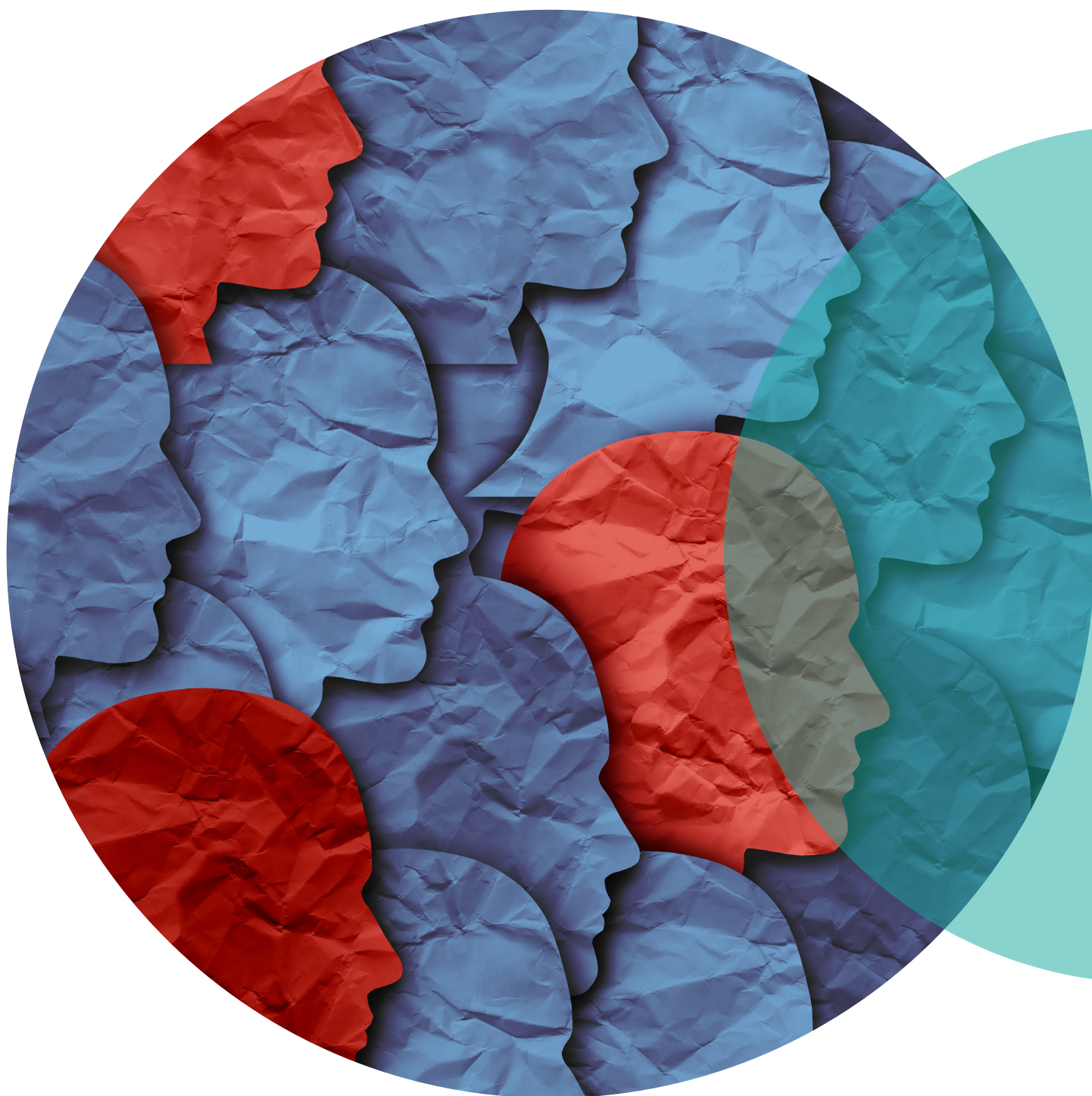


Watching out for populism: Authoritarian logics as a vulnerability to hybrid threat activity



Hybrid CoE Working Papers cover work in progress: they develop and share ideas on Hybrid CoE's ongoing research/workstrand themes or analyze actors, events or concepts that are relevant from the point of view of hybrid threats. They cover a wide range of topics related to the constantly evolving security environment.

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats

tel. +358 400 253800 | www.hybridcoe.fi

ISBN 978-952-7472-54-5 (web)

ISBN 978-952-7472-55-2 (print)

ISSN 2670-160X (web)

ISSN 2814-7235 (print)

January 2023

Cover photo: Lightspring / shutterstock.com

Hybrid CoE's mission is to strengthen its Participating States' security by providing expertise and training for countering hybrid threats, and by enhancing EU-NATO cooperation in this respect. The Centre is an autonomous hub for practitioners and experts, located in Helsinki, Finland.

The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 883054.

Contents

Summary	5
Introduction	6
1. Democracy and populism	7
1.1. Political liberalism and the general will	7
1.2. Democratic depression and populism?	7
1.3. Defining populism	8
2. The authoritarian logics of populism	10
2.1. Against complexity	10
2.2. Against elites	10
2.3. Against representation	11
3. Fragmenting the public sphere	13
3.1. Social media: amplifiers of the populist radicalization of democracy?	13
3.2. Public sphere and virtual opinions	13
3.3. Connecting audiences and creating counterpublics	14
3.4. Brutalization of political expression	15
Conclusion: Watching out for populism to counter authoritarian drives	16
Author	17

Summary

This Working Paper argues that one should watch out for populism and what it implies for hybrid threat activity. Populism has an underlying authoritarian logic and thus undermines the main checks and balances, and the individual and public rights and liberties that regularly keep excesses of power at bay in a liberal democracy. The logic of authoritarianism can thus mechanically undermine the key frameworks of a liberal democracy. Hybrid threats present an essentially political challenge to liberal democracies. This paper therefore sets out to underline the logic of authoritarianism, which could potentially be pushed to the fullest extent through hybrid threat activity and undermine the foundations of a liberal democracy. The paper highlights three essential authoritarian logics within populism: the rejection of complexity; of elites and groups perceived as powerful; and of the very idea of democratic representation. The paper goes on to identify the parameters of the fragmentation of the public sphere by articulating the interplay between the logic of populism and the kind of communication and group formation dynamics that digital social media allows, setting out to underline a general brutalization of political expression as a result of such interplay. The key elements of this paper should be used to better comprehend weak signals and authoritarian outliers, especially in the information and political domains. While the paper in no way suggests that populism itself would necessarily be a component of hybrid threat activity, the findings it presents should be used to better anticipate the kind of populist political discourse and practices that tend to be leveraged within a hybrid threat campaign.

Introduction

Hybrid threat activity poses a political challenge to democratic societies. It undermines the ability of democracies to make decisions and it challenges the integrity of their processes. Hybrid threats create or exploit fear and anxiety to pressure societies and states by placing executive, judiciary, and legislative decision-making processes under institutional stress.¹ On the other hand, authoritarianism challenges liberal democratic standards on a global scale. Since 1994, 70% of cases of autocratization have resulted from democratic erosion rather than quick takeovers of power.² The Secretary General of the Council of Europe wrote of “a clear and worrying degree of democratic backsliding”³ in 2021. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) reported in the same year that “less than half (45.7%) of the world’s population now live in a democracy of some sort, a significant decline from 2020 (49.4%)”.

Populist parties and politicians often prove to be vectors of a pushback against liberal democratic norms and values. They can even become vectors of foreign interference.⁴ Populism tends to radicalize and brutalize political expression by stoking a multitude of clashing and particularistic interests, identities, and resentments.⁵ To paraphrase George Orwell, drawing out the ideas and practices corresponding to

populism to their logical consequences makes them resemble a political challenge to the representation and deliberation processes of democratic societies. While recognizing the contested nature of the concept of populism – as well as its complex relationship with democratic practice – the purpose of this Working Paper is to explore the reasons why the logic of populism could end up eroding already weakening democratic norms to the benefit of authoritarian ideals. It looks at how the inherently authoritarian logics of populism can disintegrate the democratic public sphere and in so doing undermine liberal democratic processes, opening priming and destabilization levers to hybrid threat activity. The paper further explores the interplay between the logic of populism, authoritarianism and their potential instrumentalization within hybrid threat campaigns. The paper first elaborates on the interplay between democracy and populism by proposing a functional definition of populism. It then explores the link between the logic of populism and the ideals of authoritarian governance by drawing the logic out of three key dynamics of populism. Finally, it draws out the logic of populism by pondering its interplay with digital social media to suggest that this interplay could end up fragmenting the public sphere and brutalizing political expression.

- 1 Rainer Jungwirth, Hanna Smith, Etienne Willkomm, Jukka Savolainen, Marina Alonso Villota, Maxime Lebrun, Aleksis Aho, Giorgos Giannopoulos, ‘Hybrid threats: a comprehensive resilience ecosystem’, JRC Flagship Report (JRC European Commission, 2022).
- 2 Anna Lührmann, Staffan I Lindberg, ‘A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?’, *Democratization*, Vol 26, Issue 7, (2019).
- 3 Marija Pecvinovic Buric, ‘State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law: A Democratic Renewal for Europe’, Report by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, May 2021): 5.
- 4 ‘Complément d’enquête. France: les réseaux Poutine’, presented by Tristan Waleckx, 27 October 2022, France 2 TV Channel. The Dossier Centre transmitted information to France 2 according to which Philippe Olivier, member of the European Parliament for France’s National Rally, maintained connections with Russian Oligarch Konstantin Malofeev by being involved in the “altintern” project of creating a union of European far-right parties.
- 5 Christopher Bertram, ‘Rousseau’s Legacy in Two Conceptions of the General Will: Democratic and Transcendent’, *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 74, No 3 (summer 2012): 403–419.

1. Democracy and populism

1.1 Political liberalism and the general will

One aim of the liberal form of democracy is to tame the authoritarian tendencies that are contained in the principle of majority rule. Liberal democracy ensures that any constituent part of the body politic will not abuse the others. The essence of political liberalism is best reflected in John Locke's main proposals: individual freedom is not conducive to anarchy but is rather a structuring social norm. It is instead domination by and submission to an alien power which is the true vehicle of violence, division, and disorder. Locke's conception of individual freedom means that power must be effectively limited and kept in check.⁶ Also a philosopher of the social contract, Jean-Jacques Rousseau prescribed that a civil society is made up of individuals exercising their freedom by putting their self and corporate interests under a set of common laws and duties. It conceptually follows that such a community sees the development of a *general will* whose "object is the law and the current system of justice of the land".⁷ The general will transcends the expression of public opinion at any point in time, even if majoritarian. It refers to the kind of regime, values and norms that regulate political and societal life for several generations of citizens. The parameters of the general will and with it public freedoms, and the separation of powers,⁸ together with a free press and free expression impede tyranny through checks, balances, and

oversight. Francis Fukuyama points out that the goal of political liberalism is the management of diversity in pluralistic societies.⁹ Power in democracy is limited by the embodiments of the liberal component of democracy. Diverse sources of power and legitimacy coexist and check each other. They emanate from the need to regulate public powers to the benefit of individual rights and liberties.

1.2 Democratic depression and populism?

While political liberalism rests on tolerance, compromise and deliberation, Fukuyama argues that the logic of populism is to gradually step back to pre-liberal political ideas, leading to a democratic "recession" or "depression".¹⁰ Populism is a negatively connoted term as much as democracy was during most of the 19th century. This Working Paper recognizes that "populism" refers to a set of practices and expectations which stem from genuine and legitimate demands for better representation. It looks at the essence and implications of populism by articulating the logic of its premises and practice. Populism is a set of beliefs on how power should be exerted in a democracy, based on the general claim that elites confiscate power, resources, and agency from the people. The frames of populist discourse depict problems and issues in definitive antagonistic terms. Populist discourse is also defined as praising the good and cohesion of an in-group while

6 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. Ed. Peter Laslett, 1997).

7 John A. Clark, 'The definition of the general will', *Ethics*, Volume 53, Number 2, (January 1943), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2989185>.

8 Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

9 Francis Fukuyama, 'A Country of their Own: Liberalism Needs the Nation', *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2022).

10 Ibid.

portraying an out-group as irreconcilably other.¹¹ Populism is a system of claims, resentment, and victimhood. Nadia Urbinati argues that populism is “made of negatives – whether it is anti-politics, anti-intellectualism or anti-elite”¹² Eatwell and Goodwin propose several key principles of populism – *distrust* towards politicians, elites and the system; a fear of *destruction*, which can concern national identity, social status, and traditional values; a feeling of relative *deprivation* that has arisen with the perception of flagrant social inequalities; and a process of *de-alignment* of the people from intermediary bodies and political parties.¹³ A common denominator of populist ideas is the belief that the people are being misrepresented by the existing governance system (the Elites).

1.3 Defining populism

Defining populism is thus a tricky exercise, especially given its normative charge. Populism embodies and exploits a set of genuine concerns and demands to improve democratic representation. Claude Lefort’s work on how totalitarianism historically came about within the development path of European democracies points to how the logics of authoritarianism

can emerge from democracy as an attempt to resolve divisions and overcome complexity within democracy itself.¹⁴ A student of Lefort’s, Pierre Rosanvallon, proposed a *functional* definition of populism, instead of defining it by ideological standards.¹⁵ Populism exploits tensions within the principle of democratic representation. Populist movements historically emerged from contesting the principle that representatives should be elected to express the general will and take decisions on behalf of citizens.¹⁶ The core belief of populism is that a direct representation of the people will make for better governance because it will bypass other forms of decision-making.¹⁷ Rosanvallon suggests that populism is a pathology of democracy since it exploits the necessarily imperfect nature of electoral representation.¹⁸ He argues that populism stokes and radicalizes distrust in several dimensions of democratic participation: popular oversight of governments drifting towards depicting office holders as a clique of tyrannical, cynical and corrupt politicians; trending towards “negative sovereignty”, whereby “negative masses”¹⁹ seek a radical rejection of elected representatives; leading to a systematic suspicion against office holders.

11 Linda Bos, Christian Schemer, Nicoleta Corbu, Michael Hameleers, Ioannis Andreadis, Anne Schulz, Désirée Schmuck, Carsten Reinemann, Nayla Fawzi, ‘The effects of populism as a social identity frame on persuasion and mobilisation: Evidence from a 15-country experiment’, *European Journal of Political Research*, (2020): 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12334>.

12 Nadia Urbinati, *Me The People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2019).

13 Roger Eatwell, Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism. The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (London: Pelican Books, 2018).

14 Claude Lefort, (translated by David Macey), *Democracy and Political theory* (New York: Wiley, Hoboken, 1988).

15 Pierre Rosanvallon, ‘Penser le populisme’, texte de la leçon inaugurale prononcée lors des 26èmes *Rencontres de Pétrarque* 2011, 27 Septembre 2011.

16 Paul Taggart, ‘Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* Vol 9, number 3 (October 2004); Margaret Canovan, ‘Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy’, *Political studies*, Volume 47, Number 1 (March 1999).

17 Katherine Collin, ‘Populist and authoritarian referendums: the role of direct democracy in democratic deconsolidation’, Report (Brookings Institution, February 2019).

18 Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 117.

19 Elias Canetti, *Masse et puissance*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 55–58.

Rosanvallón argues that populism formulates a solution to the problem that democratic regimes face in seeking the most adequate and expedient form of representation of the people.²⁰ It sets the people in opposition to a series of otherness types. Otherness can be ethnic (anti-immigration narratives); a moral accusation against elites' alleged inherent corruption; and it can also be social and economic otherness. Populists need to adapt to the mood of the people they claim to speak for. Their beliefs need to be elastic to waver and adapt. Antonio Scurati, in his landmark work on the rise of Italian fascism, proposed that Benito Mussolini should be considered "a man of void" to capture the ability of the fascist leader to switch beliefs and propose a narrative and images that would work with the people's mood and bring about consent to fascist power.²¹ Scurati argues that current populist leaders demonstrate a similar tactical attitude to adapt their beliefs and narratives to what can make them win. Qualifying an external enemy of the people requires such adaptability.

Although the above suggests that populism is an essentially contested concept, this paper stresses that there is an authoritarian logic to it. Pierre Rosanvallón proposes that populism can be best defined as the idea that the

people will be emancipated from the power of the elite by becoming one unanimous body. The people channel their expression through direct democracy, and follow a charismatic leader. Three main emotions drive this idea of populism: resentment against dominant groups, belief in conspiracies, and rejection of the sitting elites.²² This paper considers that the essence of populism is authoritarian because as an ideology framework (right-wing or left-wing populism belong to different ideals although they share similarities), a leadership style, a political culture, or commonly used political electoral tactics, its logic undermines the liberal form of representative democracy: populism constructs a unanimous people, speaking with one voice and through direct democracy; it logically implies bypassing deliberation and nuance in democratic debates. The logic of populism weakens the frameworks that guarantee the expression of minorities and individuals in disagreement with the *unanimous* people. It undermines the main checks and balances, and the individual and public rights and liberties that regularly keep excesses of power at bay in a liberal democracy. The logic of authoritarianism can thus mechanically undermine the key frameworks of a liberal democracy.

20 Rosanvallón, *Counter Democracy*, 265–266.

21 Antonio Scurati, *M: Son of the Century: A Novel* (New York: Harper, 2022).

22 Pierre Rosanvallón, *Le siècle du populisme: histoire, théorie et critique* (Paris: Les livres du nouveau monde, Editions du Seuil, 2020).

2. The authoritarian logics of populism

This paper identifies three distinct logics which, if pushed to their full potential, could be vulnerabilities in the face of hybrid threat activity. Populism's logics are to reject complexity, reject any elite, and reject the idea of representation.

2.1 Against complexity

Populism taps into a demand for simple explanations. By appealing to the direct and overwhelming expression of the people as a regular mode of governance, populism bypasses democratic deliberation. The need for simplicity extinguishes debate and discussion as it makes nuances redundant. Nadia Urbinati identifies this process of simplification in the fact that populism is "a machine for collapsing the distinctions that make representative democracy work" by placing overwhelming importance on decision-making as voting at the expense of decision-making as deliberation and compromise.²³ Since it considers society in a Manichean way (people vs elites; nationals vs. foreigners), populism is an expression of such need for simple explanations. Populism proposes a rudimentary picture of what makes a society, or of what constitutes the in-group of good and ordinary people in contrast to what constitutes the out-group, pictured as the source of the former's discontent. Political adversaries are enemies of the people and traitors. The enemy – the out-group – is an amalgamation of figures both

external and internal, all directed against the security, safety, and tranquillity of the ordinary people.²⁴ Populism stokes a simplified heuristic logic to make sense of the world. In *Prophets of Deceit*, Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman distinguish political agitators (i.e., populists) from social reformers in claiming that while the latter identify the structural causes of social problems, the former only blame the social group perceived to be responsible for social resentment.²⁵

2.2 Against elites

Karl Popper argued that "realizing democracy rather implies avoiding the perils of tyranny than putting the People in power".²⁶ Elections in democracy work as a popular tribunal – voting governments in and out of office – instead of the direct channel of the people's will. Constructive deliberation requires channelling through elected representatives of the people. The logic of populism is contradictory to the principles of representation and separation of powers, as those are considered to be illegitimate since they could contradict the people's power. Populism has an inherently majoritarian logic in its approach to policy-making²⁷ as populist movements seek access to power on a platform for elite replacement.²⁸ Independent bodies, courts, and agencies are against the essence of populism portraying elites as steal-

23 Ben Margulies, 'Book Review: Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy by Nadia Urbinati', LSE Blog, 20 October, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2020/10/20/book-review-me-the-people-how-populism-transforms-democracy-by-nadia-urbinati/>.

24 Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le siècle du populisme*, (2020).

25 Leo Lowenthal, Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949).

26 Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, (Princeton: Princeton Classics, 2020).

27 Ben Stanley, 'The Thin Ideology of Populism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Volume 13, Issue 1, (2008), 95–110, at 104–105.

28 Ben Stanley, 'Confrontation by Default and Confrontation by Design: Strategic and Institutional Responses to Poland's Populist Coalition Government', *Democratization* Volume 23, Number 2, (2016): 267.

ing the power of the people. Against the power of elites, populists hold that an adequate representation of the people needs an identifiable channel, and persona.²⁹ Poland's right-wing Law and Justice party's "Good Change" platform and Hungary's Jobbik party are examples of platforms of fundamental change and breaking with a given social order that is perceived to deprive the people of their rightful place. Populist movements interpret election successes as a mandate not only to replace the sitting elites but also to change the system. Acting on a platform for elite replacement, "populist constitutionalism"³⁰ has a cumulative impact. Legal changes are brought about at all levels of norms, including constitutional law. Weakening the separation of powers by politicizing the judiciary, undermining pluralism, and conducting an anti-elite strategy are distinctive features of populist constitutionalism. The populist instrumentalization of the law can even be found at ordinary judicial levels. In 2017, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe issued an opinion regarding Polish judiciary reforms and concluded that those reforms "enable the legislative and executive powers to interfere in a severe and extensive manner in the administration of justice, and thereby pose a grave threat to the judicial independence as a key element of the rule of law".³¹ The Venice Commission warned against politicizing the judiciary since

it would allow the state to be judge and party within judicial proceedings. Populist constitutionalism is logically authoritarian and anti-pluralistic since it tends to concentrate power in the institutions most directly stemming from the latest voting majority, undoing the safeguards of minority rights and deliberation. This amounts to majoritarian rule of the public opinion majority of the day at the expense of the frameworks and safeguards of political liberalism, particularly the conception of the inherent rights and liberties of individuals under John Locke's political philosophy.

2.3 Against representation

A key tool of the populist platform for changing norms and legal orders is the use of referenda as an ordinary practice to bypass political disputes and parliamentary deliberation. It is important to distinguish the practice of a referendum under populist drives from the practice of constitutional referenda, such as those in the Swiss Confederation, where a citizens' initiative is submitted to a series of checks and intermediation. Referenda can become participative ways of making decisions since they are not meant to bypass parliamentary deliberation. Populist agendas tend to regard referendums as the quintessential way of giving a voice to the people.³² "Referendums fit with each of the (three) key aspects of populism: they are

29 Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le siècle du populisme*.

30 Tamás Hoffmann, Fruzsina Gárdos-Orosz, 'Populism and Law in Hungary – Introduction to the Special Issue', *Review of Central and East European Law*, Volume 47, Issue 1, (March 2022); Zoltán Szenté, 'Populism and Populist Constitutionalism', in *Populist Challenge to Constitutional Interpretation in Europe*, ed. Fruzsina Gárdos-Orosz and Zoltán Szenté (London: Routledge, 2021), 3–28.

31 European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission), 'Opinion on the Draft Act Amending the Act on the National Council of the Judiciary, on the Draft Act Amending the Act on the Supreme Court, and on the Act on the Organisation of Ordinary Courts', Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 113th Plenary Session (8–9 December 2017), Opinion No. 904 / 2017, CDL-AD (2017)031. § 129.

32 Lars Brummel, 'Referendums, for Populists Only? Why Populist Parties Favour Referendums and How Other Parties Respond', IUC Working Paper Series, 2020/002/LEPG, Inter-University Centre for Advanced Studies, Dubrovnik, (3 December 2020).

people-centered, reduce the power of the elite and are a means to keep the corrupt elite in check (at least to some extent)".³³ A referendum amounts to decision-making by aggregation instead of by deliberation. The systematic appeal to the referendum would make political responsibility and accountability over the course of policy choices disappear as the people alone can shoulder the responsibility for a decision taken by referendum. Decisions taken by referendum are not reversible policy choices like those taken by an elected government – policy decisions taken by referendum cannot be reversed by voting leaders in and out of office as a popular tribunal. This practice reflects a logic which ultimately extinguishes the relationship between the responsibility of government and the governed. Abusing the practice

of referendums can trivialize the expression of the popular will when called upon too often or if choosing a harmful policy course. Katherine Collin from the Brookings Institution established a nexus between direct democracy and "democratic deconsolidation".³⁴ While populism pushes for enhanced direct democracy, it paradoxically could lead to disengagement. This is a twin authoritarian logic: extinguishing reflexive deliberation by crosscutting it with majority voting, while increasing disengagement and apathy among the polity if the people's voice is trivialized. Both logics lead to a stronger executive power which is structurally more agile and decisive. This twin logic of authoritarianism is particularly likely during times of crisis if the polity perceives an existential threat.

33 Kristof Jacobs, Agnes Akkerman, Andrej Zaslove, 'The Voice of Populist People? Referendum Preferences, Practices and Populist Attitudes', *Acta Politica*, Volume 53, Issue 4, (2018): 520, [10.1057/s41269-018-0105-1](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-018-0105-1).

34 Katherine Collin, 'Populist and authoritarian referendums: the role of direct democracy in democratic deconsolidation', Report (Brookings Institution, February 2019).

3. Fragmenting the public sphere

3.1 Social media: amplifiers of the populist radicalization of democracy?

Apprehending the authoritarian logics of populism also requires addressing the ways in which groups and individuals communicate and express their political standing. Digital social networks plug into the narrative of populism and accelerate it to a large extent. They constitute direct and practical tools for participation in politics. They have empowered and connected individuals by flattening hierarchies between citizens, political power, and experts. Under the caveat of their algorithmic governance, they allow participation in political discussion on an equal footing, regardless of previous standing or experience. The “Stop the steal” campaign during the 2020 election in the US is emblematic of the populist radicalization of democracy that social media can amplify. The Election Integrity Partnership in its report about the 2020 US election found that “misleading and false claims and narratives coalesced into the metanarrative of a ‘stolen election’ which later propelled the January 6 insurrection”.³⁵ The report considers that “the production and spread of misinformation was multidirectional and participatory”. Individuals can make a narrative converge, which triggers online extremism and physical violence. This phenomenon of the convergence of narratives shows how false and misleading claims connect to a feeling of victimhood and produce violence from individuals and groups of protesters. Digital social networks offer unprecedented reach and connection opportunities, and they can contribute to

creating transnational groups around the tenets of populist movements. Social media information circulation models contribute to isolating and compartmentalizing individuals and groups, facilitating affective polarization between an in-group and the perceived out-groups.

3.2 Public sphere and virtual opinions

Digital social networks can become instrumental in undoing the public sphere in liberal democracies. Jürgen Habermas defined the public sphere as “the realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed”.³⁶ The existence of this public sphere depends on the ability of citizens to “confer in an unrestricted fashion (...) with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions”.³⁷ Habermas’s public sphere should be understood as a normative model rather than as a description of existing conditions. It refers to an ideal model which underlines the conditions in which solid and sound deliberation can happen in a democratic public sphere. Habermas distinguishes opinions from *public* opinion – the former designating prejudices, individual values, norms and attitudes and the latter stemming from a “reasoning public”. Digital social networks favour opinions at the expense of public opinion. Content circulation and notoriety on social media may create virtual opinions – namely a sense of consensus or dissensus over a given issue, regardless of actual statistical measurement. Isolation and compartmentalization impart an artificial sense of validation and

35 Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, ‘The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election’, Stanford Digital Repository: Election Integrity Partnership. v1.3.0, 2021, <https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069>.

36 Jürgen Habermas, ‘The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article’, *New German Critique*, No 3 (autumn 1974), 49–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/487737>.

37 Jürgen Habermas, ‘The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article’.

prevalence to the ideas, identities, or world-views of individuals: social media can make individuals distance themselves from reality by fragmenting the public sphere into several spheres where particularistic opinions reinforce each other in a polarizing dynamic. Algorithms also constitute a technological and political regulation which contradicts the libertarian ideal according to which social media would put every user on a strictly equal footing. This kind of fragmented public sphere would not be conducive to the emergence of a public opinion based on reasoning and open deliberation. Hannah Arendt showed that providing an escape from reality had been a key building block of totalitarianism in subjugating the masses.³⁸

3.3 Connecting audiences and creating counterpublics

Scientific works in social psychology have demonstrated that populist rhetoric connects individuals and groups to a shared feeling of injustice, “as self-conscious group members in a power struggle”.³⁹ Digital social networks are a powerful vector for connecting sources of resentment, interest groups and victimhood across borders. The internationalization of the Alt- Right highlighted by Weiai Wayne Xu⁴⁰ is characteristic of the processes that could be in play with other audiences connected to popu-

list value systems in the future. International groups can be akin to “counterpublics”⁴¹ as they designate “alternative public spheres in opposition to the dominant public”. The concept of counterpublics shows that groups can internationalize along populist ideals since their identities relate strongly to a feeling of victimhood, marginalization, or discrimination. Social media can sustain the creation of “counter identities”, nurturing transnational radicalization and extremism.⁴² Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins reported on fighting a “Counterfactual Community”, spreading falsehood and disinformation about the Syrian White Helmets during the Syrian Civil War. Such a counterfactual community is an example of a generative, aggregative, and incremental narrative amplification.⁴³ The existence of this “counterfactual community” shows the ease with which distant participants can get together virtually and gather around a common theme, a common cause, a common event. This is very much akin to the constitution of transnational counterpublics, which reduces the space for positive-sum compromises and debates.⁴⁴ Populism-driven authoritarian trends in democracies may lead to the creation of counterpublics which can be instrumentalized by hybrid threat actors to leverage division in democracies.

38 Hannah Arendt, *Les Origines du Totalitarisme, Eichmann à Jérusalem*, Bourtez P. (Dir.), (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, Editions Gallimard, 2002).

39 Bernd Simon, Bert Klandermans, ‘Politicized collective identity: A social psychological analysis’, *American Psychologist*, Volume 56, Issue 4, (2001): 319, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.4.319>.

40 Weiai Wayne Xu, ‘Mapping Connective Actions in the Global Alt-Right and Antifa Counterpublics’, *International Journal of Communications*, Vol 14 (2020).

41 Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, *Social Text*, Number 25/26 (1990): 56–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.

42 Weiai Wayne Xu, ‘Mapping Connective Actions’.

43 Eliott Higgins, *We are Bellingcat: an intelligence agency for the people* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

44 Malin Holm, *The Rise of Online Counterpublics? The Limits of Inclusion in a Digital Age* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Publications, 2019).

3.4 Brutalization of political expression

One of the logical consequences of populist ideals is to brutalize political expression. Populist rhetoric promotes a social identity which politicizes individuals around a self-conception of being victimized, abused and lied to by the elite. Victimization feelings tend to legitimize individual and collective violent action. Social psychology works have identified illiberalism in the logic of populist rhetoric driving the spread of authoritarian views in a liberal democracy's political landscape. Levitsky and Ziblatt introduced an "illiberalism index" with the following indicators: decreased attachment to political pluralism, a vilifying depiction of political opponents, disregard for minority rights, and incitement to political violence.⁴⁵ Studying the dynamics of social psychology on tyranny to analyze the 6 January riots at the US Capitol in 2021, Smith and Tindale suggest that what drove individuals and groups to engage in political violence was the sense that a complete regime and social-order breakdown had to be

preliminary to the reorientation of governance and society in a way that would right the perceived wrong at the core of the in-group radicalized identity.⁴⁶ Remarkably few arrests have been carried out among members of identified far-right groups in relation to the January 6 riots. On the contrary, the majority of arrests were among citizens with no prior affiliation to violent or extremist groups. Research on far-right terrorism suggests that the tactics of "accelerationism"⁴⁷ could unite various and disparate groups in seeking a complete breakdown of state and society.⁴⁸ The 6 January riots demonstrate the propensity of a vastly diverse galaxy of groups and individuals to coalesce under the right dispositional and contextual factors towards a violent eschatological goal to accelerate the complete breakdown of the political and social order to bring about a new and "better" society, and to get rid of its elites accused of being the source of perceived wrongs.

45 Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018).

46 Christine M. Smith, Scott R. Tindale, 'A Social Sharedness Interpretation of the January 6th U.S. Capitol Insurrection', *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Volume 26, Issue 3 (2022).

47 The doctrine of accelerationism is a rather tactical attitude grounded in the belief that a multiplication of chaotic events and their conscious precipitation by active minority groups can bring about the end of the liberal democratic system in order to change it for a given revolutionary ideal.

48 Brian Hughes, Cynthia Miller-Idriss, 'Uniting for Total Collapse: The January 6 Boost to Accelerationism', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 14, Issue 4, (April/May 2021).

Conclusion: Watching out for populism to counter authoritarian drives

It is critical to identify populism and to appreciate what it covers in terms of ideas and tactics. A variable crisis of democratic representation explains the appeal of populist platforms in liberal democracies. The core authoritarian logics of populism as well as the fragmentation of the public sphere, and the brutalization of political expression constitute a matrix which needs to be understood more systematically to increase awareness of the types of political developments that could be leveraged by hybrid threat actors. This Working Paper identified three logics of populism which could become vectors for creeping authoritarian governance ideals. Their logical consequences could be levers for hybrid threat activity since the brutalization of political expression risks undermining the social and political order of liberal democracies. Rejecting complexity, nuance and opposing viewpoints is the first of those logics. The second logic consists of rejecting groups and elites perceived as powerful, which substitutes an enemy image for tackling social grievances through structural reform. The third logic is about rejecting representation and it makes compromise and deliberation impossible. Populism tends to bypass and radicalize democratic deliberation. Although it seeks to suppress intermediary bodies and representatives of the popular will, its practice of direct democracy could in the end discredit the very popular will that it seeks to articulate. Discrediting the added value of democratic governance is a core objective of authoritarian regimes using hybrid threat activity, which can manifest particularly during acute crisis times or when an existential threat is perceived.

The dynamics of authoritarianism may make public deliberation increasingly difficult, which could lead to compromises being impossible to make. Hybrid threat actors can take advantage of this to accelerate and deepen the effect of hybrid threat activities to destabilize democratic governance.

The ideals of populism – as a platform for better empowerment of citizens and their participation in societal and political debates – match the libertarian undercurrent of digital social networks and social media. One aspect of this combination is to undermine the conditions in which a democratic public sphere could emerge as a source of sound deliberation and debate. The logics of radicalization and the brutalization of political expression under the twin influences of populism and content circulation models on social media could end up fragmenting the public sphere. Populist politics combined with social media possibilities can lead to the constitution of transnational counterpublics, or a series of fragmented public spheres in which the expression of opinions is mutually reinforcing, with little to no contradiction and deliberation. Research on the social psychology of tyrannical and authoritarian beliefs has shown the aggregative appeal that “accelerationism” entertains among far-right extremist groups. This can decisively fragment and disintegrate the public sphere, without which liberal democracy cannot exist. Such trends could make it easier to leverage extremism and violent radicalization to cripple decision-making and sound political deliberation.

Author

Mr Maxime Lebrun is Deputy Director of the Research and Analysis Function of Hybrid CoE. He has previously worked as a Lecturer in War and Conflict Studies and Acting Department Director for Political Studies at the Baltic Defence College in Tartu, and a Non-Resident Research Fellow at the International Centre for Defence and Security in Tallinn, Estonia. He holds a master's degree in International Relations from Sciences Po Lyon with a specialization in strategic, military and security studies from Sciences Po Aix-en-Provence.



Hybrid CoE

The European Centre of Excellence
for Countering Hybrid Threats