

# *Countering Populist Authoritarians*

*A guide for funders  
and civil society organisations*

## ***Summary***

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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,

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