The Sustainability of Obedience: A Comparative Analysis of Political Behavior Between Fear and Trust

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Article

The Sustainability of Obedience: A Comparative Analysis of Political Behavior Between Fear and Trust

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Abstract Politics in all regimes hinges on ordinary acts of obedience, yet the mechanisms that sustain it differ. This article theorizes "sustainable obedience" as obedience (i.e., rule-following and deference to collectively binding authority) that reproduces itself because the marginal costs of monitoring and sanctioning are kept low by institutional and cultural feedback. We develop a dual-channel model: a fear channel (deterrence through selective coercion and information control) and a trust channel (procedural justice, impartial enforcement, and legitimacy) that interact through path dependence and habit formation. Mixed methods combine cross-national indices (V-Dem, Freedom House, World Values Survey) with comparative discourse and document analysis (2014–2025) to trace these mechanisms in three contrasting regimes: the Netherlands (liberal democracy), Turkey (competitive authoritarianism), and Russia (closed autocracy). Findings show trust-based obedience dominates in the Netherlands and is temporarily supplemented by proportionate deterrence during crises; Turkey institutionalizes a high and persistent fear architecture, with limited compensatory appeals to performance and electoral legitimacy; Russia sustains obedience primarily through multi-layered coercion and digital control backed by ideological narratives. We derive testable propositions about substitution and complementarity between channels and show how crises can normalize exceptional measures. Normatively, democratic resilience depends on renewing the trust architecture without entrenching fear; authoritarian resilience remains cost-effective yet ultimately fragile under information shocks.

Keywords fear; trust; obedience; authoritarianism; democracy; liberal democracy; competitive authoritarianism; closed autocracy

1. Introduction

In democracies as well as autocracies, politics ultimately works through people's obedience: filing tax returns, voting, complying with court rulings, accepting curfews in emergencies, even unconditionally obeying mobilization orders in wartime … This simple observation reveals a deeper paradox: obedience exists in every regime; however, in authoritarian contexts, it is often made sustainable by fear and the threat of punishment, while in democratic contexts, it is made sustainable by trust and perception of legitimacy. In Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) [1], social order is secured by the transfer of "fear" to a rationalized apparatus of sovereignty; Rousseau, in *The Social Contract* (1762) [2], makes the citizen's consent to the "general will" the source of obedience. Arendt's [3] distinction between violence and power conceptualizes the fragility of fear-based obedience, while Tyler's [4] legitimacy-based theory of conformity conceptualizes the resilience of trust-based obedience.

Terminological note. In this article, we use obedience as a regime-neutral umbrella term for the behavioral outcome we aim to explain: the regularized enactment of collectively binding rules and authoritative decisions in everyday politics (e.g., paying taxes, accepting emergency restrictions, respecting court outcomes, participating in elections). In contrast, compliance is treated as a more specific subset of obedience, typically used in the legal-regulatory literature to denote rule-following in defined domains (e.g., tax compliance, regulatory compliance), often operationalized in ways that foreground enforcement, incentives, and monitoring. Because our dependent phenomenon spans both formal legal obligations and broader political acts of

deference to authority, we retain obedience as the encompassing concept, while using compliance when referring to narrower, domain-specific rule adherence.

Crucially, employing "obedience" in democratic contexts does not imply blind submission or authoritarian command. The trust channel developed in this paper is precisely the argument that, in liberal-democratic settings, obedience is often legitimacy-based and self-regulating: people follow rules because institutions are experienced as procedurally fair, impartial, and predictable, which generates a felt obligation to obey even when sanction risks are low [4,5]. This understanding is consistent with work on quasi-/semi-voluntary rule-following grounded in perceived state fairness and competence [6] and with political support/legitimation frameworks that locate rule-following in justified authority rather than coercion alone [7,8]. Put differently, the term "obedience" stays constant, but its sustaining mechanism varies by regime type, fear-based in some contexts, trust-based in others.

This article proposes introducing the concept of "sustainable obedience" into the political behavior literature. The concept of sustainable obedience emerges from a gap between two influential but largely parallel research traditions. On the one hand, the political behavior and legal legitimacy literature explains why individuals follow rules, highlighting procedural justice, legitimacy, and trust as drivers of rule-following even when enforcement is weak [4–6]. On the other hand, the comparative authoritarianism literature explains regime survival through institutionalized mixes of legitimation, repression, and co-optation, and through coercive organizations and risk management [9–12]. What is less explicitly theorized across both traditions is the temporal reproduction of mass rule-following: *how obedience becomes "cheap" to maintain over time* because institutional arrangements generate feedback loops that lower the marginal costs of monitoring, sanctioning, and securing consent. "Sustainable obedience" is introduced to make this cost-and-feedback dimension analytically central and comparable across regime types. Sustainable obedience is defined as a form of obedience that reproduces itself if the marginal cost of enforcement/control (monitoring, sanctioning, and legitimacy-production) is low, reinforced by institutional and cultural mechanisms. This definition analytically combines both authoritarian governance on the fear–punishment axis (intimidation, deterrence, exemplary punishment) and democratic governance on the trust–legitimacy axis (procedural justice, inclusive representation, consent). The justice–legitimacy link in Levi's [6] "quasi-voluntary compliance" thesis, voluntary compliance thesis, Luhmann's [13] positioning of trust as an institutional means of coping with uncertainty in social systems, and Hardin's [14] "trust as encapsulated interest" approach strengthen the normative and analytical foundations of this framework. The three pillars of authoritarian stability, legitimization, coercion, and co-optation [9], provide a theoretical bridge showing the conditions under which fear-based obedience is cost-effective and reproducible.

Thus, the study connects two rich but often parallel bodies of literature. The first is the political-legal compliance and procedural justice literature, which examines why and how citizens comply [4,5]. The second is the comparative authoritarianism literature, which investigates how power is maintained in authoritarian regimes and which institutional tools sustain obedience [10–12,15,16]. While the first cluster mostly demonstrates that legitimacy and procedural justice increase harmony in democratic-legal contexts, the second cluster focuses on the political economy of obedience and risk management through mechanisms such as the architecture of repressive apparatuses, election manipulation, and elite sharing. This article aims to combine these two universes through the lens of "sustainability", explaining not only the formation of obedience, but also the logic of its continuation and reproduction.

The theoretical contribution of the article is twofold. First, we propose a dual-channel model: (i) Fear-based sustainable obedience, through the strategic dosing of coercive capacity and visible punishment (high but stable deterrence, selective examples, the impression of "watchful eyes everywhere"); (ii) Trust-based sustainable obedience, obedience that triggers norm internalization through procedural justice, predictability, and participation channels, evolving over time into habit and the logic of appropriateness. Second, we add the insights of path dependency and increasing returns to this dual model: legitimate procedures and inclusive representation make compliance "cheap" over time; conversely, when comprehensive coercive apparatuses are established, the cost of reversal increases, and fear-based compliance also becomes "cheap", but remains fragile. Thus, sustainable obedience is the product of feedback loops established between institutional design and behavioral repetition [7,17–19].

We will test this framework on three different regime patterns: the Netherlands (liberal democracy), Turkey (competitive authoritarianism/"Not Free"), and Russia (closed autocracy).

The regime typologies in V-Dem's [20] 2024 and 2025 reports, along with Freedom House's [21] current country classifications, demonstrate that this selection ensures both theoretical diversity and measurable contrasts. Furthermore, World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 data [22] provides standardized indicators of "trust in government" and institutional trust, allowing us to empirically track the trust-based obedience channel.

Current crises, pandemic, war, and disinformation make this discussion not just theoretical but an urgent practical issue. Multinational studies during the COVID-19 period showed that trust in government is one of the strongest predictors of voluntary compliance; these findings confirm that the legitimacy–obedience channel works even under emergency conditions. In contrast, authoritarian regimes can turn the crisis into an opportunity for "demonization" and deepening control capacity, thereby increasing the risk of the "normalization" of fear-based obedience [23,24].

Furthermore, over the past decade, evolving forms of authoritarianism have established the sustainability of obedience through new tools: the "spin dictators" model, which operates not through brute force but through media–perception management and targeted repression; simultaneously, the mainstreaming of populist discourse can erode the trust–consent channel in democratic contexts. These two trends make the debate on the sustainability of obedience critical not only theoretically, but also in terms of regime resilience and democratic resistance [20,25,26].

The article's empirical strategy is to combine V-Dem, Freedom House, and WVS secondary data with comparative document/discourse analysis (constitutional and legal regulations; leader speeches; crisis narratives). We will thus test which discursive, institutional, and behavioral tools make both fear and trust channels long-lasting, how they are dosed differently in the three regimes, and under what conditions they can substitute for each other. The findings will have normative implications for strengthening the architecture of trust in democratic regimes and revealing the dependencies of the coercive apparatus in authoritarian regimes. Ultimately, our argument is this: the sustainability of obedience is not a zero-sum choice between fear and trust; it is a dual and interactive balance depending on the circumstances, and regime types produce this balance through different institutional combinations. The cost of this production depends on the marginal rate of substitution between legitimacy and coercion technologies. Therefore, democratic resilience is possible not only through institutional design but also by producing habit and norm internalization through repeated fair procedures, transparency, and inclusive representation. In contrast, authoritarian resilience, to the extent that it relies on the routinization of fear by combining selective–targeted coercion with visible examples, remains fragile in the face of high shocks [4,9,11].

In the following sections, we will elaborate on the theoretical model, present the methods and data sets, and trace the configurations of fear and trust channels that produce sustainable obedience through case studies in the Netherlands, Turkey, and Russia. The discussion section will evaluate the limits of the "dual model", its points of interaction, and the outcomes of democratic resistance/authoritarian persistence through inter-regime comparison; the conclusion section will synthesize the implications for theory and policy-making (For theoretical context, see [19,26,27]).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptual Map: Dimensions and Limits of "Sustainable Obedience"

This study approaches the concept of obedience not merely as a singular act of "following orders", but as a behavioral regularity that is reproduced over time and has gained continuity with low monitoring and low sanction costs. "Sustainability" here is not a normative praise but an analytical feature: In a political community, control intensity (probability of being caught, severity of sanctions, administrative capacity) and consent intensity (legitimacy, trust, perception of justice) combine with different weights to lower the marginal cost of obedience. These two channels, fear and trust, are not alternatives to each other but rather mechanisms that are substitutable and coexistent in different regime types. Distinctions made in the literature between "compliance", "consent", and "legitimacy" [4,7,8] can be read as a scale in this context: in the coercion–interest–norm triangle, fear-based channels are closer to the "coercion/interest" corner, while trust-based channels are closer to the "norm/justice" corner. Therefore, sustainable obedience is simultaneously the product of both the expected cost/punishment calculation [10,11] and the perception of procedural justice and impartiality [4,28].

This dual-channel understanding is reinforced by the processes of path dependence [18], habit, and norm internalization: Institutions shape citizens' intuitions about what is "appropriate" through repeated experiences [17]. Conformity behavior turns into routine through repetition, routine into expectations, and expectations into public reason [29,30]. Thus, the fear channel is fed by predictable sanctions and information control, while the trust channel is fed by predictable procedures and impartial enforcement.

Below, we distinguish between the two channels in terms of their micro-foundations, institutional devices, cognitive-emotional underpinnings, and conditions of fragility, and in the final section, we combine them into an interactive model.

2.2. Fear Channel: Micro-foundations, Institutional Architectures, and Fragility

Micro-foundations. Fear-based obedience arises, in its simplest form, when the product of an individual's "probability of being caught" (p) and "severity of sanctions" (s) exceeds the expected benefit of disobeying (expected utility approach). However, this bare model leaves out the cognitive and symbolic dimensions of the political sphere. Selective and visible punishment raises the perceived probability of being caught ($\hat{p}$), even if it keeps the actual p and s constant, it produces the image of the "state that sees everything" [12]. Preference falsification and the spiral of silence [31,32] serve to impose a low-intensity but constant deterrent on opposition in the public sphere: People conform not only out of fear of the price, but also out of fear of isolation and loss of prestige.

Institutional Architectures. The three pillars of authoritarian stability, legitimization, repression, and co-optation, provide the architecture that makes the fear channel "sustainable" [9]. The institutionalization of the security bureaucracy (party–military–police relations), targeted repression (selective repression), information architecture (censorship, disinformation), and distribution networks (rent, public resources) work together [11,33,34]. "Informational autocrats" or "spin dictators" [25] replace raw violence with thick propaganda, agenda management, and limited but measured repression: Compliance relies not on the *constant* use of violence, but on its credible yet infrequent use and the *reminder* of violence [35].

Cognitive-emotional Foundations. The sustainability of the fear channel relies not only on cost calculations but also on uncertainty management. Cognitive shortcuts like pessimistic bias and risk aversion lead to over-compliance [36]. Threat perception and out-group vilification are constant sources of authoritarian language; presenting the other as morally inferior and dangerous spreads the impression that punishment is "deserved" [37,38]. Crisis narratives, terrorism, war, and epidemics normalize the "extraordinary" justification for obedience; the state of exception becomes a technology of governance [39].

Vulnerability and Backlash. The fear machine is hungry for information: High censorship *blinds* the ruler to the regime's real support; the dictator's dilemma [10] grows. Excessive and indiscriminate repression can produce martyrdom and delegitimization, creating a "backlash" [15,40]. Therefore, sustainable fear requires targeted/measured use and legitimacy reinforcement: "Performance legitimacy" (growth, security) and legitimacy frameworks such as "tradition/religion" reduce the raw cost of repression [11,41]. Nevertheless, major shocks (economic collapse, military defeat) and elite divisions can instantly render the fear channel fragile; accumulated preference storage can turn into sudden unraveling [42].

2.3. Trust Channel: Legitimacy, Procedural Justice, and Norm Internalization

Micro-foundations. Trust-based obedience arises from the individual's perception of authority as legitimate and institutions as impartial. Procedural justice, the right to be heard, respectful treatment, impartial decisions, and explainable justifications, is the "internal" engine of obedience [4,5]. When individuals perceive an institution as fair, the intuition "I'll obey even if I won't get caught" emerges. Levi's [6] concept of "semi-voluntary compliance" implies a psychological contract between the citizen and the state: The state is fair and competent; the citizen pays taxes and obeys the rules. Hardin's [14] "trust as encapsulated interest" model shows that when authority generates the expectation that it truly encompasses the citizen's interest, obedience becomes relational rather than interest.

The Nature and Impartiality of Institutions. Rothstein's [28] "quality of government" framework argues that corruption-free, impartial, and predictable governance increases trust-This finding implies that in democracies, the rule of law and equal treatment dramatically reduce the marginal

cost of compliance: Citizens develop a logic of conformity based on the belief that "rules are applied equally to everyone" [17,43] rule of law criteria provide a basis for empirically measuring these dimensions of impartiality. The simultaneous rise of social trust (generalized trust) and institutional trust creates a "virtuous cycle": Impartial institutions generate trust; trust increases cooperation and voluntary compliance; increased compliance improves service quality [44–46].

Norms, Habits, and Cognitive Shortcuts. Norm internalization is accelerated by the alignment between normative expectations (what others expect from me) and empirical expectations (what others actually do) [29]. Repeated fair encounters trigger habit formation, which corresponds to automated (low cognitive cost) behavior in political psychology [47]. Thus, trust-based obedience becomes a routine produced by the combination of moral obligation and low cognitive load.

Breaking Points. Populist polarization can erode the perception of procedural justice through the opposition between "the people" and "the elite"; when trust in institutions is undermined, voluntary compliance retreats to the identity camp [26]. When partisan capture and clientelism undermine belief in the impartiality of power, the channel of trust contracts; the need for more intense sanctions comes into play [33]. Therefore, sustainable trust is not only electoral authorization, but also the production of daily bureaucratic impartiality and procedural justice.

2.4. Dual (Interactive) Model: Substitution, Complementarity, and Dynamics

Every regime has both channels; the difference lies in the dosage and architecture. In democratic regimes, punitive sanctions are a safety net in the background, while the main vehicle of obedience is legitimacy–trust; in authoritarian regimes, legitimizing frameworks are auxiliary inputs that reduce the cost of the fear channel [9]. The "responsive regulation" concept in regulatory policy literature generalizes this logic: If soft tools (persuasion, guidance, transparency) fail, gradually harsher tools are employed; as success is achieved, the approach returns to the soft foundation [48]. Similarly, in tax compliance, a trust-based "psychological tax contract" complements risk-based auditing; excessive penalties can crowd out internal motivation (tax morale) [49,50].

From this perspective, consider a simple dynamic indicator for sustainable compliance. At time t, the compliance level O_t is explained by three components:

- **Fear catalyst**: $F_t = \hat{p}_t \times s_t \times \sigma_t$ (where σ_t is the selectivity/proportionality coefficient);
- **Trust catalyst**: $T_t = L_t \times Q_t \times J_t$ (legitimacy, government quality, procedural justice);
- **Habit/Path**: H_{t-1} (inertia of past conformity).

Accordingly:

$$O_t = \alpha F_t + \beta T_t + \gamma H_{t-1} - \kappa P_t,$$

where P_t represents corrosive factors such as polarization and perceived injustice, and α, β, γ, κ represent weights that vary according to the regime. In authoritarian contexts, α is high and β is low; in democratic contexts, β is high and α is low. As selectivity (σ) decreases, F may reduce O_t with the risk of backlash rather than increasing [15]. As impartiality/fairness (Q, J) increases, the persistence of β increases through the H channel [28].

Substitution and Threshold Effects. Fear and trust channels can be substitutive in low shocks and complementary in high shocks. For example, in a limited wave of public discord, transparent communication and procedural guarantees can quickly restore the trust channel; conversely, in times of widespread crisis (war, wave of terror), a limited deterrent dose can serve as a bridge to preserve the trust channel. Excessive substitution (e.g., the routine use of severe punishments in a democratic context) erodes intrinsic motivation and reduces β in the long term; excessive substitution in an authoritarian context (eliminating pressure through pure propaganda) produces credibility erosion and weakens α [25].

2.5. Mass Psychology, Information Environment, and Governance Technologies

Information Asymmetry and Censorship. The sustainability of the fear channel depends on the information architecture, while the sustainability of the trust channel depends on the transparency architecture. In the digital age, both channels are redesigned through micro-targeting and platform logic: Authoritarian regimes selectively censor content that suppresses collective action

capacity while performing agenda calibration in favor of the regime [35]. In democracies, numerical transparency (open data, performance measurement), participatory tools, and horizontal accountability make the trust channel "visible" [28,51].

Emotions and Moral Framing. Fear is easily mobilized through moral frameworks based on threat and disgust (sacrilege, authority violation), while trust is reinforced through frameworks based on justice, care, and reciprocity [52]. Therefore, the sustainability of the trust channel is directly related to daily experiences of justice and the quality of local-level institutions [44,46]. Collective rituals (elections, consultation, local forums) reproduce consent in a functional rather than theatrical manner; the difference from the forms of ostentatious loyalty demonstrated by Wedeen (1999) [38] is that participation is based on a single-account legitimacy rather than double-accounting.

2.6. Resilience, Fragility, and Normative Consequences

Resilience is the channel's ability to maintain cost-effectiveness under shocks. Trust-based obedience can be maintained with short-term deterrent support ($\alpha \uparrow$) during high shocks (e.g., security threats); once the crisis passes, rapid normalization is required so that β does not erode. Otherwise, the normalization of the "extraordinary" displaces the trust channel. In an authoritarian context, prolonged crises create fatigue and credibility erosion; when performance decline weakens the legitimization pillar, the marginal cost of the fear channel increases [9]. Therefore, authoritarian resilience often depends on keeping external threats alive or on success story narratives; both of which are vulnerable to information shocks [25,42].

Ethical Forks. Sustainable fear is normatively unacceptable, but analytically, it is real. From a political theory perspective, the problem is that designs that make the fear channel effective erode society's autonomy and self-respect. Sustainable trust, on the other hand, is effective and desirable; however, the dissolution of institutional neutrality can quickly lead to polarization and disinformation. Within this framework, the model proposed by this study ensures that procedural justice is continuously produced alongside institutional trust for democratic resilience, while authoritarian persistence is understood through the fragility of the duality of targeted pressure and narrative management.

2.7. Operationalization: Measurable Concepts and Testable Propositions

To empirically validate the theory, variables can be grouped under the following headings:

1. **Fear Channel Indicators**:
   a. *Perception of apprehension* ($\hat{p}$)*:* perception of risk to protest/freedom of expression, asymmetric distribution of trust in the police/courts (e.g., low among opponents).
   b. *Severity of sanctions* (s)*:* detention, administrative fines, speed of prosecution; selectivity/proportionality (σ): targeted vs. widespread repression measures (restrictions on freedom of association, depth of censorship).
   c. *Information control:* intensity of censorship, media freedom, frequency of platform shutdowns [35].

2. **Trust Channel Indicators:**
   a. *Legitimacy* (L)*:* trust in government/institutions; perception of fair governance [4].
   b. *Government quality* (Q)*:* corruption control, impartial enforcement [28].
   c. *Procedural justice* (J)*:* respect, impartiality, and transparency of reasoning in police/court interactions [5].

3. **Path/Habit** (H)**:**
   a. *Repeated compliance indicators:* tendency to violate rules, voluntary norm adherence in non-enforced areas (traffic, tax, election norms).
   b. *Social trust and civic virtue indices* [44,45].

Based on this framework, three example propositions:

- ***H1 (Democratic Channel Thesis).*** As perceptions of procedural justice and impartial enforcement increase (J, $Q \uparrow$), compliance (O) increases even if sanction intensity remains constant; there is a habit mediation effect (H) [4,28].

- **H2 (Authoritarian Selectivity Thesis).** Selective/measured pressure ($\sigma \uparrow$), compared to broad and indiscriminate pressure, increases the cost-effectiveness of the fear channel; however, its effect rapidly diminishes in situations of information shock [12,15].
- **H3 (Hybrid Regime Crisis Thesis).** Crisis narratives (terrorism, war, epidemics) recalibrate the composition of obedience in favor of fear by pulling down α in the short term and β in the long term through polarization (P) [25,26].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed approach that combines document/discourse analysis with a small-N comparative design and the use of secondary data (index and survey). The aim is to explain how the two channels of "sustainable obedience", fear and trust, are produced through cross-case comparison and intra-case process tracing [53,54]. Our comparative design is based on three countries selected according to the logic of maximum diversity (diverse-case selection) across regime types: the Netherlands (liberal democracy), Turkey (hybrid/competitive authoritarianism), and Russia (closed autocracy). This selection provides design contrast to test the two channels of the theory at different dosages and architectures [27,55].

The time window is 2014–2025. This interval allows us to observe how major shocks (e.g., waves of terrorism, the 2016 coup attempt and state of emergency in Turkey, the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the post-2022 war) that could affect the sustainability of obedience in all three countries are reflected in discourse and institutional design. The design targets analytical generalization; it tests the explanatory power of the theory based on pattern matching and process tracing rather than statistical representation [56,57].

3.2. Case Selection and Rationale

Case selection is based on two criteria: (i) clear differentiation in regime type and (ii) data/document accessibility. The Netherlands is a "natural laboratory" for the trust channel with its high institutional neutrality and procedural justice practices; Turkey offers a hybrid context where the substitution/interaction dynamics of trust and fear channels can be observed under polarization and crisis management; Russia provides rich material on how targeted pressure, information architecture, and legitimization frameworks make the fear channel "cost-effective" [9,11,12]. The methodology sections of V-Dem and Freedom House reports were considered for background assessments of classification and regime tendencies [20,21,58].

3.3. Data Sources

A) Primary Document/Discourse Corpus

- *Constitutional and legal texts:* emergency/exceptional state regulations, laws, and regulations related to internal security and freedom of expression/association.
- *Executive leadership discourse:* speeches by the president/prime minister, addresses to the nation, crisis briefings, official website press releases.
- *Policy documents:* national security/health strategies, pandemic action plans, election security guidelines.
- *Parliamentary records:* plenary session minutes, justifications for legislative proposals.

The unit of the document corpus is a paragraph or speech excerpt, depending on the content and length. A balanced distribution from each country (approximately 120–150 texts/speeches, 360–450 units in total) is targeted; strategic oversampling is applied to crisis years in the country-year distribution [59].

B) Secondary Quantitative Data

- *V-Dem:* composite indices such as freedom of expression, civil society pressure, election quality, judicial independence, executive constraints, and bureaucratic impartiality [20,58].
- *Freedom House: Freedom in the World* political rights and civil liberties scores [21].
- *WVS (Wave 7):* Institutional trust measures such as "trust in government", "trust in the police", "trust in the courts", and "perception of corruption" [22].

When necessary, regional surveys such as Eurobarometer/ESS can be used as a third source for cross-checking purposes for the Netherlands (note the massive overlap issues and country coverage limitations).

3.4. Operationalization and Coding

The two channels proposed in the theory are operationalized through indicators and discursive traces:

Fear Channel (F), *selective/measured pressure, visibility of sanctions, securitizing framing, information control.*

- Discourse codes: (F1) securitizing actions (claim of existential threat, urgency, call for extraordinary measures); (F2) emphasis on punishment/control (capture, sanctions, surveillance); (F3) targeting/othering (internal/external enemy, traitor/agent discourse); (F4) information architecture (censorship/filtering, broad restrictions under the guise of combating "disinformation") [35,60].
- Quantitative matching: decline in indices related to restrictions on freedom of expression and association, deterioration in "civil society pressure" and "media freedom" indicators.

Trust Channel (T), *procedural justice, institutional impartiality, transparency and participation, performance legitimacy.*

- Discourse codes: (T1) emphasis on procedure and rights (participation, consultation, avenues for appeal); (T2) impartiality and equality (rule of law, prohibition of discrimination, accountability); (T3) transparency/evidence presentation (data-based justification, performance indicators); (T4) inclusiveness/representation (internalization of minority/opposing views) [4,28].
- Quantitative matching: level/improvement in indicators of judicial independence, bureaucratic impartiality, and corruption control; relatively high level of institutional trust in the WVS.

Coding Procedure. First, open coding is used to generate a country-independent code list; then, axial coding is used to place it in the F/T hierarchy [61,62]. Coding unit: paragraph/discourse segment; multiple codes are possible per unit (e.g., both security-oriented framing and procedural emphasis in the same paragraph). The code book is calibrated with exemplary quotations and negative examples.

Compound Measures. Two auxiliary indicators are calculated using the corpus and indexes together:

- F-score: (i) F-code density (number of F codes per text, 0–1 min-max), (ii) V-Dem expression/organization constraint and media censorship components (0–1), (iii) Freedom House civil liberties sub-dimensions (reverse coded, 0–1). Equal-weighted average; PCA weight alternative is tested for robustness.
- T-score: (i) T-code density, (ii) V-Dem judicial independence/bureaucratic impartiality, (iii) WVS institutional trust component (standardized). Equal weight + PCA robustness.

Thresholds and Calibration. For set calibration usable with qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), 0.33/0.67 weak-strong boundaries can be tested; however, the main analysis is on pattern matching [63]. Country-year series of measures are used for temporal matching testing against theoretical expectations.

3.5. Analysis Strategy

Stage 1, Intra-case analysis (process tracking). In each country, periodization is performed around (i) key crisis periods (e.g., pandemic onset; war/escalation crisis; wave of terrorism), and (ii) institutional turning points (declaration/lifting of a state of emergency, electoral law changes). For each period, a discourse and legislation chain is extracted; the temporal trajectory of F/T codes and "cause-and-effect process observations" (smoking gun, hoop tests) are evaluated [54,64].

Stage 2, Cross-case pattern matching. F-score and T-score series in each country are visualized by normalizing; "shift toward fear", "reinforcement toward trust", and "hybrid calibration" patterns are sought. Expectation: T dominant/stable in the Netherlands; substitution with F increases during crisis periods in Turkey; F high and emphasis on targeted pressure in Russia.

Stage 3, Close reading/external validation. Patterns are externally validated using official policy documents and high-reliability news/reports (e.g., Reuters, AP, BBC; court or ombudsman reports). This step provides a robustness layer against the possibility of measurement error in the index data.

3.6. Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

Three strategies are followed for internal validity: (i) mechanism-focused process monitoring (cause-effect loops), (ii) triangulation (confirmation of findings across different data types), (iii) searching for negative cases and counter texts [53,65]. External validity is limited to analytical generalization; there is no claim of sample universe extension [56].

Reliability is ensured by conducting the coding process with two coders; at least 20% of the corpus is double-coded. Krippendorff alpha ≥ 0.75 is targeted; if below the threshold, the code book is revised and retraining is conducted [59]. Coding and data are prepared for external sharing in accordance with open science principles, using a pseudonymized index structure (OSF, etc.). To minimize translation-related loss of meaning, original language texts are used whenever possible; English and Turkish official translations are used only as a supplement.

From an ethical standpoint, the study uses public/open-source documents and anonymized survey microdata. No intervention with human subjects or processing of sensitive personal data is performed; WVS/Freedom House/V-Dem data usage licenses are adhered to.

3.7. Limitations and Robustness Checks

The main limitations are: (i) the issue of conceptual equivalence of indices (meaning shift between countries), (ii) the discourse–practice gap (discrepancy between official rhetoric and practice), (iii) temporal synchrony (fear and trust signals moving in the same period), and (iv) potential confounding (e.g., economic performance can both foster trust and reduce repression). For robustness:

- *Weight sensitivity:* Equal weight and PCA weight results for F/T compounds are compared.
- *Indicator alternatives:* V-Dem sub-indices are tested with different combinations; the inclusion/exclusion of Freedom House components is controlled.
- *Text sensitivity:* Unit selection (paragraph vs. document) sensitivity is tested on 10% of the corpus.
- *Third data validation:* External validation is performed using court/ombudsman reports and transparency portals for selected samples.

The methodology operationalizes fear and trust channels through document/discourse traces and index and survey indicators, testing them with a comparative and time-series design. Case selection allows the theory to be tested in different architectures, while triangulation, process tracking, and pattern matching aim to increase the internal validity and reliability of the findings. The following section presents the case analyses obtained using this methodological framework.

4. Case Studies

This section demonstrates how the two channels of "sustainable obedience", fear (F) and trust (T), are institutionalized, calibrated during crises, and reproduced over time in three regimes (the Netherlands, Turkey, Russia) within the framework of document/discourse analysis + secondary data triangulation defined in the methodology section. In each case, (i) the regime context and recent political events, (ii) legal mechanisms (laws/decisions/institutions), (iii) leader discourses and crisis frames, (iv) patterns of F/T codes, and (v) external validations are presented. In the measurements section, qualitative pattern matching logic is followed without providing formal F-Score/T-Score calculations.

4.1. The Netherlands, Institutional Architecture of the Trust Channel; Calibration of Procedural Justice in Crisis

Context and Key Features. As a parliamentary democracy operating with different coalition combinations over the past decade, the Netherlands has placed an emphasis on rights and procedures at the center of its governance practice. According to Freedom House 2025 data [21], it is categorized as "free" (97/100), reflecting effective protection of fundamental rights and freedoms and the integrity of political competition. The V-Dem 2025 report [20] also confirms the country's

high standing in the liberal democracy component. In 2024, the Dick Schoof cabinet was sworn in and took office [66], but in June 2025, the coalition collapsed, and the country transitioned to a caretaker government status; nevertheless, institutional processes and checks and balances continued to function regularly [67]. While this political turbulence points to the fragility of the trust channel in terms of the sustainability of obedience, the Dutch example shows that obedience is clearly produced through procedural trust rather than fear [20,21,67].

Crisis Architecture and Legal Framework (COVID-19). During the pandemic, the Netherlands first implemented its measures through regional "emergency decrees" (noodverordeningen); it then transferred the measures to a legal basis with the Tijdelijke wet maatregelen COVID-19 (Temporary COVID-19 Measures Act), which tied the executive's discretion more closely to parliamentary oversight and had a limited duration (1 December 2020). The law tied measures such as mask mandates, physical distancing, and capacity limits to parliamentary approval and time constraints, binding them to normative procedure. This move represents a T1–T3 (procedure/transparency) calibration that strengthens legitimacy by shifting from "state of emergency-like" administrative tools to a legislation-based procedure [68−70].

Discourse: Transparent Information and Limited Securitization. Prime Minister Mark Rutte's regular press conferences ("letterlijke tekst persconferentie") are framed by the principle of consensus and the discourse of "taking control together", emphasizing that decisions are evidence-based (OMT/RIVM data) and time-bound. This reinforces the traces of T3 (evidence/transparency) and T2 (impartiality/rule of law) from the T-codes, but strict measures such as the curfew (avondklok) have clearly produced F1 (securitization) and F2 (enforcement visibility) [69]. RIVM's [71,72] behavioral research and weekly epidemiological reporting have strengthened the cognitive groundwork necessary for compliance through epistemic trust (the institution's competence). This regular information cycle keeps the T-score high with a "performance + procedure" combination, while making the use of the fear channel measured and temporary [69,71,72].

Social Response and F/T Balance. In 2021, during the nighttime curfew and the "2G" debates in November 2021, violent incidents and hundreds of arrests occurred in various cities; the police maintained public order through proportionate force and arrests [73,74]. However, this F-code intensity was temporary; the emphasis on "legality/continuity" and judicial oversight (e.g., the judicial dispute over the curfew in The Hague) re-established the dominance of the T-channel [73,74]. Pattern matching: At the start of the crisis, F rose and was offset by T; the general trend remained T dominant [73,74].

Conclusion (the Netherlands). In the Netherlands, compliance is sustained "not by fear but by procedural trust": parliamentary oversight, time-limited measures, transparent communication, and impartial bureaucracy form the sustainable foundation of compliance. While the F-channel may activate during violent protests, proportionality and openness to oversight re-establish the T-channel's prominence [20,21,68,69,71−74].

4.2. Turkey, Hybrid Calibration: The Rise of Fear in Crisis, the Search for Legitimacy in Day-to-Day Governance

Context and Regime Quality. Since the second half of the 2010s, Turkey has settled into a framework where electoral competition continues while rights and freedoms face deepening restrictions, as described in the hybrid/competitive authoritarianism literature (consistent with the Levitsky & Way line [27]). In Freedom House 2025 [21], Turkey is classified as "Not Free (33/100)"; V-Dem 2025 data [20] also indicate a marked decline in the indicators of freedom of expression/association, judicial independence, and checks on executive power. Against this backdrop, in terms of the sustainability of obedience, a dual pattern emerges in which the F channel is rigidly activated in times of crisis and, in normal times, the T channel is compensated for to a limited extent with claims of performance/representative legitimacy [20,21].

The Breaking Point: 15 July 2016, the State of Emergency and the KHK Regime. Following the coup attempt on 15 July 2016, a state of emergency was declared throughout the country by the Council of Ministers Decision No. 2016/9064 dated 20 July 2016; the decision was published on 21 July 2016 (RG 29777) [75] and approved by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey on 22 July 2016 (RG 29778) [76]. Extensions of the state of emergency and KHKs produced selective-targeted repression and judicial exceptions across a wide range of areas (Istanbul Bilgi University Human Rights Center; constitutional and academic assessments). Official discourse emphasized that the SOE was declared for the purpose of "protecting democracy and fundamental rights against the threat of terrorism" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye,

2016 [77]). This framing intensively produced the codes F1 (existential threat) and F2 (sanction visibility).

Restriction of the Digital Space: 7253 and 7418. 31 July 2020 (RG 31202) Law No. 7253 amended Law No. 5651 on the Internet, defining the status of "social network provider". Representative office requirements, data localization, and content removal obligations were increased in Turkey. Law No. 7418 dated 18 October 2022 (RG 31987) (referred to as the "disinformation law") introduced the crime of "publicly disseminating misleading information" under TCK 217/A, thereby increasing the criminal risk calibration. Both regulations strengthen the F4 (information architecture/control) and F2 codes; in this way, visible and selective sanctioning capacity is institutionalized in a way that will make social media compliance sustainable [78,79].

Discourse and Crisis Repertoire. While official discourse has perpetuated the "national security/fight against terrorism" framework since 2016, the security narrative has also been widespread in the pandemic and foreign policy agendas. Official sources describe July 15 to the international and local public as an "attack on democracy"; the emphasis on "national unity" and "resolute fight against terrorism" reinforces the F1–F3 codes (Communication Presidency July 15 archive [80]; various provincial governorate statements). This high F intensity is sometimes accompanied by claims of electoral legitimacy and service/performance (e.g., social policies, infrastructure investments) T-channel; however, weaknesses in institutional neutrality and judicial independence indicators limit the sustained rise of the T-Score [20,21].

F/T Pattern and Sustainability. In Turkey, after 2016, the F-score follows a high plateau pattern during crisis periods: the state of emergency and decree regime (F2), digital space regulations (F4), and existential threat rhetoric (F1). This infrastructure creates a deterrent that appears selective and measured but is widely effective: expectations of the probability of capture ($\hat{p}$) and severity of punishment (s) are calibrated in favor of uncertainty; the visibility of "exemplary" events rationally shifts the cost-benefit calculation of obedience in favor of F. In contrast, the T-channel relies more on the language of selective legitimacy and performance; however, due to deficiencies in judicial/media impartiality and procedural balance, norm internalization remains limited. Conclusion: Compliance is sustainable in the short and medium term via the F-channel, but erosion of trust and polarization-driven legitimacy costs increase in the long term [20,21,78,79].

4.3. Russia, Multi-layered Institutionalization of the Fear Channel; Backup of Ideological Legitimization

Context and Regime Characteristics. Throughout the 2010s, the Russian Federation has evolved from competitive authoritarianism to closed authoritarianism, producing the sustainability of obedience through a multi-layered fear architecture as a security apparatus-focused regime. In Freedom House 2025 [21], Russia is categorized as "Not Free"; systematic restrictions on freedom of assembly, routine detentions, and heavy administrative/criminal penalties are highlighted. V-Dem [20] trends show a persistent decline in expression/organization, judicial independence, and executive constraints. This picture points to a regime where the F-channel is institutionalized through both general law and specific media/internet legislation [20,21].

Legal Infrastructure I. Sovereign Internet (90-FZ, 2019). 90-FZ (1 May 2019), known as the Sovereign Internet Law, envisions routing traffic through state-controlled choke points and establishing a national DNS and central blocking/filtering capacity through "technical tools". This created an administrative-extrajudicial blocking architecture through RKN (Roskomnadzor), making the F4 (information architecture/control) and F2 (enforcement visibility) codes permanent. Result: the probability of being caught ($\hat{p}$) and the expectation of intervention in the digital sphere rose permanently; this made the online behavioral component of obedience fear-based and sustainable [81–83].

Legal Infrastructure II. "Discrediting the military/fake news" packages (2022). Immediately after Putin's speech announcing the start of a "special military operation" against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, regulations on "war censorship" were introduced, primarily Criminal Code Article 207.3; "knowingly spreading false information" and "discrediting the army" were defined as criminal offenses carrying long prison sentences and heavy fines. Cases against journalists/activists and in absentia convictions made the implementation of this framework visible [84,85]. F-codes thus become permanent: F2 (visibility of punishment) + F3 (othering/"traitor" language) + F1 (existential threat narrative). This mechanism reinforces fear-based deterrence on both the territorial and digital planes [84,85].

Legal Infrastructure III. "Foreign Influence" regime (255-FZ, 2022). 255-FZ of 14 July 2022 consolidated the category of "foreign agent" by introducing a broad definition and comprehensive obligations for "persons/entities under foreign influence". This mechanism, which keeps civil society under a chilling effect through registration, financial flows, labeling, and restrictions on public activities, expanded the institutional layer of the F2−F4 codes [86,87]. Consequence: While the cost of horizontal organization increases, self-censorship enables the low-cost maintenance of compliance [86,87]).

Discourse: Securitization and the History−Civilization Narrative. In the 2014 Crimea speech and the 2022 war speeches, an existential threat framework is established with references to civilization−history; the emphasis on the "Western-backed" enemy and the "unity/protection of the Russian people" systematically produces F1−F3 traces. This discourse line functions as an ideological backup for the F channel with performance legitimacy (e.g., stability, economic "resilience") and normative legitimacy (historical claim to rights) [84,88,89]. Conclusion: the naked coercive nature of the fear channel is rendered unwearable by the populist-nationalist legitimizing discourse [84,88,89].

Application Examples and External Verification. Between 2021 and 2025, high criminal costs became apparent in the areas of independent media and street protests; the OSCE and human rights organizations documented systematic restrictions. Cases such as the 2024 in absentia conviction of journalist Mikhail Zygar are high-profile examples of the application of 207.3 [85,90]. Furthermore, allegations of Ukrainian children being forcibly taken away in the context of war reveal the link between regime legitimacy narratives and selective repression, pointing to ideological re-education schemes through state capacity and information architecture [91,92].

F/T Pattern and Sustainability. In the Russian case, the F-score is high and persistent: intranet control (90-FZ), war censorship (207.3), foreign influence (255-FZ), and high-visibility punishments increase the likelihood of capture and the expected severity of punishment. The T-channel, on the other hand, primarily assumes the role of normative backup with its historicization/civilization and security-performance narratives; however, due to the weakness of institutional neutrality, internalization is limited. Conclusion: Compliance is made sustainable through fear-centered and institutional-technical mechanisms; high-cost exit and self-censorship (silence instead of voice) are the behavioral face of this sustainability [21,81,82,85−87].

4.4. Comparative Reading: Three Regimes, Two Channels, One Logic of Continuity

1) *Architectures and Dosages.* In the Netherlands, the T-channel (procedural justice, transparency, impartiality) is fundamental; F is activated temporarily and proportionately in times of crisis. In Turkey, F has become permanent in crises, taking on a structural form through the digital sphere and criminal framework; T, meanwhile, assumes a substitute-compensatory role through electoral legitimacy and performance. In Russia, F is highly permanent, while T is a backup legitimacy through an ideological-performance narrative [20,21]. This triad is consistent with Maerz (2020)'s [19] hexagon of authoritarian persistence: the pillars of repression, co-optation, and legitimization vary in proportion and means across different regimes [9,19].

2) *Crisis Rhetoric and Securitization.* In all three countries, a crisis (pandemic, war, terrorism) creates a critical window of opportunity for obedience; however, the level of procedural ties and judicial oversight determines the outcomes. In the Netherlands, due to T-institutionalization, F rapidly recedes after the crisis; in Turkey, the post-2016 crisis framework becomes continuous and encompasses the digital sphere; in Russia, the crisis, with its war economy + total media architecture, transforms F into a permanent regime norm [68,69,71−74].

3) *Behavioral Sustainability.* As the Hobbesian core indicates, the visible calibration of probability of capture and severity of punishment expectations (Russia, Turkey) produces compliance in the short to medium term; however, procedural justice and institutional impartiality (Netherlands), as emphasized by the Rousseauian line, produce an internalized (=low-control-cost) form of compliance in the long term. Populist rhetoric [26] can create short-term F-boosters even in democratic contexts; however, institutional checks and balances and parliament-judiciary ties prevent the fear channel from becoming permanent [19,26].

4.5. Case Outcomes and Macro Implications

The Dutch example shows that the T-channel remained dominant even during the crisis thanks to the quadrangle of "institutional neutrality + transparent public communication +

legislative oversight + temporary measures"; it also shows that when the use of fear is temporary and exceptional and open to judicial review, it strengthens the legitimacy and consent components of obedience [20,21,68,69,71−74]). The Turkey example shows that the pressure and information architecture built post-crisis [78,79], although presented as selective/measured, created a general cooling effect, raising the F-Score to a high-continuity level; the T-channel, however, remained a fragile substitute based on electoral-performance [20,21]. The Russia example explains how the F-channel is perpetuated through legal-technical (90-FZ; 207.3; 255-FZ) and ideological (civilization/threat) layers, thereby producing the fear-centered sustainability of obedience; but the weakness of norm internalization and the risk of high external shocks (war, sanctions) carry long-term legitimacy costs (Kremlin speeches [21,84,87−90].

5. Discussion

This section combines the patterns observed in three cases in light of the dual-channel model (fear/trust) to answer the following question: Under which institutional and cognitive conditions does obedience become sustainable with "low marginal control costs", and under which conditions does it become fragile? The findings show that there is a substitutable yet complementary relationship between *fear institutionalized through technical means* and trust reinforced by procedural justice and impartiality, and that this relationship is calibrated by regime type, crisis intensity, and habit/justice stock.

5.1. Coexistence of Two Channels: Substitution and Complementarity

The Netherlands establishes the trust channel as a "baseline" thanks to procedural justice, impartial enforcement, and transparent justification; gradual and temporary deterrence kicks in during crises, but the F channel withdraws as soon as the crisis ends. In Turkey, the pressure and information architecture built post-crisis (2016) makes the fear channel structural; selective legitimacy and performance rhetoric maintain the trust channel as a substitute but fragile backup power. In Russia, the multi-layered legal/technical infrastructure (internet domination, war censorship, "foreign influence" regime) and security-oriented discourse make the fear channel permanent and widespread; since internalization of norms remains low, obedience is maintained through high exit costs and self-censorship (silence instead of voice). These patterns are consistent with findings that authoritarian resilience is based on a balance of legitimization–repression–co-optation; different regimes combine the same triad with different doses and tools [9,19].

Theoretically, this points to a dual production function: In a democratic context, β (the trust coefficient) is high; F provides "background" security but is integrated in a way that does not erode T's permanence. In an authoritarian context, α (fear coefficient) is high; T functions more as an aesthetic veneer through ideological legitimization and performance. The threshold effect is important: High and persistent punishment signals, leading to excessive crowding-out of the trust channel, may appear cheap in the short term by producing obedience, but in the long term they accumulate legitimacy erosion and unexpected tipping points [15,25,42].

5.2. The Economics of Costs: "The Marginal Cost of Control" vs "The Marginal Cost of Consent"

In democratic resilience, the marginal cost of consent is low because neutral institutions [28] and procedural justice [4] generate habits through repeated experiences [17,47]. In authoritarian resilience, the marginal cost of control is sought to be reduced; selective and visible sanctions [12] and information architecture [35] keep the "probability of being caught" and the "expected punishment" constantly high. However, this produces information blindness and agent–principal problems: Extensive censorship distorts signals about the ruler's social mood; the "dictator's dilemma" deepens [10,11]. Conclusion: While democracy accumulates stocks of habit and legitimacy, autocracy accumulates stocks of fear; the former are reforming stocks, the latter are eroding stocks.

This framework is also consistent with the sensitive regulation pyramid [48] and psychological tax contract [49] literature: Soft tools (persuasion, transparency) should be the norm, hard tools (punishment) the exception; otherwise, intrinsic motivation (tax morale/norm internalization) erodes. This is consistent with the rapid normalization in the Netherlands during crisis cycles; the normalization of the exception in Turkey and the transformation of the extraordinary into the regime norm in Russia show the opposite pattern.

5.3. Crisis Cycles and the "Normalization of the Exception"

A crisis opens a window for recalibration of obedience in every regime. The securitization of politics [60] rapidly activates the fear channel; however, democratic procedural ties ensure that this activation remains temporary. If there is parliamentary oversight, judicial oversight, and reason-based communication (epistemic trust), then when the crisis ends, F recedes, and T returns to its previous level. Otherwise, the state of exception becomes a technology of governance [39]. This transformation erodes trust in procedural justice, and identitarian/friend-enemy schemas become widespread [26], thus establishing obedience in a fear-heavy "*new normal*".

5.4. Cognitive Infrastructure: Threat Perception, Norm Expectations, and Habit

The sustainability of the fear channel relies not only on the "$\hat{p} \times s$" calculation but also on cognitive shortcuts: negativity bias, risk aversion, fear of isolation [31,32,36]. In the trust channel, normative (what others expect from me) and empirical (what others actually do) expectations accelerate norm internalization when they coincide [29]. Encounters with impartial service and fair procedures lower habit thresholds; conformity becomes automatic [28,47]. Therefore, daily experiences of justice (contact with the police, local government services, court proceedings) are the most important micro-foundational sources of the trust channel [5].

5.5. Alternative Explanations and Co-causality

A counterargument is that the observed differences stem from differences in economic performance or cultural capital. Performance legitimacy may certainly be related to obedience; however, the institutionalization of the pressure/internet infrastructure in both Turkey and Russia points to a structural fear calibration that cannot be explained solely by growth cycles [11,12]. From the perspective of the culture argument, findings showing that the trust channel increases with institutional neutrality and procedural justice leave the explanation weak unless "culture" is linked to instrumental mechanisms [28,45]. As noted in the methodology section, we limited the risk of confounding by using pattern matching and external validation (official documents/judicial records); nevertheless, index measurement error and discourse-practice gap remain limitations.

5.6. Normative and Policy Implications

The lesson for democratic regimes is clear: crisis management may involve temporarily bolstering the architecture of trust with fear; however, this support must be temporary, proportionate, and subject to judicial oversight. Transparent data, justification, and channels for participation/appeal enable trust to become habitual [4,28]. In contexts where populist polarization erodes perceptions of procedural justice, institutional buffers that protect impartial bureaucracy (independent judiciary, information ombudsmen, transparency authorities) shield the channel of trust from erosion [26,43].

The picture is bleaker for hybrid/authoritarian regimes: selective and visible punishment coupled with digital surveillance may yield cheap obedience in the short term; however, it erodes legitimacy and information stocks. Excessive censorship produces strategic blindness by restricting the manager's access to social signals; preference storage accumulated when elite division or performance shock occurs can turn into sudden dissolution (bandwagon) [10,15,42]. Therefore, the sustainability of the fear channel is limited precisely because it consumes the sources of its apparent success.

5.7. Contribution to the Literature and Future Research

The study conceptualizes (i) the sustainability of obedience through a two-channel and dynamic model, building a bridge between the legitimacy/conformity literature and the authoritarian resilience literature; (ii) links the crisis cycle insight to the "normalization of exception" debate, revealing the time-dependent substitution-complementarity mechanisms of fear/trust channels; (iii) produces mechanism evidence through text-monitoring + index triangulation. In the future, text-data methods (F/T-signal density with supervised classifiers) and experimental designs (procedural justice manipulations, deterrence signals) could strengthen the causal testing of this model. Furthermore, subpopulation analyses for intergroup heterogeneity (opposing partisans, minorities) are well-suited to examining the identity vulnerabilities of "sustainable obedience" [37,38].

6. Conclusions

This article has presented a conceptual framework that we call "sustainable obedience", combining the literature on political compliance with that on authoritarian resilience within the same framework. Our proposed dual-channel model demonstrates that obedience is produced simultaneously: on the one hand, through the deterrent rationality of fear, operating via the probability of capture and expected punishment; and on the other hand, through the internalizing effect of trust, operating via procedural justice, impartial enforcement, and epistemic transparency. Thus, obedience is understood not as a single "yes" given at a single moment, but as a temporal structure woven from repeated actions with decreasing costs. In the fear channel, selectivity and visibility reduce the marginal control cost of obedience; in the trust channel, fair procedures and impartial service reduce the marginal consent cost of obedience [4,12,28].

Case studies show that this model produces sustainability with different architectures across regime types: In the Netherlands, the trust architecture remained dominant even during crises with the triad of "parliamentary oversight–judicial supervision–transparent justification"; in Turkey, after 2016, the pressure and information architecture made the fear channel structural, while the trust channel assumed a substitute but fragile role through electoral/performance legitimacy. In Russia, the dominant internet, war censorship, and foreign influence legislation have perpetuated the fear channel; the legitimizing history–civilization discourse has functioned as the ideological backup for the trust channel [9,19,25]. The common pattern is this: crisis creates an opportunity for calibration in every regime; however, the power of the procedural bond determines whether the crisis will lead to the normalization of the exception [39] or a return to the norm.

Our theoretical contribution is threefold. First, by addressing the sustainability logic of obedience through the substitution–complementarity relationship, we defined a non-zero-sum choice space between fear and trust. Second, we made this relationship dynamic and made visible threshold effects and feedback mechanisms (habit, path dependency) in crises. Third, we operationalized the model by combining document/discourse traces with index/survey indicators through pattern matching and process tracking, thereby substantiating classical conceptual theses with mechanism evidence. In these respects, the study technically links the Hobbesian deterrence intuition to the logic of selective and visible sanctions, and the Rousseauian consent intuition to procedural justice and impartial enforcement.

Three policy-level implications emerge. (i) In democratic regimes, crisis management can reinforce the trust channel with temporary and transparent fear support; but if duration, proportionality, and transparency of justification are exceeded, intrinsic motivation (norm internalization) erodes and the cost of obedience increases in the medium to long term [48,49]. (ii) In hybrid/authoritarian regimes, digital surveillance and censorship with targeted repression may produce "cheap" obedience in the short term, but it accumulates information blindness and legitimacy erosion; sudden unraveling is possible in shocks and elite divisions [10,15,42]. (iii) In the long term, the daily experience of procedural justice, respect in interactions with the police, transparency of court decisions, and impartiality of the bureaucracy, produces habit stocks, enabling the naturalization of obedience; trust thus transforms into political capital.

The limitations of the findings are also clear: problems of conceptual equivalence in indices, discourse–practice differences, and the risk of confounding variables cannot be entirely eliminated. Therefore, we suggest two directions for future work. First, more fine-grained time series should be extracted using text-data approaches (supervised classifiers, lexicon-based F/T density measurements). Second, the causal weights of the channels should be tested using experimental and quasi-natural experiment designs (procedural justice manipulations, deterrence signal variations). Furthermore, sub-population (opposition/ruling party voters, minority groups) heterogeneities will reveal the identity fragilities of sustainable obedience.

Leviathan's promise is security, while the Social Contract's promise is legitimacy. The maturity of the political community lies in its ability to combine these two promises without sacrificing one for the other. The engineering of fear can produce obedience, but it erodes the sense of self-governance. The architecture of trust, on the other hand, produces a self-renewing form of obedience; it reduces costs and makes democracy resilient to shocks. This article has shown that sustainable obedience is built on this dual architecture, and that crises test the quality of that architecture. The recipe for democratic resilience lies in turning trust into an institutional habit without normalizing the exception; otherwise, short-term "order" returns as long-term fragility.

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Data Availability

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. The study used third-party data that are available from the sources cited in the article.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: M.R.U.; Data curation: M.R.U.; Formal analysis: M.R.U., & S.A.T.; Investigation: M.R.U., & S.A.T.; Methodology: M.R.U., & F.S.; Resources: F.T.; Supervision: F.T., & F.S.; Writing – original draft: M.R.U.; Writing – review & editing: F.S.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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