

Countering Populist Authoritarians

*A guide for funders
and civil society organisations*

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May 2019

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Summary

This paper is aimed at funders and civil society organisations (CSOs) promoting progressive causes such as civil liberties, democratic participation, the rule of law, equality, integration, social justice, anti-corruption and environmental protection. Their objectives and their ability to operate are increasingly hampered by the rise and influence of parties advancing populist authoritarian agendas. As such, funders and CSOs are increasingly facing efforts to weaken the standards, institutions and organisations that protect and promote basic values such as fundamental rights, the rule of law and pluralist democracy.

Part I of the paper explains the factors causing increasing proportions of the electorate to vote for parties with authoritarian agendas. Populist authoritarian politicians have been able to attract voters by exploiting public fears over economic prosperity, growing inequality, migration, terrorism as well as changes to traditional cultural norms and social hierarchies. Populist authoritarians are using carefully calibrated narratives designed to trigger support for their agendas by creating the perception of threat and competition. Their success has been due in part to objectively justified anxieties, but also their ability to manufacture and exaggerate problems and spread their narratives to a broad audience through the media.

Part II of the paper offers a holistic set of recommendations on how to diffuse support for authoritarian policies, nurture support for progressive causes and create an environment where populist authoritarians cannot take root.

Part II can be read as a standalone document without first reading Part I, for those who are uninterested in learning about why individuals endorse authoritarian political attitudes or in understanding the psychological profile of these voters. The remainder of this summary sets out the measures that funders and CSOs could take to counter the rise of populist authoritarians and safeguard democratic pluralism, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

Measures designed to prevent populist authoritarians from manufacturing or exaggerating sources of threat and competition

Media. Public service media are often under the control of governments, and privately owned media are excessively concentrated in the hands of a few owners. The economic model that formerly sustained good quality journalism has been broken by the shift to digital formats. This has resulted in the media serving as a powerful channel for the spread of populist authoritarian narratives. Funders could support CSOs to advocate for reforms to guarantee media independence, greater plurality of media ownership, and ensure financial sustainability for high quality, balanced journalism that facilitates healthy democratic debate. Funders could also provide greater financial support for non-profit media.

Integration. Support for populist authoritarians tends to be higher in rural areas, segregated urban areas or areas that experience a rapid

influx of migrants who compete with the local population for resources. But when different groups mix under the correct circumstances, levels of prejudice and levels of support for populist authoritarian parties fall. Funders could support CSOs to promote higher levels of integration and mixing between the majority population and minority groups including through joint housing projects, school exchanges and increasing diversity in the workplace.

Measures that address genuine public anxieties that act as sources of threat and competition

Counter-terrorism. The threat of terrorism triggers the endorsement of authoritarian political attitudes. Commonly used counter-terrorism policies like mass surveillance and ethnic profiling are counter-productive and end up increasing the threat of terrorism. Funders could support CSOs to advocate for effective policies that comply with human rights standards. These include community-based policing, targeted surveillance, and combating social and economic marginalisation which causes individuals to become vulnerable to radicalisation into violent extremism.

Economic and social rights. The consequences of economic shock as well as growing inequality and relative deprivation function as sources of threat and competition. In response to economic recession governments introduced austerity measures and weakened the social safety nets designed to protect the public, thereby increasing the anxieties that have

led to support for authoritarian politicians. Funders could support CSOs to mobilise grassroots movements of citizens to become more involved in municipal government to improve the delivery of basic services. Funders could also support CSOs to advocate for better implementation of social and economic rights so as to guarantee access to basic services and an adequate standard of living.

Measures designed to minimise the proportion of the population who become pre-disposed to endorsing authoritarian political attitudes

Education. The educational environment and curricula are proven to have an impact on the values endorsed by individuals. Teaching students to develop empathy, tolerance and critical thinking, and increasing their knowledge of human rights standards leads to individuals endorsing more progressive values. Funders could support CSOs to develop appropriate teaching materials, train civics teachers and work with schools to develop charters that encourage these values.

Religion. Religion also has a strong socialising impact. Currently, ultra-conservative voices among religious institutions are vocal, well-organised and receive financial support from Russian and American religious bodies. Funders could consider supporting more progressive voices in European religious communities to become better organised and more active.

Framing and communications. Populist authoritarians systematically deploy effective framing techniques that boost support for their agendas. CSOs working on progressive causes have difficulty in developing and disseminating powerful narratives that generate support for progressive values. Funders have invested some resources into research and developing guidelines and training for CSOs. However, this is not happening on a large enough scale and continuing training and support is unavailable. Funders could invest in further research, training and support, including through the creation of a centralised Europe-wide human rights communications agency to serve CSOs.

such as the creation of a special representative on civic space.

Measures to protect the civic space

Pastoral support. Smear campaigns and administrative harassment of CSOs have created undue and sometimes intolerable personal and professional pressure on staff. To attract and retain staff, funders could support CSOs to invest in staff wellbeing.

Protection from surveillance. The threat of government surveillance hampers the work of CSOs. Funders could support CSOs to receive training on how to protect themselves from surveillance.

Legal and political protection. The EU could use legal and political tools to protect CSOs from harassment. Funders could support CSOs to advocate for the EU to use available tools more fully and develop new measures,

Introduction

Increasing proportions of the public across the European Union are voting for political parties that promote an authoritarian political agenda. In several countries authoritarian populists are in power, either alone or in coalition. And even in countries where they are not in government, the growth in support for populist authoritarian parties has prompted centrist parties to embrace aspects of authoritarianism as a way of retaining or recapturing voters.

This paper outlines, first, how populist authoritarians threaten democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, and places the phenomenon of shrinking civic space in that context; second, why populist authoritarian parties are enjoying growing support among the public; third, what funders and civil society organisations (CSOs) could do to fight back and ensure that progressive values come out on top in the battle for public support.

The range of counter-measures proposed in this paper is not exhaustive. Rather, the recommendations have been adapted to the roles of donors and CSOs. The paper is based on a book recently published by Liberties, by the same author.¹ The book is researched to academic standards and incorporates the most recent findings from a range of relevant academic disciplines. The book draws heavily from research in the field of social psychology into how and why individuals come to endorse authoritarian political attitudes. The discipline of social psychology has largely been neglected by mainstream scholarship, which is dominated by the disciplines of political science, so-

ciology and history. The novel approach taken in the book allows the author to offer readers a consistent and holistic explanation of how demographic, economic, social, political and other factors identified by current mainstream research shape voters' political attitudes and voting choices.

Part I: Getting a Grip on the Problem

This section of the paper will cover three issues. First, the ways in which populist authoritarianism threatens the fundamental values of pluralist democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. Second, the factors that underlie the success of populist authoritarian parties. Third, what kinds of policies and attitudes are favoured and held by populist authoritarian parties and their supporters.

The paper uses the term ‘populist authoritarian’ to refer to political movements that are anti-elitist (populist) and that threaten standards and institutions that guarantee pluralist democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. Conversely, the paper uses the term ‘progressive’ to refer to political movements that uphold these values. Respect for pluralist democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are conditions that countries need to meet before they will be granted EU membership, and these standards are listed as the EU’s foundational values in the Treaty on European Union. In this sense of the word, all governments in the EU are assumed to be ‘progressive’ regardless of their political colour.

1.A. How do populist authoritarian politicians erode fundamental values?

Once in power, populist authoritarians pursue a number of measures that destroy democratic pluralism, the rule of law and fundamental rights. These include steps designed to consolidate their position in government.

- **Rule of law.** Populist authoritarians try to draw power and influence to the executive and weaken independent institutions, particularly the judiciary, that are supposed to prevent abuse of power by the government. This is for three reasons: first, because the courts protect the rights of individuals and groups whom populist authoritarians attack as a means of creating and maintaining public support; second, because the courts protect rights that guarantee democratic pluralism; third, because the judiciary safeguards the independence of other institutions designed to limit government power (such as regulatory bodies overseeing data protection, banking, public spending or the media).
- **Democratic pluralism.** Populist authoritarians will often tamper with the electoral system, for example, by changing constituency boundaries or increasing their influence over electoral commissions, to tip elections in their favour. But they also destroy democratic pluralism to ensure that their narratives dominate public debate. This tends to involve imposing restrictions on CSOs that work to promote progressive values, restricting freedom of assembly and free speech by, for example, taking over public and private media. The aim of this is not only to spin facts in the government’s favour or suppress damaging news. It is also a means of maintaining a perception of threat and competition among the public, and of socialising the public into support for authoritarian values in the long term.

- **Fundamental rights.** As noted, populist authoritarians attack certain fundamental rights (like access to an effective remedy before an independent court) as a means of drawing power to the executive and undermining democratic pluralism (like free speech, freedom of association and freedom of assembly). But they also attack fundamental rights in other ways.
 - By re-imposing ‘traditional’ social rules and socio-economic hierarchies that violate the right to equality. There is some variation between countries, but this usually includes reinstating repressive gender roles and encouraging or tolerating discrimination towards LGBTI persons and ethnic minorities.
 - By supporting the harsh punishment of groups that are perceived as a threat to society. This includes encouraging or tolerating violence towards marginalised groups seen to undermine social and cultural norms (such as feminists or environmentalists) or security (such as religious minorities). It also includes harsh treatment and punishment by the state of groups perceived to pose a threat to public safety, such as prisoners (e.g. through poor detention conditions) and migrants (e.g. through mandatory detention).
 - By weakening rights perceived to interfere with public security. For example, by favouring mass surveillance over privacy, or by weakening the right to a fair criminal trial, or by limiting the right to protest.
 - **Consolidate gains.** As noted, populist authoritarians will entrench their political position by tipping electoral processes and rules in their favour. But in the long run they also take measures to ensure that they retain solid public support. This includes taking over the media so they can manipulate public opinion and socialise the public into authoritarian values, as noted. If they cannot acquire influence over private media, they will take measures to discredit it and establish a direct line of communication with the public through social media. Other steps designed to create greater long-term support for authoritarian values include promoting their ideology through the education system and through political narratives, policies and laws, such as restricting women’s reproductive rights or access to free childcare, or criminalising humanitarian assistance towards migrants.
- 1.B. What kinds of measures do populist authoritarians take against civil society organisations?***
- The shrinking civic space is one element of a broader attack on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. CSOs become targets of populist authoritarian politicians because they protect the standards, institutions and marginalised groups that populist authoritarians attack. Civil society organisations are also targeted because of their ability to mobilise the public, provide an alternative source of information on current affairs and create progressive narratives that challenge the threat

and competition-based narratives used by authoritarians to trigger their supporter base.

Broadly speaking, there are four kinds of measure.³

- **Attacks on funding.** This can include limits on foreign donations, deterring donors by requiring their details to be published, taxing sources of funding, abolishing tax breaks, and removing public funds.
- **Death by bureaucracy.** This can include imposing excessively burdensome administrative requirements, for example, on financial reporting, coupled with severe penalties for non-compliance.
- **Harassment.** Populist authoritarian politicians or their allies in the media may engage in threatening behaviour and inflammatory speech towards NGOs designed to intimidate staff, as well as using legal tools abusively, particularly forms of administrative harassment like unfounded audits and investigations or excessive requests for information.
- **Smear campaigns.** These are designed to destroy the public's trust in civil society organisations, which damages their ability to inform or mobilise the public, as well as reducing the flow of donations.

I.C. The psychological profile of authoritarian voters: traditionalists and inegalitarians⁴

It is well established by researchers that a significant proportion of voters respond to a perception of threat or competition by endorsing authoritarian political attitudes. Research shows that some people are predisposed to adopting authoritarian attitudes. Broadly speaking there tend to be three groups in society: predisposed progressives, predisposed authoritarians and a moveable middle – people in this group are also sometimes referred to as ‘biconceptuals’. The moveable middle tends to be the larger group. People in this category hold a mixture of progressive and authoritarian views on various political, social, economic and personal issues, which could allow them to be further subcategorised for a more fine-grained analysis. The moveable middle can be swung towards greater support for progressive or authoritarian positions, depending on whether they are more exposed to circumstances and narratives that reinforce progressive or authoritarian attitudes.

Research has shown that voters who are pre-disposed to endorsing authoritarian political attitudes can be divided into two groups: oppressive traditionalists and oppressive inegalitarians. This can be helpful to understand, because these two groups are triggered to endorse authoritarian political attitudes by slightly different phenomena, even if they tend to favour the same kinds of authoritarian policies in the end.

I.C.a Oppressive traditionalists

The scientific literature refers to this group as ‘right-wing authoritarians’. Oppressive traditionalists view the world as a dangerous place. They are triggered by, and are particularly sensitive to, certain types of threat. Once triggered, oppressive traditionalists endorse adherence to traditional social rules, harsh punishment of individuals who break those rules or otherwise threaten group safety, and the concentration of power in a strong leader capable of enforcing the rules. The types of threat that trigger oppressive traditionalists include:

- **Economic shock.** The perception of economic instability and recession are shown to provoke an increase in support for authoritarian political attitudes. This is confirmed both by historical research examining public attitudes over periods of stability and prosperity versus instability and recession, as well as experimental research that examines how individuals react to perceived economic shock. Oppressive traditionalists are sensitive to economic threats to their ‘ingroup’, which tends to be defined along ethno-nationalist lines, rather than threats to their personal economic well-being.
- **Physical insecurity.** The perception of a rise in violent crime or terrorism or the threat/existence of a war with another country is also proven to shift voters’ political attitudes towards endorsing authoritarian policies. There is also evidence that the threat of disease has a similar impact.

- **Challenges to traditional social and cultural norms.** The perception that traditional norms are being changed or challenged also induces greater support for authoritarian policies. Migration and the presence of ethnic minorities can be perceived as a challenge to cultural norms where migrants or minorities are portrayed as having cultural rules that conflict with ingroup values, for example on gender equality or LGBTI rights. But ‘threats’ to cultural norms can also take the form of certain categories of people being perceived to break social rules, like feminists, LGBTI persons, criminals or those whose lifestyle simply contravenes conventional norms.

I.C.b. Oppressive inegalitarians

The scientific literature refers to this group as ‘social dominators’. Here they are labelled oppressive inegalitarians. Oppressive inegalitarians view the world as a competitive jungle where groups struggle to achieve and maintain their place in the social and economic hierarchy. They are triggered by, and are particularly sensitive to, certain types of competition. Once triggered, oppressive inegalitarians endorse harsh measures to reassert the social and economic hierarchy.

Oppressive inegalitarians are triggered by competition for social and economic status. A marginalised group will be perceived as competitive when it is seen to be advancing its status, for example by becoming better off economically or acquiring more public support

or more political or social influence. Examples of competition could include: women or ethnic minorities seen to be performing better on the employment market or taking up prominent business or government positions; ethnic minorities seen to be using public resources in a way that could advance their position in society. Oppressive inegalitarians are not only sensitive to competition for the status of their own group from 'lower' status groups. It seems that these types of authoritarians are also concerned with maintaining social and economic hierarchies in general – even if they are objectively on the losing end of them.

Oppressive inegalitarians have a strong zero-sum view of the world: they are inherently more likely to see a gain by a marginalised group as their loss, which means that they tend to overestimate progress made by marginalised groups. This helps to explain why the idea of 'white/Christian genocide' is so common among some authoritarians, even though it is objectively ridiculous.

It should be noted that the notion of threat or competition is subject to relativity. There is research to suggest that economic shock is perceived as more threatening in affluent countries (where people have more to lose) compared to poorer countries. Similarly, within a given country it appears that although the very poorest in society are more sensitive to economic shock than those who are better off, it is actually the group just above them on the ladder – the second-to-lowest fifth in economic terms – who are most sensitive. This group of people, who are probably employed but in a precarious position on the job market, seem

most sensitive to competition, presumably because they feel that they have something to lose and they feel vulnerable. It seems likely that the very poorest react less strongly to economic shock because they don't have much lower to 'fall' in economic terms.

1.D. What is triggering oppressive traditionalists and oppressive inegalitarians to rally behind populist authoritarian parties and causes now?

There have always been people predisposed to authoritarian political attitudes. Until recently in the EU it seems that these voters were rather more scattered in their voting habits across different political parties. In some countries they were more likely to vote for the centre left, in others the centre right. But the situation has changed in recent years. Populist authoritarian parties and politicians have become adept at uniting pre-disposed authoritarians behind their causes, pulling them away from other parties, while at the same time also beginning to capture voters that belong to the moveable middle. There is evidence of greater polarisation as the moveable middle starts to empty out into progressive and authoritarian camps. Judging by election results across Europe, populist authoritarians seem to be performing better than progressives in capturing voters from the moveable middle.

Populist authoritarians have been helped by a perfect storm of circumstances. They have capitalised on some objectively legitimate grievances, but they have also manufactured, twisted or exaggerated other developments to

create a perception of threat or competition that is not objectively justified. Populist authoritarians have been greatly helped by the poor state of media independence and pluralism as well as outside financial and technical support.

1.D.i Objective sources of threat and competition

The objective developments that have aided populist authoritarians include:

- Economic recession, growing inequality and increased relative deprivation.
- Increased migration flows.
- Terrorist attacks.
- Significant changes in recent decades in traditional social norms towards greater individual freedom and equality for historically marginalised groups.

Populist authoritarians have often exaggerated or manufactured a sense of threat and competition using these factors. Examples include:

- Portraying migrants and ethnic minorities as criminals, terrorists and as a public health risk.
- Alleging that the cultural values of migrants and ethnic minorities are incompatible with national culture and that migrants wish to extinguish European culture and religion.

- Framing progress towards equality for marginalised groups like women and LGBTI persons as threats to traditional cultural values rather than benefits for society as a whole.
- Painting ethnic minorities as taking scarce public resources and jobs away from the majority population.
- Presenting progressives and the political mainstream as a traitorous ‘elite’ who have usurped power from the ingroup and are responsible for threats to the nation’s economy, security and culture.

CSOs can find themselves targeted by several of these narratives and are generally portrayed as part of the unpatriotic ‘elite’ acting against the interests of the nation on behalf of foreign powers (e.g. the EU) or foreign elites (e.g. philanthropists). For example, CSOs providing assistance to migrants are often portrayed as threats to culture and security. CSOs working on gender or LGBTI equality are portrayed as threats to traditional cultural values. CSOs working on environmental issues are often portrayed as threatening economic prosperity and as destroying the traditional relationship between humans and nature.

What matters, for the purposes of provoking support for authoritarian political agendas, is perception, rather than the objective reality of threats. For example, populist authoritarians in Hungary, Romania and the Czech Republic have based successful election campaigns around migration even though they experience

very little migration and even when numbers of migrants entering the EU have fallen considerably.

I.D.ii Poor state of media independence and pluralism

The poor state of media independence and pluralism and the rise of the internet has allowed populist authoritarians in the EU to spread their narratives throughout society. Public service media is increasingly under the control and influence of governments, making it susceptible as a vehicle for propagating threat and competition-based narratives when populist authoritarian parties come to power. Furthermore, the media market is such that it is inherently geared towards helping the spread of populist authoritarian narratives. The shift from traditional print media towards digitisation has meant that advertising revenue that formerly sustained media outlets has instead moved to news aggregator websites, such as Google and Facebook. The loss of revenue for traditional media outlets meant that many went out of business, allowing oligarchs to acquire media companies at little cost to serve their commercial and political agendas. Often these owners are allied to governments and have helped to spread government propaganda. But even well-intentioned media outlets have propagated populist authoritarian narratives, frequently dedicating a disproportionate amount of coverage to authoritarian figures and messaging so that they can survive economically. This is because human psychology makes information that stimulates fear and that appears novel particularly attractive.

Controversial, fear-based and sensationalist content attracts more viewers, readers and, hence, revenue.

II.D.iii Outside help

There are commonalities in the rhetoric and political agendas of authoritarian politicians across the EU. There is evidence to suggest that this is not coincidental. These political movements benefit from similar sources of expertise and financial support from Russia and the far right in the USA.⁶

I.E. What kinds of attitudes and policies do authoritarians hold and support?

The paper has already outlined the ways in which populist authoritarian governments dismantle democratic pluralism, the rule of law and fundamental rights. This section will offer a brief overview of other policies advocated by populist authoritarian politicians and attitudes held by authoritarian voters. The policies advanced by populist authoritarians align well with the political attitudes of oppressive traditionalists and oppressive inequalityists. The policies favoured by authoritarians follow a relatively coherent pattern because they are based on the underlying worldviews of oppressive traditionalists and oppressive inequalityists. These policies share in common that: they reassert traditional social and cultural rules and social and economic hierarchies; they encourage the punishment and oppression of perceived internal and external threats.

I.E.i. Same policies and attitudes, different underlying reasons and triggers

Both types of authoritarian tend to support the same sets of policies, though for slightly different reasons. For example, both types of authoritarian engage in victim blaming of women who experience sexual assault. For oppressive traditionalists, this is because women who violate (or threaten) traditional cultural norms by dressing provocatively are breaking conservative social norms and are ‘asking for trouble’ and ‘deserve’ what they get. For oppressive inequalityists, sexual assault of women by men is a tool to perpetuate the lower status of women in the social hierarchy. To take a second example, both types of authoritarian tend to oppose policies designed to protect and preserve the environment, including moving eating habits away from the consumption of meat. For oppressive traditionalists, this is because the relationship between humans and the environment has traditionally been one of exploitation, where nature is meant to give way to food production and industrial development. For inequalityists, this is because nature and animals are viewed in hierarchical terms and have a lower status than humans.

I.E.ii. Common threads: moral hierarchy, prejudice, violence and anti-democratic tendencies

Moral hierarchy

Authoritarians tend to support a particular moral hierarchy, which also shows through in the policies that they support: God over man

(i.e. the supremacy of religion), man over women (paternalism), heterosexual over LGBTI (heteronormativity), whites over non-whites (xenophobia and nationalism), adults over children (strict parenting by a strong figure), man over nature (anti-environmentalism).

Prejudice

One particularly strong thread running through authoritarian political attitudes is prejudice. Both oppressive traditionalists and oppressive inequalityists are highly likely to be prejudiced towards historically marginalised groups such as women, LGBTI persons, migrants and ethnic minorities, but also other ‘outgroups’ such as the homeless, the poor, the overweight, persons with disabilities, prisoners. For oppressive traditionalists this is because historically inequality has been the norm in society, and because some groups are seen as threatening and therefore merit punishment and repression to safeguard cultural norms or group security. For oppressive inequalityists, inequality is fundamental to their vision of the world as a competitive jungle where the strongest and most deserving dominate the social and economic hierarchy. Prejudice is a generalised attitude. That is, when an individual is prejudiced, he/she tends to be prejudiced towards all marginalised groups and not just one particular group.

Violence

Authoritarians are also more likely to support the use of violence against marginalised groups and groups perceived as threatening. This includes support for violence and harsh forms of punishment by the state but also support for partaking as private individuals in acts of violence against such groups.

Democratic life

Authoritarian voters are not particularly interested in participating in democratic life. Populist authoritarian voters tend to be less interested in politics and have less knowledge of political affairs. Authoritarians tend to object to free speech, public protest and lobbying activities for activists and organisations that challenge traditional social rules or socio-economic hierarchies, such as environmental protection of equal treatment.

Although authoritarian voters report that they feel ‘ignored’ by mainstream political parties, it is a mistake to think that giving authoritarian voters greater opportunities for consultation or participation in democratic life would cause them to reverse their support for authoritarian policies. Rather, authoritarian voters seem content to allow politicians to ‘get on with it’ just as long as those politicians reflect their values and political attitudes. In support of this, there is research that finds that a significant proportion of authoritarian voters have in the past refrained from voting at all until populist authoritarian parties that reflected their views emerged.

As noted, oppressive traditionalists favour concentrating power in a strong leader who can act decisively and without hindrance to implement traditional rules strictly and defend against or attack internal and external threats to the ingroup. Oppressive inegalitarians tend to consider that both direct and indirect democracy are less fair as a system of government than rule by an oligarchy that represents the interests of the dominant cultural or religious social group.

Other policies and attitudes

While there is some variation between countries, the attitudes of authoritarian voters and the policies they tend to favour usually include:

- Restrictions on immigration, including reducing numbers of migrants, deportations, compulsory detention of migrants, allowing employers to refuse to employ migrants, the use of violence against migrants, reluctance to send their children to schools to which migrants send their children or live in neighbourhoods with migrants.
- Opposition to gender equality, the endorsement of traditional family roles for women, opposition to abortion (including support for the use of violence against women seeking abortions), opposition to women in leadership positions, endorsement of rape myths.
- Opposition to affirmative action as well as to policies that promote equality for LGBTI persons such as same-sex marriage, including teaching on gender identity and

sexual orientation on educational curricula, and support for hate speech and hate crime.

- Opposition to redistributive policies that could improve the social or economic status of marginalised groups, including the poor, women, the homeless, ethnic minorities or LGBTI persons. Redistributive policies include public health care, affordable housing, early education programmes, unemployment benefits, increasing taxes on the wealthy. Support for welfare appears to be chauvinistic. That is, public services should be accessible only for the ‘deserving’ ingroup.
- A strong law-and-order approach including harsh punishment for criminals (such as support for the death penalty), the weakening of due process rights and the restriction of civil liberties, such as privacy, perceived to interfere with public security.
- Restrictions on activism and advocacy by civil society organisations that protect groups (e.g. migrants) or causes (e.g. environmental protection) seen as threatening or that promote causes that challenge traditional social rules or hierarchies.
- Prioritisation of industrial development and commercial activity over care for the environment, including an inclination towards punishing environmental activists for protesting rather than businesses for polluting.
- A foreign policy that favours increased military spending, deployment of the military only in response to perceived threats,

non-intervention to protect human rights, a decrease in development aid and withdrawal from multilateral cooperation.

Variations between countries

There is some variation between societies in the rules and hierarchies that authoritarians favour. This depends to a great degree on how well-entrenched equality for a particular group has become. For instance, in some western societies and among younger generations equality for women or for LGBTI persons may have become rapidly entrenched as a social norm. When such developments have become sufficiently broadly accepted, traditionalists and inequalityists are less likely to oppose equality for LGBTI persons or women. For traditionalists, this is because equality for these groups has already become part of ‘the rules’ that they defend. For inequalityists, this is because the (new) place of these groups has become accepted in the social hierarchy. At the same time, they will remain prejudiced against other marginalised groups for whom equality has not become entrenched, such as racial minorities. The same can apply for other rules. For example, it may be that protection of the environment has become more strongly entrenched in some countries than in others. Where this is the case, it is quite possible that authoritarians will endorse environmental protection as reflecting a national tradition.

In this sense, progressives should note that it is possible to garner support for progressive norms relatively quickly provided that they are sufficiently strongly promoted and endorsed

by institutions in society that have a strong socialising influence over the public, such as the media, government, religious institutions and schools.

I.F. Why are threat and competition-based narratives so powerful?⁸

It is probable that the reason the kinds of threats and sources of competition pointed out above have such a powerful effect on political attitudes is rooted in human evolution. Communities were more likely to survive outside threats if they had strong internal cohesion, and if they attacked perceived sources of the threat. Communities tend to have stronger internal cohesion if the group sticks to a common set of rules and values (which guarantees internal cooperation between group members) and maintains existing social hierarchies (which guarantees social stability). This is probably why populist authoritarians favour a return to traditional social norms and socio-economic hierarchies. The reason populist authoritarians tend to favour the harsh punishment of people challenging social norms and traditional

hierarchies and support the concentration of power in a strong leader who can act decisively is probably because these measures helped to enforce group cohesion and decisive action against perceived threats. Thus, there are several reasons why populist authoritarians tend to favour a strong law-and-order approach and dislike fundamental rights, the rule of law and democratic pluralism. These standards:

- Contradict many traditional norms and undermine social and economic hierarchies.
- Provide means to challenge traditional norms, such as the right to form associations, media freedom and freedom of assembly.
- Protect those perceived to challenge the norms (e.g. feminists) or perceived as a threat to society (e.g. criminal and terrorists).
- Prevent power being concentrated in a strong leader by requiring independent courts and other institutions that impose limits on the power of the executive.

Part II. How can progressives fight back?

The types of measures available to progressives can be divided in two. First, measures to combat the short-term triggers. These are the triggers that cause people predisposed to authoritarian political attitudes to actively endorse those attitudes, and that are gradually shifting the moveable middle towards authoritarian views. Second, long-term measures that lower the likelihood that people will become predisposed to authoritarian political attitudes in the future. The measures suggested below should not just be considered as ‘negative’ in the sense of fighting support for authoritarian policies. Many of these measures also actively promote support for progressive values.

II.A. Addressing short-term triggers

Measures to prevent populist authoritarians from manufacturing or exaggerating the perception of threat and competition

Some of anxieties that populist authoritarians rely on for support are partly manufactured. Donors and CSOs could consider taking the following steps to reduce the ability of politicians to exaggerate certain issues and spread their narratives.

- **Support good quality, balanced media.** As discussed, current problems with public and private media have created an environment that is fertile for spreading threat and competition-based narratives that trigger support for authoritarian political attitudes.

Reforms to ensure the independence of public service media and improvements to the financial sustainability of private media are vital.

Donors could:

- Support independent, high quality media by supporting training on ethical journalism and by giving grants to independent journalists or new non-profit media outlets.

Donors could support CSOs to work towards:

- Reform of the EU’s Audio-Visual Media Services Directive to include guarantees for the independence of public service broadcasters.
- Ensuring that EU competition rules on the plurality of media ownership are reinterpreted in a way that protects democratic pluralism.
- Creation of national laws guaranteeing editorial independence from owners of private media.
- Creation of non-profit models for new media outlets.
- Creation of new sources of funding for independent journalism, for example through taxes on news aggregators like Google and Facebook.

- **Improved integration and mixing.** For the most part, support for populist authoritarian parties tends to be higher in the countryside and in urban areas that are segregated or deprived of resources (putting groups into competition with each other) where the majority population either has no or only negative experiences with minority groups. In urbanised areas where mixing occurs in schools, housing and the workplace (and there is not an acute shortage of resources), levels of support for populist authoritarian parties tends to be lower. Research in the field of ‘contact theory’ confirms that mixing between majority and minority groups, especially when this takes place under certain conditions, serves to lower levels of prejudice and increase empathy towards minority groups. This in turn lowers levels of support for populist authoritarian parties and causes. The reason for this is that personal experience of minority groups diffuses the perception of threat or competition falsely created by the narratives used by populist authoritarians.

Donors could fund:

- Further academic research into ‘contact’ theory.
- Collection and dissemination towards national authorities, municipalities and CSOs of examples of promising practices and lessons learnt.

Donors could support CSOs to:

- Carry out advocacy towards the EU and national and local authorities asking for greater allocation of resources for ‘contact’ projects.
- Carry out projects designed to facilitate positive ‘contact’ between ethnic and social groups, for example, housing projects, school exchanges and joint community projects.

Measures to deal with genuine sources of threat and competition

Certain anxieties on which populist authoritarians rely for support are rooted in genuine concerns among the public. If these problems are not resolved, the population will remain susceptible to populist authoritarian narratives and supportive of the solutions they propose.

- **Effective, human rights-compliant counter-terrorism measures.** Populist authoritarians have created a false link between migration and terrorism. But this does not mean that the threat of terrorism is not genuine. However, commonly used rights-violating measures like mass surveillance and ethnic profiling are ineffective and counter-productive. That is, they create greater insecurity. Similarly, policies used to counter radicalisation into violent extremism end up contributing to an environment where people become more vulnerable to

radicalisation. In contrast, human rights-based counter-terrorism measures are shown to be more effective in addressing security threats. These include community-based policing, targeted surveillance, and addressing marginalisation and discrimination against communities that are vulnerable to radicalisation.¹⁰

Donors could support CSOs to:

- Carry out advocacy towards governments to encourage them to implement counter-terrorism measures that are effective and human rights-compliant, allowing them to reduce genuine security threats.
- Carry out litigation to contest the legality of mass surveillance.
- Promote a holistic approach to countering violent extremism that focuses on making communities less vulnerable to radicalisation by addressing economic and social marginalisation.
- Collect best practices on community-based policing and evidence-based policing (as opposed to ethnic profiling) and disseminate these through police training bodies.
- Work with police forces to implement community-based policing and evidence-based profiling.

- **Economic and social rights and local democracy.** Economic shock and increasing inequality and relative deprivation are two factors that help trigger support for populist authoritarians. Voters can be shielded from the consequences of economic shock by strong social protection and well-funded public services. Increasing inequality and relative deprivation can also be countered by providing well-funded public services to provide individuals with opportunities to reach their full potential, as well as guaranteeing fair pay and working conditions and the affordability of basic goods like housing, fuel and food. Governments are under a legal obligation to realise economic and social rights, including an adequate standard of living, adequate wages, provision of services like housing, health care, education and welfare during times of hardship. Human rights CSOs in the west have tended to focus on social and economic rights only incidentally from the perspective of non-discrimination and social inclusion for marginalised groups.

It can be challenging to change policy at national level. But it can be easier to achieve reforms at municipal level, where authorities tend to be closer to the public and usually have some control over relevant public services. Increasing public participation at municipal level raises the likelihood that local authorities deliver these services. This in turn creates more effective protection for citizens from relative deprivation as well as economic shocks. Increasing citizen participation in municipal governance would also serve a complementary role of empowering citizens in democratic life, which could

create more resilience among the public against attempts by authoritarian politicians to erode democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. The ‘fearless cities’ project could serve as a partner or as inspiration for local democracy initiatives.

Donors could support CSOs to:

- Promote better implementation of economic and social rights at national and EU level.
- Build grassroots initiatives designed to allow citizens to organise and vocalise their demands for adequate services from local authorities.
- Carry out advocacy towards the EU to change EU laws that can prevent municipal authorities from providing effective, good quality public services, such as certain rules on public procurement, services of general interest and free movement of services.
- Work with ‘fearless cities’ to develop a successful model of citizen participation that can be replicated elsewhere.

II.B. Long-term measures to reduce the likelihood that people will become predisposed to authoritarian political attitudes

Research suggests that whether people become predisposed to authoritarian or progressive political attitudes comes down primarily to socialisation. Socialisation is an ongoing process – we are constantly socialised into support for certain values by our friends, peers, partners, workplace, religion, the media, education system and even government policy and rhetoric.

- **Formal and informal education.** Being taught to develop critical thinking, empathy, tolerance and receiving education on the substance of human rights are proven to make individuals less likely to endorse authoritarian political attitudes and more likely to endorse progressive values. Populist authoritarians tend to attack the education system precisely because of its potential to socialise future generations into progressive values. In countries where they have taken power, populist authoritarians tend to inject authoritarian values into the educational curricula and limit academic freedom at university.

Donors could support CSOs to:

- Further develop educational materials and training for civics teachers on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights for use by CSOs and schools.

- Collect and disseminate promising models for collaboration with schools and local authorities on human rights education as well as materials for use in formal and public education.
- Develop school charters that promote values such as tolerance, empathy and perspective-taking as part of the educational culture, such as UNICEF's 'rights respecting schools' initiative.
- Develop informal public education programmes aimed at increasing public understanding of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

promoted by a given religious tradition will also influence whether individuals are more predisposed to authoritarian or progressive attitudes. In many countries 'fundamentalist' and ultra-conservative religious forces appear to be more vocal and better organised than progressive religious voices.

Donors could:

- Support progressive religious voices to become better organised and more vocal in public debate.
- Support CSOs to work together with progressive religious groups on common causes.

- **Religion.** Religion, like education, is a powerful socialising force. The impact of religion on political attitudes depends in part on the substantive values promoted by the religion in question, and the underlying approach towards religiosity promoted by a given tradition or religious body. Where a given tradition promotes 'fundamentalist' religiosity, this will predispose individuals towards support for authoritarian attitudes. Religious fundamentalism refers to an approach where individuals are closed-minded, dogmatic and absolutely certain about the truth and correctness of their beliefs. Where a given tradition promotes 'quest-like' religiosity, this will predispose individuals towards more progressive attitudes. Questers see religion as a guide rather than a prescriptive set of do's and don'ts. The values

- **Framing, progressive narratives and communications strategies and tools.** Populist authoritarians have been very successful at developing and spreading threat and competition-based narratives. These narratives do not only serve to trigger authoritarian attitudes. Research from the field of cognitive linguistics shows that over time these also end up socialising the public into support for more authoritarian policies. This is because the narratives (or frames) that are used are designed to reinforce certain clusters of values underlying authoritarian political attitudes.

Unfortunately, progressive forces among civil society, the media and politicians have been unable or slow to challenge authoritarian narratives effectively. Much of the time,

progressives have (unintentionally) ended up reinforcing authoritarian narratives by trying to engage in direct contradiction or myth-busting instead of developing genuinely alternative progressive narratives that speak to clusters of values that underlie progressive political attitudes. Funders in Europe have begun to support research, training and communications guides that teach the civil society sector how to frame effective progressive narratives.¹¹ However, this is not happening on a large enough scale and, even where there is support to train or support CSOs, it is often too short-term to have a lasting impact on their work.

In addition to this, CSOs working on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights do not tend to have a large public constituency compared, for example, to environmental groups like Greenpeace or development groups like Oxfam. This means that intense and powerful public outreach activities are needed. But the civil society sector tends not to have the right set of skills, knowledge or sufficient resources to devise the strategies and use the tools that this requires. This makes it difficult for them to reach large audiences.

Equipping civil society with the requisite skills, knowledge and resources to use framing techniques and communicate effectively could have a multiplier effect because it could lead to the creation and popularisation of progressive narratives and frames that can be taken up by the media and politicians as well as civil society.

Donors could:

- Fund the development of communications toolkits adapted to the cultural and linguistic particularities of each country.
- Fund training and continuous expert support to CSOs on communications and framing.
- Create a shared resource for CSOs, such as a European human rights communications agency, to assist with effective framing and the development of progressive narratives and assist with effective communications strategies and tools.
- Invest larger amounts of funding into building the communications capacity of CSOs.

CSOs could:

- Create in-house expertise by requiring staff to study and use existing publicly available communications guides and materials.
- Maximise limited resources by collaborating with each other to produce shared communications materials.

II.C. What specific measures can be taken to protect and support civil society?

As outlined above, CSOs should be provided with training and guidance on how to communicate more effectively with the public so as to promote support for progressive values. This kind of support would not only help to create long-term support for progressive values and challenge the threat and competition-based narratives advanced by authoritarian politicians. It would also create greater support among the public for civil society organisations themselves – this support would make it harder for governments to damage CSOs’ reputations through smear campaigns, make politicians more cautious about attacking civil society organisations for fear of a public backlash, and would open the way to cultivating a culture of micro-donations for CSOs working on these issues from the general public.

Donors could increase their investment in measures to create resilience among their grantees. For example:

- **Pastoral support.** Increased workloads, reduced resources, increased harassment and attacks are having an impact on the wellbeing of staff, which makes it harder for CSOs to retain and attract good quality staff.

Donors could:

- Fund measures to provide support to civil society staff such as sabbaticals, psychological support services and partnerships with sports and

entertainment companies to facilitate periods of rest and relaxation.

CSO could:

- Introduce internal policies to promote the mental wellbeing and promote the morale of staff.

- **Protection against surveillance.** There is an increased perception among civil society organisations that they are subject to government surveillance, which has a negative impact on their work and can impose a personal strain on staff.

Donors could:

- Fund CSOs specialised in data protection and technology to train other CSOs on how to protect the privacy of their communications.

CSOs could:

- Immediately take low-cost precautions that do not require training and can be self-taught, such as use of Signal (an encrypted messaging app) or installing PGP on email accounts.

- **Protection against legal/administrative measures.** As noted, governments are intentionally, or as a by-product of other reforms, imposing limitations and burdens on CSOs that makes their operation more difficult. CSOs sometimes have sufficient legal knowledge and resources to challenge these restrictions in national courts and before the ECHR. It is less common for CSOs to have the expertise required to challenge these limitations through EU law.

Donors could fund CSOs to carry out advocacy towards the EU to:

- Ensure the EU takes legal action against governments trying to shrink the civic space.
- Develop guidelines for EU governments clarifying how to interpret EU law on money laundering and terror-

ist financing in compliance with the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

- Create a special representative on civic space in the Commission, reporting to the First Vice-President, empowered to receive complaints from CSOs and make diplomatic interventions to protect CSOs under attack.

Donors could:

- Increase capacity among CSOs to use EU law to protect the civic space.
- Provide greater funding to CSOs to litigate themselves and work with pro bono and low bono litigators to protect the civic space.

Concluding comments

Populist authoritarian politicians have become adept at mobilising the public thanks to a favourable media environment, public anxieties – both genuine and manufactured – and their ability to develop threat and competition-based narratives. These movements receive support from US and Russian donors that seems to be coordinated across Europe. Progressive donors need to catch up and make strategic investments that have the potential to make large impacts. Of the recommendations suggested

above, increasing the communications capacity of CSOs, especially by funding research, guidelines and training on values-based framing, is likely to produce the biggest positive impact relative to investment. This is because of the potential multiplier effect: there are already thousands of CSOs working on progressive causes in existence across the EU. Improving their communications capacity could turn them, collectively, into a powerful force for disseminating progressive narratives.

Notes

- 1 Butler, I., 'Countering populist authoritarians: Where their support comes from and how to reverse their success', 2018, Civil Liberties Union for Europe. Downloadable for free [here](#) at Liberties' website.
- 2 For further discussion see chapter 2 of 'Countering populist authoritarians'.
- 3 Butler, I., 'Participatory democracy under threat: Growing restrictions on the freedoms of NGOs in the EU', Civil Liberties Union for Europe, 2017. Downloadable [here](#).
- 4 For further discussion see chapters 3 & 4 of 'Countering populist authoritarians'.
- 5 For further discussion see chapters 7 & 8 of 'Countering populist authoritarians'.
- 6 Open Democracy, 'Revealed: Trump-linked US Christian "fundamentalists" pour millions of "dark money" into Europe, boosting the far right', 27 March 2019; Washington Post, 'Russia and the far right's cozy affair', 29 July 2018.
- 7 For further discussion see chapter 6 of 'Countering populist authoritarians'.
- 8 For further discussion see chapter 9 of 'Countering populist authoritarians'.
- 9 For further discussion see chapter 10 of 'Countering populist authoritarians'.
- 10 Butler, I., 'Security through human rights', Civil Liberties Union for Europe, 2017. Downloadable [here](#).
- 11 For examples of toolkits see: Public Interest Research Centre, Counterpoint, Equally Ours, 'Building bridges: Connecting with values to re-frame and build support for human rights', 2016; Equinet & Public Interest Research Centre, 'Framing equality: Communication toolkit for equality bodies', 2017; ILGA-Europe & Public Interest Research Centre, 'Framing equality toolkit', 2017; and www.narrativechange.org

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