China. The more polarized democratic states are, the more likely we are to see the emergence of political factions whose actions, to use Thucydides’s terminology, weaken the steady course of the polities in the sense of domestic as well as foreign policy execution.

Constant bombardment of misinformation and the creation of alternative factualities on a range of issues can create a wide ecosystem. This ecosystem is enhanced by skillfully producing advantageous content for different social media platforms. For example, one can read and view alternative narratives about 9/11 or many other key historical events. Well-established sources of authority are cast in doubt, including those in politics, science, and media. Factions in the democratic West are easily drawn to these ecosystems of alternative factualities. The resulting “collusion” can be quite innocent and opportunistic. No official agreements
need to be signed, no money needs to change hands. It is just based on rational choice and an unofficial bargain. At the same time, by taking positions that favor the states that are creating these ecosystems, politicians and their political movements can gain electoral background support. The ecosystem hypothesis would explain why certain odd-seeming foreign policy positions have been adopted by campaigns, politicians, and electorates in the West in recent times.\(^4\) Foreign policy rarely matters to voters. However, because of the autocratic ecosystems, they can matter to the candidates and parties. The resulting democratic vulnerability predisposes attraction toward external actors (the \textit{push effect}). It also attracts external power(s) to participate, using certain digital (and financial) methods, in the democratic infighting (the \textit{pull effect}) because of their domestic dynamics and calculations.

From this point of view, the “Thucydidean brink” can be understood to highlight a point when push and pull factors meet in a way that further feeds the democratic regression of the Western state in question and fulfills the diversionary objectives of the external autocratic meddler. The narratives of worry prevail in both Russia and China. They feel squeezed and encircled. They are constantly seeing signs of Western cultural interference and even subversion, i.e., active hybrid operations by Western actors (Bougon 2018). Usually democracies are, still, politically healthier despite the polarization and political drama within them. They have transparent and legitimate processes for power transition and domestic power conflicts, as well as open societies. In many of the measures of stability, from corruption indexes to media freedom indexes, they are still relatively stable compared to states like Russia and China, which face existentially more critical questions even if they appear stable and monolithic as they score seeming foreign policy victories and the West appears increasingly dis harmonious.

It can be argued that the linking of regressions—the external–internal nexus—involves the coming into being of historically and culturally meaningful sequences of reciprocal actions that constitute wider regressive trajectories—a grand movement. This is important to note. It links the Thucydidean brink model to the recently fashionable Thucydides’s Trap hypothesis.

\(^4\) For example, the Trump campaign put pressure on the Republican Party to change its platform on helping the Ukraine in 2016 (Johnson 2017).
**Thucydidean Model of Political Regression**

To uncover how regressive scenarios can contain brink characteristics, we use an approach that draws from the classical writings of Thucydides and Aristotle on the phenomena of enkratia, akrasia, and stasis. The reason why Thucydides is especially relevant for the brink hypothesis is because he delineates the idea that the regression and failure of a political community is inherently tied into intercommunal warfare. From a Thucydidean perspective, a failed and extremely regressed community in a state of stasis may still direct its previously internal political bonds outward, thereby actively attracting foreign elements and powers into mutual cycles of regression.

Political communities at earlier stages of regression are more likely to externalize their internal conflicts and engage in what can be called a diversionary war. They are attracted to meddling in the affairs of (certain) others. It can be further argued that in their externalization, these states may be attracted toward communities in a deeper stage of regression. Or, the attraction may be targeted at states that they perceive to be their peer competitors. In the case of Russia, for example, the US has been seen as a special signifier of a great power—a status that Russia lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Meddling in the US is partially motivated by the reversal of the Soviet collapse, as a demonstration that Russia matters and that its return to global superpower status should be acknowledged. For the present Russian leadership, the politico-cultural relationship with the US is deeply meaningful for both rational and irrational reasons. The US and the West in general are also seen as sources of domestic danger. The fear of color revolutions in combination with the historical reasons which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union is baked into a seemingly unified theory, where the West is seen as being actively engaged in actions that are antithetical to the cohesion of the Russian Federation. China’s fears are perhaps qualitatively different, but bear a close resemblance to Russia’s case, including Russia’s need (as a way to overcome its fears) to

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5 In his historical study of revolutionary France, Ozouf (1984: 579) states that terror during those times “becomes less striking if it is viewed as inseparable from war.” Terror can be thought of as an essential part of war, namely, as a part of a type of war, or war can be thought of as a kind of extension of terror.
meddle in Western democracies, and in particular in US domestic politics. However, China is in a better position to become a genuine peer competitor than Russia.

Overall, different phases of regression can be placed along a continuum that ranges from healthy political communities to stasis-ridden “anti”-communities and that can explain the push and pull effects at various stages either toward meddling upstream—in states that are not as regressed as the meddler—or downstream—in states that are more regressed or fully regressed.

The external–internal nexus draws from three important elements in contemporary world politics. First, the intense forms of political regression from polarization to violent upheavals are often framed as contagious processes and pictured in terms of disease-like conditions. Second, the concept of state failure offers a modern signifier of extreme political regression. Third, different conceptualizations of diversionary practices and war provide a dynamism, which, on the one hand, highlights the international consequences of various states’ in-group worries over their sustainable hold on power and, on the other hand, explains how a linkage of war materializes between states. These modern notions can be approached from a classical perspective. The Thucydidean notion of extreme regression—stasis—as a disease-like contagious process of communal failure can still be used to diagnose the regressive embedding of contemporary world politics.

The first important point of similarity between the Thucydidean understanding of regression and modern thinking on political violence involves disease metaphors and ideas of regression as contagious. In Greek thinking, political regressions, and especially their extreme form, were associated with the plague (Kalimtzis 2000: 7). The Greek concept “nosos” describes both the condition of political chaos/confusion and the outbreak of an epidemic disease. Thucydides’s account of the Athenian plague points out the resulting general lawlessness in the city in a way closely resembling the account of political stasis that hit the city of Corecyra during the Peloponnesian War.

This classical template finds its match in the modern understanding of political violence. Political disruptions and violence, and its subcategories, are often referred to in disease terms (Zartman 1995: 9; Price-Smith 2008: 159). Disease and contagion metaphors are often used to make tangible the dangers of extreme political violence. The outbreak of a war is seen as a process similar to a contagious disease in terms of
spreading and intensifying. Similarly, terrorism and acts of terror are seen as contagious (Hamilton and Hamilton 1983: 41). It appears that this way of formulating political violence in epidemiological terms reenacts the classical template of regressive dynamics, which is borrowed from Hippocrates. Furthermore, the concept of contagion also offers intriguing parallels between modern and classical interpretations of political regression. Thucydides describes how the episodes of stasis ran their course from polis to polis. This was similar to the plague of Athens detailed by Thucydides as spreading between and within human body and from community to community. While spreading, regression steadily increases in intensity, as fear of it leads to increased vulnerability to it. In modern studies, a nuanced and complex analysis of political regressions often points to the contagiousness of violent acts. The term “contagion effect” in here refers to the idea that political violence and disorder in one region or state increases the likelihood of similar occurrences and events elsewhere.

Human nature is regarded as essentially imitative of and responsive to other peoples’ behavior. We follow highly intense and visible events (Govea and West 1981: 349). The literature on spread makes constant reference to the type of social contagion that is quasi-cognitive (Motyl and Pyszczynski 2009: 267). It involves the visual aspect as well. “Seeing” or “witnessing” events, e.g., through social media seems to reveal the “true” nature of circumstances. Some expressive patterns become notable, visually clear, and repeatable. It can follow that contagions are difficult to control, because the scope, speed, and directionality of spread can be unpredictable and take rational expectations by surprise. However, it is often proposed that the spread requires an external component as well as some type of internal conditions to take hold, i.e., both push and pull factors. Furthermore, it seems that the spread moves downstream, whereby it spreads from politically important places—for example, major cities or regions—to places lower in the hierarchy of power. Seeing riots, out of control demonstrators, and violent events in places with high status can lead to a spread easier than witnessing similar events in places with lower status. The disorder and use of violence in these places and by authorities/states of high status are followed intensely. The places and the actors are visible and therefore stimulate more response and imitation. The hierarchy effect means that the main actors and main places of using

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6See, e.g., Ross and Homer (1976: 1).
or experiencing significant violence and chaos can increase the likelihood that the occurrence begets events of similar quality, which continue to intensify and/or spread.

Feelings of belonging and identification are important facets of regressive contagions. The rally round the flag effect has already been mentioned. Large-scale operations or movements draw attention. They stimulate at the level of identity and solidarity. They can pull people together or tear them apart. Contagion is possible if there are endogenous groups with at least the beginnings of identities conducive to political violence domestically or externally. The manifest or latent group identifications are prerequisites for contagion: the more heterogeneous the dormant group structure is in a particular state or area, the more there are “seeds” of contagion. However, it can be hypothesized that heterogeneity also lessens the consequences of the spread of regression since it leads to fragmentation of the regressive contagion. If potential patterns of identification point to division between a clear in-group and unified opposition, an out-group, the possible political consequences can increase. In the case of domestic trouble, the prevailing order can be lost quickly with a unified opposition staging a visible event in an important region. In a more heterogeneous situation, the contagion stimulates fewer people, and it is easier for the in-group in power to maintain its position and manage the flow of events although sporadic violent events might take place.

This background is relevant mostly to violent upheavals and deep internal political dysfunction. However, in a modified form, it is also relevant for the initial stages of political regression, such as polarization and its external component, meddling in critical processes such as elections. How and through what mechanism does the external component take hold in the target population? What types of stimulations, divisions, identifications, and hierarchy effects are possible in different democratic target states that have not yet regressed that deeply? More importantly, how does a deeper regression of an autocratic state turn into effective externalization and, through such projection, start to affect and regress a democratic state? What are the particularities of this scenario?

These questions seem extremely relevant to the deeper understanding of the overall scenarios of election meddling and hybrid interference of different kinds. For example, in the case of Russia, how do its domestic regression and in-group worries contribute to the deepening of regression in Western democracies? For states at an earlier stage of political regression, the learning process seems to be important to the spread
Contagion can assume different forms: the transmission of symbolic-performative content (e.g., slogans of war against Christmas, climate change as a Chinese hoax, China-virus, or foreign rapists and murderers), spread of technical mimicry (e.g., how to engage and spread misinformation and spin/time leaked content), and, importantly, propagation of immunity (how to heal rifts, manage scandals, or resist polarizing techniques).

The inwardness versus outwardness dimension of regressive tendencies is of utmost importance from the perspective of their contagiousness. When acts of regressive slide are contained within a domestic frame and remain domestically directed, it creates a context that pulls in external actors. The actions of external forces can remain in a shadow as situational awareness is internally focused. Blind spots are created. Heated elections in polarized democracies can especially create tunnel vision, whereby external actors and their diversionary activities are left unchecked. Alternatively, when the domestic political drama is intense enough, the acts directed toward external actors can play a minor role and gain minor visibility. This can increase the likelihood of different degrees and types of collusion. However, the politically reactive cognitive frame can be broader from the outset or broaden as the regressive scenario evolves. The acts start to constitute a highly visible push factor that leads to externalization toward foreign actors. For example, diversion can be clearly motivated by internal troubles in a democracy, or at least public doubts of it can surface in conjunction with major political dramas, such as the impeachment of a president and foreign actions. When President Clinton ordered the bombings in Iraq in the middle of his impeachment, there was suspicion that this was done, at least partly, because of domestic reasons. Similarly, President Trump’s military actions have been suspected of being attempts to divert attention away from his domestic troubles. In addition, as the US economy and lack of federal leadership became apparent during the Corona crisis, the suspicions about China’s growing global role and secretive attitude in the initial spread of the pandemic intensified. The domestic tensions led into externalization for good and bad reasons. In these cases, the directedness of contagion had to do with the spread of the in-group’s worries and its identity troubles.

However, these scenarios of drawing-in and projecting-out rarely happen in a pure form. In both cases, the very concepts of “foreign,” “external,” and “foreigner element” become a topic of intense debate. Identity wars prevail. Possible diversionary actions become entangled with domestic politics and foreign dynamics are hard to separate from the
internal circumstances. This scenario is especially relevant for noticeable cases of election meddling. The dividing line between the state targeted for meddling and the meddler state becomes increasingly blurred. Doubts, suspicions, and worries abound. The situation can become neurotic and increasingly erratic. The involved states turn into parts of the same intensifying nexus.

The Thucydidean model of regression highlights the process of extroversion, when previously internal bonds start to turn inside out. When this Thucydidean brink happens, the competitive factions start to scan around for possible partners in acts of collusion. They stretch toward external surroundings, trying to find attachment points in different foreign actors and elements that can be attracted to intervene or are motivated to become involved because of their own political regressions. The political factions of a dis-eased state are attracted to foreign help in their internal struggle against each other. The key characteristics of a healthy political community, shared political friendship, can start to turn into its opposite, shared political animosity. The brink describes this threshold: domestic political rivalries can become the primary source of motivation and posit themselves above the negative feelings felt towards international competitors and enemies.

However, diversions tend to happen before the final, most paralyzing phases of the regressive vortex, where the polity is too involved and too fractious to pull together any meaningful foreign operation or meddling. The main faction of the dis-eased state, its in-group, mobilizes political resources and stretches identities in a domestic battle to confront outside elements in the belief that this will be helpful to the worsening internal situation and power struggle. They see potential solidifying effects in finding, confronting, and fighting foreign elements. In a democracy, the likeliest time for this to happen is when the leading dominant group in power fears a loss in elections and the consequences of power transition. In an autocracy, this can be part of relatively constant power transition phase that is always of concern in terms of its manageability and legitimacy. The autocratic in-group can also see and react to issues that, in actuality, are nonexistent as the internal opposition is too repressed and fragmented to pull together meaningful resistance. Uncertainty and loss of critical self-reflection in the absence of meaningful opposition can result in a tendency to see tactical opportunities in foreign adventures, interventions, interferences, and meddling. For example, the Russian sponsored
war in the eastern Ukraine can be seen as a diversion that initially led into solidification of factional tensions inside Russia (Theiler 2018: 318).

Thucydides brings the theme of externalization to the forefront of his histories. Diversions such as foreign military expeditions can happen because and as a function of the domestic bonds that are weakening. Domestic healing is attempted through successes abroad. Diversions are primarily externalizations. Externalization is a defensive instinct aimed at solidifying the standing of one’s in-group by projecting the in-group’s domestic fears and anticipations of possible threat into the outside world and to its hostile elements. For example, an authoritarian in-group can perceive outside elements as threatening and fearsome, instead of recognizing similar characteristics (or factors favoring such an evaluation) in itself. Blame is put on the outside foreign elements by projecting and judging the in-group’s own nature and methods onto others. This can proceed to a neurotic level, whereby it is driven not by strategic calculus but by an irrational and instinctive emotive mindset toward the external world. Thucydides gives a tragic example of this in a lengthy and detailed pedagogical narrative of the disastrous expedition of Athens against far-away Syracuse (Thucydides 1954: 18–19).

Thucydides describes how Athens was being plagued by private domestic ambition, outright hubris, among conflicting factions when it undertook the disastrous military campaign against Syracuse. A contrast with the thinking of Isocrates (436–338 B.C.) can be used to illustrate what Thucydides had in mind. According to Isocrates, external warfare and war against far-away places result in together-mindedness at home (e.g., Kalimtzis 2000: 182). In this, Isocrates antedated the Roman saying, *Externus timor, maximum concordiae vinculum*—the key to unity is to find an external foe. Internal struggles are set aside when there is a common struggle against close-by or far-away enemies and foreign elements. External enemies and threat perceptions can be used not only to find common cause, but also to show how domestic political rivals resemble them. In this sense, the process of finding enemies in the external environment is driven by domestic motivations. For Thucydides, what Isocrates suggested was a symptom of underlying regressive processes instead of being a healing medicine. Thucydides warns against hasty externalizations of domestic struggles and restlessness.

The highlighting of the theme of distance and foreignness is, in this interpretation, signs of deeper stages of political regression. For Thucydides, the process of externalization is related to the ability to avoid
exposure. Externalization can be defined as the projection to external places of things that are repudiated and not tolerated in one’s own place, such as conflict and disintegration. That is to say that externalization involves mechanisms to clear away things the community fears to find in itself. However, from the Thucydidean perspective, externalization makes external political events integral parts of domestic processes even with larger actors like Athens, thereby binding matters into a difficult to control complex of interwoven matters, into an external–internal nexus.

Moving to a modern equivalence of Thucydidean notions, the concept of diversionary war is clearly on the list. The use and significance of violence becomes a key component of group cohesion and sense of belonging. Diversionary war provides an additional element to understanding the spread of political regression. In terms of rational choice, the diversionary war model\(^7\) can be defined as follows: Leaders faced with domestic troubles, such as anticipation of being dethroned, often choose to undertake adventurous foreign policies to create cohesion and to “divert attention from their domestic failures” (Smith 1998: 625), ultimately even embarking on aggressive foreign policy leading up to a war for such ends (Levy 1989: 666).\(^8\) The basic rationale of an actor engaged in such externalization of civil conflict stems from the belief that in-group cohesion tends to increase with out-group conflict.\(^9\) It is notable that the direction of causality is thought to be straightforward: Domestic problems can increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior against perceived foreign actors and elements (Dassel and Reinhardt 1999: 56). The influence of foreign “pull” and “attraction” is born in the increasingly neurotic political and geostrategic imaginary of the domestic in-group of a regressing state.

Gelpi (1997: 256) argues that when faced with internal problems, a state’s in-group has three general approaches from which to choose. First,

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\(^7\) For the numerous classic types of diversionary war, see, e.g., Bodin (1955: 168).

\(^8\) The examples of diversionary war include the German role in World War I (e.g., Gordon 1974), the Falklands War (e.g., Levy & Vakili 1992), and the October War (Gross Stein 1985). The case studies tend to find support for the diversionary war hypothesis, while systematic empirical studies often fail to find positive evidence. The more systematic studies include Lebow (1981), Levy (1989), and Gelpi (1997).

\(^9\) For sociological research supporting this notion, see, e.g., Coser (1956). The game theoretical formulations include Clark (2003).
it can appease the domestic opposition through dialogue and concessions. Second, the leadership can repress the opposition by more coercive means. And, third, it can try to restore a favorable internal status quo by cohesion-creating military activity abroad. The depth of the regression affecting a state has implications for the likelihood of using diversionary strategies. The spread of domestic protests and the emergence of opposition increases the likelihood of foreign diversionary practices. However disruptive these protests might be, their general form still signifies a degree of in-group cohesion. A foreign diversion together with a rally round the flag effect may offer a solution to these early signs of in-group troubles. When the in-group troubles have escalated to the point of internal violence, a foreign war might not be materially feasible and motivations might be intensively focused on the internal front. It should be noted that for a disintegrated in-group, anything “foreign” is already conceptually problematic and the ability to pull together any meaningful foreign intervention is minimal. Mobilizing energies are concentrated on finding foreign elements in those domestic groups and factions that threaten the survival of any meaningful in-group.

**Classical Stages of Regressive Slide**

The major advantage of the neoclassical approach is the dynamism it brings to the interaction between state failure and diversionary war. With the help of Thucydides and Aristotle’s formulations concerning violent political regression, it is possible to bring otherwise disparate elements under a common framework. The regressive vorticity, downward-sloping political slide, involves three important stages: communal togetherness, split-mindedness, and extreme stasis. All of these have consequences for the nexuses comprising attractions, externalizations, and diversions. Next, I will review these stages.

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10 Morgan and Bickers (1992) claim that the type of domestic conflict especially prone to externalization is when a leader loses the support of their own party. Dassel and Reinhardt (1999) claim that diversionary war is relevant only if the military as well as politicians feel threatened by domestic strife.

11 See, e.g., Levy (1989).

12 The use of foreign wars and conflicts in American politics has been quite well studied (e.g., Morgan and Bickers 1992). Many studies have found a pattern of externalization present in American politics.
Stage 1: Healthy Together-Mindedness

At the heart of classical politics was a normative idea of self-restraint, both in the individual and communal senses of the term. This stoic mentality was shared by both Greek and Roman political thinking up to the time of Marcus Aurelius. The idea has left its powerful legacy on modern political thinking. Private motions and interests were restrained by the common interest, shared steady movement, and the communal sense of a shared end-goal, telos. Accordingly, in the classical sources, there is a quite common assumption that, for a political community to emerge, a capacity of mutual understanding is needed. This mutual understanding can be arranged according to numerous desirable constitutive principles, such as republican oligarchy or steady democracy. Furthermore, there is an underlying thought that a political community needs to be able to take care of itself and to protect itself against internal and external pressures. The citizens should share a belief that the community needs to be defended. Framed in this way, the progressive narratives that recount how steady and anchored together-mindedness should prevail are in the forefront of classical and modern discussion.

Thucydides puts the emphasis on the human nature of politics. The borders of this political space are, on the one hand, hard facts that cannot be negotiated, and, on the other hand, the accidental events that take place irrespective of human will. A healthy polis provides a locus for the maintenance and expansion of the political space. Healthy politics makes the community and its members relatively immune from the negative effects of nature’s laws and from the unpredictable and fierce consequences of the haphazardness of nature. This builds trust among citizens and strengthens bonds of fundamental political friendships. From this perspective, steadiness and incrementalism are key. There should always be time. Alikeness among the citizens increases the probability that tomorrow will be as steady as today. Alikeness refers to the sense of sharedness among citizens. They hold similar memories and a similar sense of the politically sacred. Thucydides emphasized what he called “provident delay” and “planning” as the key characteristics of healthy political deliberation (Laurie 1993: 98). The stress is on the sustainability

13 See, e.g., Burns (2011).

14 Similarly, Aristotle intertwines alikeness at the level of common opinions to what is likely in the future (e.g., Aristotle 1984: I, 1, 1355, b18).
of political space as a process that leaves time for argument and political prognostication. Thucydides’s purpose is both heavily diagnostic and prognostic. The aim is to allow the community the time and the means to make the necessary corrections in order to stop the regressive process from taking full effect.

For Thucydides, common memory is fundamental for a healthy political community. The beginning of the regression leading to a full-blown war affected the political memory. But before that, the leadership should provide citizens mnemonic aids in the form of common rituals, festivities, sacred days, and stories of the past. When the community regresses, alternative memories and narratives start to surface—comparable to the contemporary talk about dis- and misinformation—and memory aids and heuristics about the past start to lose their previous politically sacred value. The community is in danger of facing clashing narratives of a shared past and future. Lack of similarity among the stories told by the various citizen groups leads to unpredictability and unsteadiness. The narratives start to emphasize perceived inevitable necessities—such as the “might is right” type of memories—or they may accommodate recollections of immediate violent events and passions of the moment (Thucydides 1954: 2.54). Political memory shortens. Amnesia prevails. In giving it memory aids that are instrumental in resisting the powerful effects and affects of regression, Thucydides recommends for the political community a set of defense mechanisms against political regressions.

Thus, proper communal memory recaps past horrors and mistakes as pedagogic stories that carry teachings aimed at steadying the communal path forward (Cogan 1980: 168). It is reminiscent of internal and external upheavals and their causes from a particular normative standpoint. Thucydides emphasizes rhetoric and speeches by political leaders as the locus of memory. This brings to mind Entralgo’s defining of the aim of rhetoric: “the mission of rhetoric is...not to persuade but to discover the persuasive element” (Entralgo 1970: 177). It is crucial to note that the goal is to continually sustain and reestablish the constitutive element of community. Communal together-mindedness is a playground for alikeness and variations of it in a way that leads to likeliness and predictability when it comes to the future of the community. The idea is that the relatively high degree of firmness both in the sense of sharedness and in the sense of a future gives room for healthy political deliberation.
Stage 2: Split-Mindedness

The political nature of justice is emphasized by Aristotle in connection with the strength of together-mindedness.\textsuperscript{15} He perceives justice as fundamental for a political community. All political decisions should arise from considerations and motives aimed at solutions that are perceived as just by the citizens. This just political aim promotes the staying power of general political friendship in a manner that promotes a good communal life (Kalimtzis 2000: 37). If the glue loses its adhesive power, political friendship loses its benign meaning. Aristotle’s term “living together” refers to the binding of conflicting tendencies into one goal-directed process. Action within such a living together situation is a binding force as well as an expression of mutual cohesion and boundedness. In other words, the praxis of common action is directly related to the staying power of together-mindedness. At the same time, such shared praxis represents what is meant by a healthy polis.

As split-mindedness deepens—the modern term for this would be polarization—it brings with it spreading anger and hatred. Shared narratives split and become fragmentary. Healing political rhetoric becomes increasingly difficult and speeches become empty. In a sense, the growing feeling of injustice provides a counterforce to the sustainment of the political community in a healthy state. With injustice, dis-ease starts to take hold. For Thucydides and Aristotle, the beginnings of regression, leading to internal upheaval and violence, are at the level of the emergence of an individual’s apartness and isolation from the political context. The term \textit{akrasis} refers to the relative failure of individual and collective self-restraint. Split-mindedness, as a phase of political regression, involves an increasing number of individuals who are inside the bounds of a community’s politics, but feel alienated from and untouched by its bonds of affinity and political friendship. As akrasia spreads and takes hold, the community increasingly becomes a group of isolated and estranged people and their factions. Common movement becomes replaced by a sense of disappointment and disillusionment. Commonness reduces to factions, and to their erratic kinetic clashes at the rhetorical level. As perceived

\textsuperscript{15} “…justice, alone of the virtues, is thought to be ‘another’s good’, because it is related to our neighbor; for it does what is advantageous to another, either a ruler or a copartner. Now the worst man is he who exercises his wickedness both towards himself and towards his friends, and the best man is not he who exercises his virtue towards himself but he who exercises it towards another; for this is a difficult task” (Aristotle 1984: 5, part 1).
injustice is the fundamental reason for the growing number of akratics, the deterioration of the sense of political affinity between the members of the community involves a shift from political justice to a system that only resembles it and, eventually, one that is dissimilar to it (Aristotle 1984: 1134a 24–30).

Akrasia refers to the weakening of the mind and will, which results in deeper emotional and behavioral incontinence when it comes to expressive behavior. As a result, one acts in a way that one knows is not appropriate and does not quite know the reason why. Another example of akrasia is the failure to deliberate from abstract reason all the way to practical action or vice versa (Rorty 1997: 208). An akratic person who has failed in integrating thoughts with desires is in a constant state of having at least two equally likely courses of action open to them and, therefore, is always in a conflictual and unpredictable state. Acts of anger are generalized, blind, unpredictable, and irrational. In the Aristotelian sense, the objects of desire, which can override thought, include such things as victory, honor, wealth, and good. Behavior can lead to excessive desire of honor or self-interest and self-worth. The strong desire to win—as in the case of the tragically unsuccessful Athenian expedition to Sicily during the Peloponnesian War reported by Thucydides—can make one do things that are contrary to what one thinks one and one’s community should do.

The failure to act inside the bounds of together-mindedness at this phase of regression lessens the staying power of the community by subtracting a number of healthy citizens who would act in concord and support with it. A small number of isolated persons do not constitute a full-blown regression. At this stage, the political community contracts into some type of majority, which can even make it more coherent and stable in the short term, and some elements are closed out of the in-group. Much of expressive political behavior turns from a way of signifying communal bonds into a tool of representing the in-group’s cohesion. It becomes cleansed and purified. The in-group can even perceive this as a healing process, thereby not only confusing the communal sustainability with its own internal cohesion but also ultimately deepening the regression of the political community.

16 Another distinctive feature of anger is that, unlike many passions, it is backward-looking (Rorty 1997: 648). The source of the anger, the perceived injustice of the past, needs to be remedied.
It is important to note that in the process of split-mindedness, there is an important threshold. In the course of a regressive dis-ease, there is a critical moment from when the disease can proceed to increasingly morbid forms or it can take a turn for the better, back to the first stage or a dive further into the vortex of political regression. Furthermore, this threshold marks the point beyond which the community cannot engage any more in any meaningful curative practices. The community turns away from even attempting the reintegration of the growing numbers of marginalized people. Political cures become less and less obvious as random and erratic actions stemming from hate prevails and replaces any unity of communal action.

At the stage of acutely spread split-mindedness, the spirit of general injustice offers a seeming and tempting alternative to what one ideally thinks and does. Through contagion, the powerlessness can turn into a virulent type of empowerment when shared values stemming from a general sense of various injustices come into being. At the second stage of split-mindedness, the akratics connect with their fellow akratics through programmatic bonds that are directed against the established faction—i.e., the in-group—and against everything representing it. This unusual situation is a catalyst for further spread of the regressive syndrome because such a feeling of empowerment is unexpected and can release an explosion of deeply held yet not cognized desires and lead to a host of actions that are hasty and unpredictable. The resulting sense of political convulsions and movements may be catching and difficult to resist. It can easily “ignite” the situation into one of generalized political akrasia—into that of fatal regressive upheaval/collapse, stasis.

Stage 3: Stasis

In a full-blown stasis, the continuing sense of injustice turns the beliefs of emerging political movements into a doxa. A diversity of various politico-religious doctrines can emerge to empower new factions. The common theme unifying the emerging factions is a shared anger toward the other factions, and against the prevailing in-group in particular. In this way, passion motivates judgment and leads to shared and programmatic actions of hatred. The programmatic nature of hatred points to an emergence of a separate inventory of values: “Dissatisfaction of itself is too unstable and reactive to give rise to the intellectual justification for remolding society anew. An underlying secession from a joint system of values to a separate
set of values is necessary. The rage and animosity, which a perception of injustice engenders, gain permanence and direction only because they are organized and filtered through a new set of values” (Kalimtzis 2000: 119). The once prevalent inventory of values disintegrates into separate sets of values. These new values fuel the communal infighting and hatred.

One of the most striking details of stasis provided by Thucydides is the way in which the prescriptive values lose their coherence and become the reverse of what they were: “Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question inaptness to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; caution plotting, a justifiable means of self-defense. The advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent a man to be suspected” (Thucydides 1954: 3.82). Thucydides continues his list in a way that highlights the extroverted nature of values. That is, the values had changed from those instituted through previous interaction to those characterized by deep hatred and extreme violence. In the middle of intense rampant regression, the popularity of common values decreased as individual survival and desires became the foremost concern.17

The increasingly rapid and violent process of stasis signals the hardening of akratic positions and the emergence of programmatic justifications for the entrenched hatred (Kalimtzis 2000: 119). The coupling of akrasia and stasis through the shared element of a widespread sense of detachment and spectacular rash actions creates a virulent atmosphere of insecurity and opportunity. Such hatred substitutes the communal logos maintained by practical wisdom, phronesis, with randomness and excess. The communal boundaries, as guardrails of a political space, become squeezed as the community becomes exposed to both randomness and law of the jungle type of events. The phantasms of revenge and retribution become the source of pleasures, which are excessive and arbitrary:

17 In the case of the Athens plague, Thucydides describes how “[m]en now coolly ventured on what they had formerly done in a corner, and not just as they pleased, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying and those who before had nothing succeeding to their property…. Perseverance in what men called honor was popular with none, it was so uncertain whether they would be spared to attain the object; but it was settled that present enjoyment, and all that contributed to it, was both honorable and useful.”
“...the pleasure of punishment become[s] unbounded and retribution may be out of proportion to the original, real or perceived infraction” (Kalimtzis 2000: 119–120). From this perspective, the appetite for retribution is even higher against former political allies than it is toward strangers because hatred finds a more defined object in a former friend whose agonies have more meaning than those of complete strangers. As the actions in a properly constituted political community are defined by shared friendship, the same community under stasis comes to share hostility and hatred. The intensity of these phantasms of hatred makes the community inflicted by stasis distinct as an entity just as the intensity of political friendship made it.

Thus, the stasis turns the political community inside out: Hatred becomes the “cohesive” factor of a community in stasis and friends are found from afar rather than from near. The notion that the enemies of one’s enemies are one’s friends aptly illustrates the end of a political community: “In peace there would have been neither the pretext nor the wish to make such an invitation [to call in foreign help]; but in war, with an alliance always at command of either faction for the hurt of their adversaries and their own corresponding advantage, opportunities for bringing in the foreigner were never wanting to the...parties [of stasis]” (Thucydides 1954: 3.82). The above saying also shows the degree of pleasure and excess that takes hold in the condition of deep stasis, whereby people can direct their diffused anger into common acts of specific hatred.

A further symptom of stasis is that the communal space is temporalized. Time becomes increasingly scarce. One feels the need to act as soon as possible and provident delays no longer play a role. Thucydides’s account of regressive political processes captures vividly how citizens turn attention away from together-mindedness and toward the immediate fulfillment of narrower interests. The temporalization and increasing tempo of events lead to the importance of doing something—of finding some “cure” and “relief” for political desires—immediately. Two extreme vices become manifest: unreasoned boldness and rash quickness (Edmunds 1975: 75, 81). The unreasoned and bold manner in which actions are taken contrast with the “provident delay” under conditions of healthy political friendship. The primary virtue becomes decisiveness. The temporally restricted situation easily leads to the conclusion that what is going to be done must be done in a bold and straightforward manner.
The other stasis-intensifying value is frantic rashness, which Thucydides calls “the small sharpness of a little soul” (Thucydides 1954: 3.82–83). The phrase echoes the narrowness, especially in terms of interest, represented by such action, of frantic rashness. In the case of boldness, those who demonstrate moderation are easily regarded as enemies: The hatred prevailing under stasis leads to repulsion directed toward those who advocate restoration of together-mindedness. However, it is even more generalized as former compatriots become foreigners and enemies. When the constitutive element has turned into a shared deconstitutive element of repulsion, quickness becomes the norm. Rapid actions are of value because they have their own redemptive logic and retaliatory desire—act or be acted upon, kill or be killed. Paradoxically, the failed stasis-ridden community has an element of together-mindedness in that it is held together by shared hatred. In terms of the regression model, the disappearing political affinity has caused violence that turns the community into an anti-community. The additional property of this black hole-like anti-community is the intense “gravitational pull” that it exerts on other states in the initial stages of political regression, when it is still capable of launching a diversionary war. The contagion of this type of political violence is not merely geographical. The direction of the contagion is also cognitive and based on group affinities and identity closeness—i.e., through geographically distant external to internal linkages and vectors. The direction and intensity is determined by the ability of the different factions to frame events in a gripping manner.

**Modified Six-Stage Regression Scale**

The neoclassical approach can further distinguish between different scenarios of contagion and spread of the slide. Political regression inevitably becomes externally reactive, in a different way at different stages, and directed toward different “foreign” entities depending on their stage of regression. Thus, regression does not happen in a vacuum. It is exported as well as imported depending on the stage at which it is.

What were previously internal bonds making the community cohesive are now links that are increasingly outwards directed. The external bonds react with external entities, with perceived friends and foes. These regressing communities attract external actors and stimulate factions in them to launch diversions or bonding. It can be argued that the appeal for foreign meddling and intervention is especially irresistible for states in the initial phase of disintegrating together-mindedness. These actors still have sufficient coherence and means for labor- and resource-intensive
projections of force toward perceived enemies, or to come to the aid of factions or in-groups in foreign places experiencing turmoil.

It is possible to subdivide the phase of split-mindedness into two separate stages. During the regressive Stage 3, the community is still capable of healing activity and cohesion. The primary argumentation and political rhetoric are still conducted in the shared register of gaining back a lost sense of political cohesion, although there might be competing visions of what constitutes a “proper” sense of communality. However, the methods of restoration and revival used at this stage of regression can easily be the constitutive elements of further regression. The discourse of stage 3 is characterized by securitization, hardening of attitudes toward deviance, externalization, projection of force, and growing suspicion. In a related modern context, Dassel and Reinhardt (1999) paraphrase Samuel Huntington’s famous remark: “each group employs means which reflect its peculiar nature and capabilities. The wealthy bribe; students riot; workers strike; mobs demonstrate; and the military coup.” Such a contested situation, in which commonly respected rules disappear, is prone to lead to diversionary interventions, different acts of meddling, and acts of war. The heightened sense that something is seriously wrong may be projected outward to the perceived foreign hostility. Political communities in this phase cannot easily resist the temptation to embark on foreign wars and interfere in the internal affairs of other communities. These externalizations are launched in the name of defending the cohesion of the domestic community.

During the regressive Stage 4, the community is incapable of common actions and turns increasingly inwards. Political infighting gains ground and programmatic factions composed of akratics come to define political life. The community starts to appear ambiguous and becomes an increasingly erratic collection of disparate groups. It is difficult to tell who is in charge, to discern recognizable organization, and to make out the respective identities and capabilities of people. The infighting and “internal” projections of force are increasingly violent and easily spiral out of control. Rather than being capable of externalization, the factions “internalize” against each other.

Split-mindedness is characterized by language games of mutual distrust, hardening of attitudes toward moderation, and an inclination toward marginalization, temporalization, haste, boldness, and unreasoned
actions. On the other hand, the community is prone to be indirectly or remotely influenced by foreign powers. Rather than being a source of diversions as is characteristic of states in Stage 3, states in Stage 4 become the objects of diversion. The process of further failure is intensified for both internal and external reasons: “And the trend toward violent disorder may prove self-sustaining, for war breeds the conditions that make fresh conflict likely. Once a nation descends into violence, its people focus on immediate survival rather than on the long term” (Mallaby 2002). In the infighting, political factions easily resort to foreign assistance. In this way, the factions in communities in Stage 4 of regression are prone to turn for allies and resources to states in Stage 4 or actors at the threshold between Stages 3 and 4. This process of coupling is reinforced by the push effect of externalization that characterizes communities in Stage 3.

The communities in Stage 3 can engage in curative practices when the first symptoms of possible regression emerge. The curative ability means that the spread of contagion elsewhere leads to further immunity. From this perspective, it can be argued that the process of contagion is mirrored by a process of spreading immunity. The caution and externalization of communities comprise attempts to find a cure, to immunize oneself. Communities in Stage 3 engage in externalization mainly to get rid of internal causes of political regression. However, whereas the methods of the communities in Stages 1 and 2 are genuine and phronetic, the methods of those in Stage 3 are often methods of cohesion only in name.

Based on classical sources, a three-phase model of political regression as related to diversionary war is possible. The model draws from the writings of Thucydides and Aristotle. It is based on low, moderate, and high levels of civil strife. The low level of civil conflict is unlikely to motivate foreign wars. On the other hand, the high level of civil crisis makes it increasingly unlikely that a state is capable of projecting force externally. Secondly, it is suggested that a moderate level of civil tension can increase the likelihood of different types of externalization of the internal conflict. Finally, states that experience high internal conflict and civil strife may be regarded as optimal targets for projections of force. In these cases, a mutually engaging push–pull situation emerges.

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18 On the victimization that precedes and accompanies humanitarian crises, see, e.g., Harff and Gurr (1998).
The emergence of a frame and enveloping flow depends on the existence of linking elements in both the external power and the failing state. The in-group cohesion model that defines much of the diversionary war hypothesis leaves the question of why diversion takes the direction it does. What stimulates and inspires the search for in-group identity in diversionary actions that range from meddling, interfering, and intervention to war? The answers to this question are varied: Historical animosities between states, cultures, or even civilizations can become important ingredients of the diversion imagery in search for an expressive direction. Material goods and resources also explicitly induce diversionary behavior. However, perhaps the most important source for stimulation comes from the presence of an imagined foreign element. In the intensity of the external–internal nexus, the distinction between “us” and “them,” together with that of “domestic” and “foreign,” is increasingly complex. This further increases the significance of various “aliens,” “illegals,” and “foreigners” inside the state territory.\(^\text{19}\) In a way, the regression brings enemies closer at the same time that their identities become increasingly murky. Some factions become united and form mutual bonds that determine future dynamics.

I conclude the chapter by bringing the Thucydidean framework into more contemporary times and terminology. The high political drama in the US and the scandalous nature of its erratic movements illustrate that well-established democracies can feel regression and become dis-eased. This observation allows for the introduction of more elements to the contemporary overall regressive slide and to evaluate the motivations felt by states at the different stages to, on the one hand, externalize and interfere in the affairs of other states that are on their own regressive paths and, on the other hand, to attract external actors to meddle in and engage with their heated domestic environments. The following stages sum up the overall modified Thucydidean regression scale advanced in this study and shed light on the possible nexuses that can increase the likelihood of diversion and interference.

1. **Stage of Cohesive Democracy:** A deliberative ethos and self-restraining attitude characterize a healthy contemporary state. Political affairs are taken seriously and approached with caution and restraint. The

\(^{19}\)In this context, the talk about “fifth columns,” especially during the first half of the nineteenth century, about the enemy, provides cases in point.
state turns into a central object of political desires, and society moderates and anchors private impulses. In a way, a citizen becomes a lover of their patria, and the community becomes the object of this feeling, a beloved entity. The staying power and continuity management of this sentiment is held as an essential virtue in politics. Political leaders are the ones who, in a measured and controlled manner, speak for the good of the community instead of achieving their own impulses and desires. Moreover, private motions and interests are restrained by the common interest and the communal sense of purpose, telos. Healthy political deliberation takes time, and it values time as something that must exist. The stress is on political space as a process that leaves time for argument and political prognostication.

A healthy state of affairs is the hardest for outsiders to meddle with. It has a high degree of immunity against foreign influences. The opportunities for interventions, interference, and meddling are scarce and subversions take time to arrange and likely have no lasting impact. To a degree, non-regressed states are relatively immune to the many forms of hybrid influencing that have become possible in great power competition, taking place in and through various domains. However, it should be remembered that in today’s transnational world of flows, no state is free from disruptions that might come in surprising shapes, where there is only little, if at all, time for political deliberation. There are diverse forms of disruption and resilience is harder to achieve in a situation in which feverish global flows are essential for national economies and societies.

2. Stage of Vulnerable Democracy: The deterioration from a healthy state of affairs toward the Thucydidean brink of regression becomes increasingly self-feeding as the polity is destabilized. Thucydides focused on the loss of steady memory as one of the early signs of growing political disease. The regressing private and public mind may start to lose control over memory practices that restrain and moderate. The polity becomes increasingly exposed to external necessities—for example, interventions or meddling by outside powers—or it may start to accommodate the recollection of immediate events and passions of the moment (Thucydides 1954: 2.54). At the same time, when something highly striking and dramatic takes place, the community can become biased toward the radical. In such a situation, the community redefines its memory practice and starts to take clues from the random characteristics of the flow of events instead of being anchored to a healthier long-term political
memory which taps into the societally maintained inventory of historical examples and mistakes. While healthier practices would remind the polity of wars and their causes and consequences, dis-eased memory no longer enables it and its leadership to function steadily and coherently. Political demagogues get opportunities to emerge. This empowerment of polarizers and their political rhetoric provide a constitutive element in the further temporalization of the regressing polity’s memory.

Moreover, these newly unleashed political forces can see advantages and political opportunities in what was previously considered to be unwise agitation, cleavage creation, and, even, different types of collusion with external, state-based, and transnational elements and influences. With the leeway given to political opportunism, the possibility increases of whimsical courses of future action both internally and externally. Courses of action get more entangled, they are no longer carefully calculated and strategically thought out. At the same time, this is viewed from the outside with intensifying interest and excitement.

Signals that attract are sent to other states. This is registered first, and most strongly, by states that have already regressed beyond the brink, beyond the two healthy stages. They can see, on the one hand, foreign policy opportunities and, on the other hand, potential for internal political gains by domestic in-group hardliners in their respective states. Successful interference in a healthier polity with a higher status can be seen as a victory that solidifies the in-groups and, to a degree, legitimizes its domestic standing. For the state that sent the signals of vulnerability, regressive influences are accentuated and societal polarization starts to spread inward from foreign sources. A dangerous nexus becomes firmly established. This is the essence of the Thucydidean brink, when both the foreign and the domestic arenas of competition become increasingly entangled. This can take a state in second stage beyond the brink. For a relatively functional democracy, this means deeper and more frozen polarization, and possible constitutional shake-ups in which actions are taken to mute or even repress the domestic opposition. Polity’s key institutions stop working and balancing power equations. Increasingly, the fundamental legitimacy of the political process becomes undermined or denied.

3. Stage of Suppressive Autocracy: The state is still capable of de-escalating its dis-easing. Healing activities are still possible. The in-group has shrunk in the name of solidity and is in need of internal purity.
The polity is integrated in name only. The state can signal together-mindedness, but compared to Stages 1 and 2, these are based on the use of brute force. The shrunken but more internally coherent in-group leads to the exclusion of opposing elements. Repressive actions against the opposition lead to the splintering of the opposition into factions. Any strategies and tactics that might unify the factions into a dynamic opposition are actively subverted and managed by violent means. For example, Russia’s regime under President Vladimir Putin has squeezed the opposition because of fear of a color revolution in Russia. The in-group worries persist, but the regime shows a unified face in terms of the outside world. Investments in the military and security apparatus remain high as compared to the underlying resources devoted to internal suppression and repression of the opposition. The military resources can be used abroad to create a sense of Russian might that is hoped to make the Russian leadership appear more legitimate.20

However, a state at Stage 3 is also increasingly nostalgic about its lost and imagined political health. The primary political argumentation is done in the shared register of gaining back a lost sense of political cohesion, some imaginary golden time in the past. However, the repressive and calculative methods of restoration and revival used at this stage can easily become the constitutive drivers for further regression. This stage is characterized by securitization and hardening of the attitude toward deviance. Paranoia can become a prevailing sentiment. The suspicion that foreign elements are behind any domestic trouble is omnipresent. This increases the likelihood of direct or indirect externalization, of projection of force toward the perceived foreign powers and the interests that are seen as instigating trouble and instability at home. A further characteristic of Stage 3 is suspicion that the regression will deepen, and factions will emerge inside the in-group. This anxiety about potential collapse and perceived problems in moving through necessary power transitions casts any acts of disagreement in a negative light of fear and suspicion. These sentiments might be real, since the members of the in-group hierarchy are seeking shelter, security, and sustainability. This can lead toward diversification tactics that might not be suitable for the purposes of managing the in-group’s solidity.

What emerges is increasingly self-interested behavior, individualization, and fragmentation of interest at the expense of any sense of in-group

20 See, e.g., The Washington Post (2014).
solidarity. As a result of these tendencies toward identity fragmenta-
tion, in-group solidarities are in need of constant testing. They are
evaluated and approved through loyalty—for example, in taking part in
domestic polity management and foreign diversionary operations. 21 Such
a contested situation in which commonly respected rules disappear is
prone to lead to diversionary actions and even war. The heightened sense
that something can be seriously wrong may be projected outward to the
perceived foreign hostility or can take the form of aggressively holding
one’s own interests at home and abroad under tight control. 22 States at
this stage cannot easily resist the temptation to embark on foreign wars
and interfere in the internal affairs of other communities because of the
in-group’s insecurities and lack of any meaningful opposition to provide
alternative views for reality checks. These diversions and externalizations
are launched in the name of defending cohesion and rooted identities,
and under the misguided sentiment that the victorious status of the state
will somehow remedy the situation.

4. Stage of Fractious Autocracy: During this even more regressive
stage, the state is incapable of common actions, and turns increasingly
inward as the political environment is pregnant with anticipation of
intense outbursts of unrest and violence. The in-group is fragmented and
can no longer externalize its internal issues into foreign places in any other
sense than by claiming that the domestic opposition is actually composed
or supported by “foreign elements.” It simply lacks resources and mobi-
lization capabilities. The in-group is increasingly exclusive and shrinking.
Violent means need to be used to maintain the regime’s viability. Any
signs of opposition lead to arrests and other forms of repression. The
whole sense of society starts to appear ambiguous and becomes an increas-
ingly erratic amalgamation of disparate groups. It is difficult to tell who
is in charge, to discern recognizable organization, and to identify the
respective statuses and identities of the political participants. The polit-
ical infighting between factions inside the former in-group is intense
and cannot be hidden from the public. The “internal” projections of
force toward perceived opponents are increasingly violent and can easily

21 See, e.g., Dassel and Reinhardt (1999: 81).
22 The Russian use of military grade nerve agent to kill a former spy on UK soil
provides an example (March 2018) of how domestic elements can be reminded of the
need for loyalty abroad as well, in places where regressive Russia has considerable political
and financial interests.
spiral out of control. Rather than being capable of or motivated by the logic of externalization, the factions “internalize” against each other. At Stage 4, the key actors are characterized by deepening mutual distrust and violent hardening of the attitudes toward all types of “moderation.” The spreading of hatred leads to growing repulsion and aggression toward those who advocate the restoration of together-mindedness. The general inclination is toward temporization, haste, boldness, and unreasoned actions. The remnants of the in-group can appeal for outside help, thereby further muddying the boundary between the domestic and the foreign. Other factions are reactively active as well. The situation is at this point seriously sliding toward the next brink, the deepest stage of regression.

Foreign powers are drawn in by the in-group, which has turned into a regime faction, and by other factions. The support still needs to be justified—mostly in name only—by the laws, constitution, and political customs of the state. However, the reasons for inviting foreign support are relatively easy to manufacture for the in-group, for its opposing faction, and also for the foreign intervening power. For example, the call by the Syrian regime for Iran and Russia to intervene on its behalf, as well as the involvement of Turkey and the US in Syria, can be partly understood within this model. This is even if, arguably, Syria had already regressed to the third stage, while still holding a viable and cohesive in-group. The factions in communities at Stage 4 of the regression are prone to turn to democracies at Stage 2 and autocracies at Stage 3 for allies and resources. This process of coupling is reinforced by the push effect—and consequent externalization—that characterizes communities at Stages 2 and 3. It responds to the pull—invitations to intervene—by states at Stage 4.

5. **Stage of Failed Autocracy:** When the regression proceeds even further, political failure and collapse set in. The increasingly rapid and violent processes signal the hardening of uncontained—akratic—positions and the emergence of programmatic justifications for the entrenched hatred (Kalimtzis 2000: 119). The coupling of uncontained actions and spreading hatred with a widespread sense of detachment and spectacularly rash decisions creates a virulent atmosphere of insecurity and opportunity. The shared hatred starts to substitute communal purpose with randomness and excess. The phantasms of revenge and retribution become a source of pleasure, which can be excessive and arbitrary: “...the pleasure of punishment become unbounded and retribution may be out of
proportion to the original, real or perceived infraction” (Kalimtzis 2000: 119–120). As the actions in a properly constituted political community are defined by shared friendship, the same community under intense regression increasingly starts to share hostility and hatred.

The state starts to become the equivalent of a “black hole” in the sense that it invites foreign interventions as a power vacuum. However, it can no longer mount strategic externalization in any other sense than people fleeing the epicenters of extreme violence. On the one hand, states at Stage 5 lack the resources to implement a concerted effort to use war and other means as a diversion. On the other hand, these states do not have the will to mobilize against foreign actors because the “foreign” is found within the domestic polities. At Stage 5, the previous in-group fragments into factions that try to expand and gather support among the out-group as well as foreign elements. The situation is one of civil war. The state doxa turns into competition over anti-groups that have their mutually exclusive definitions of what has happened and what should happen through violent purges in the future.

6. Stage of Chaos: The state which has regressed into the final stage of regression is characterized by extreme factional violence. The state becomes extroverted, turned inside out. The previous bonds that were directed toward the domestic groups now move toward external surroundings, actively trying to attract outside elements from nearby and far away in the hope of receiving help in eliminating domestic rivals. The shared sense of being a nation is lost for years and decades. The earlier doxa, which was based on some degree of nostalgia for oneness, nation, being a patriotic citizen, and cohabitation, ceases to exist. The new doxa of an extroverted anti-community is based on shared hatred instead of even nominal political friendship. The common theme uniting a faction is one of a shared anger toward other factions. In this way, passion motivates judgment and leads to shared and long-term programmatic actions of hatred. The once prevalent inventory of values disintegrates into separate sets of values. One of the most striking details of stasis provided by Thucydides is the way in which prescriptive values lose their coherence and become the reverse of what they were.

From an external perspective, these “polities” at Stage 6 became problematic. Participation in their final stage of regression can be resource-consuming and do not produce the desired effect in terms of rallying anyone round the flag. These extroverted anti-communities are usually
avoided if they do not pose problems in terms of refugee flows or spread their hatred in the form of terror. These can lead to destabilization in states at Stages 1–4 and provide popular support for crisis management operations. On the other hand, major powers can be drawn in, to a degree, for status reasons. The humanitarian interventions in the 1990s and 2000s were in some cases motivated not only by a desire to maintain humanitarian values, but to demonstrate one’s status as a responsible great power by doing so.  

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23 See, e.g., Aaltola (2009).
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