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Populism, Nationalism and Illiberalism: A Challenge for Democracy and Civil Society

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Preface to the e-paper series "A Companion to Democracy"

Democracy is multifaceted, adaptable – and must constantly meet new challenges. Democratic systems are influenced by the historical and social context, by a country's geopolitical circumstances, by the political climate and by the interaction between institutions and actors. But democracy cannot be taken for granted. It has to be fought for, revitalised and renewed.

There are a number of trends and challenges that affect democracy and democratisation. Some, like autocratisation, corruption, the delegitimisation of democratic institutions, the shrinking space for civil society or the dissemination of misleading and erroneous information, such as fake news, can shake democracy to its core. Others like human rights, active civil society engagement and accountability strengthen its foundations and develop alongside it.

The e-paper series "A Companion to Democracy" examines pressing trends and challenges facing the world and analyses how they impact democracy and democratisation.

Populism, Nationalism and Illiberalism: A Challenge for Democracy and Civil Society

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1. Introduction

The global state of democracy has worsened markedly over the past few years. The 2019 annual reports of major democracy research institutes therefore carried rather bleak titles, such as "Democracy Facing Global Challenges" (Varieties of Democracy Institute, V-Dem), "Democracy in Retreat" (Freedom House) and "Polarization and Repression Increase" (Bertelsmann Transformation Index).[1] These developments are part of a long-term global trend of declining democratic quality of political regimes. Freedom House reported that global freedom had declined for the 13th consecutive year.

Data compiled by the Sweden-based V-Dem Institute also confirm this trend and will be presented in greater detail in this paper. One-third of the world's population lives in countries where the state of liberal-democratic institutions has worsened in the last ten years (Lührmann et al. 2019). The global trend of declining democratic quality amounts to a "third wave of autocratisation" (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019). Autocratisation refers to all processes that diminish the quality of democracy and is thus democratisation in reverse. It can affect not only democratic regimes but also regimes that are already autocratic, for example if repression is intensified. Despite these negative trends, more than half of the world's population still lives in democracies and many countries (e.g. Algeria, Tunisia and Sudan) have made notable democratic progress in the past few years.

However, these achievements are threatened by political leaders who use aggressive rhetoric to mobilise their followers and practice an authoritarian style of rule. This includes Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Narendra Modi in India. Nationalism, racism, xenophobia and a populist, anti-elitist narrative are popular mobilisation strategies of such illiberal actors. As soon as they come to power, they take an aggressive stance against women, the LGBTQI community, indigenous groups, minorities, and other vulnerable groups. At the same time, they threaten the foundations of democracy by disregarding the decisions of other democratic institutions, such as courts and legislatures, and by not adhering to established democratic norms. Dissenting voices from the media, academia, and civil society are suppressed and drowned out by hateful rhetoric.

The terms populism, nationalism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism are omnipresent in attempts to explain and describe this development. The synonymous use of these terms whose meanings overlap but are not the same often leads to confusion. In this paper, we try to contribute to a better understanding of these trends by: (a) defining the different concepts and clarifying how they overlap and differ as well as how they relate to one another, (b) analysing and explaining why illiberalism and democracy do not belong

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[1]   For V-Dem see Lührmann et al. (2019); Freedom House: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019; Bertelsmann Transformation Index: https://www.bti-project.org/de/ergebnisse/global/.

together, (c) pointing out global and regional autocratisation trends, and (d) examining the consequences of this development for civil society in the affected countries (shrinking spaces).

The paper is structured as follows: We begin by discussing why liberal principles such as civil liberties and the rule of law are necessary for a substantively rich and sustainable democracy (Section 2). Without liberalism, democratic processes cannot reflect the will of the people and risk abolishing themselves. We also elucidate the meaning of the concepts of illiberalism, populism, and nationalism. In our view, nationalism and populism are part of illiberal politicians' mobilisation strategies and have the potential to serve as accelerants to autocratic tendencies.

In the descriptive-empirical part of this paper (Section 2.3), we use data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project and show that, despite the global level of democracy continuing to be high, the indicators that measure the liberal dimension of democracy have taken a turn for the worse in many countries. This worsening has occurred primarily in countries where governments have used a nationalist ideology to legitimise themselves. Then, we look at the current environment for civil society (Section 3). We describe how the space for civil society engagement is increasingly shrinking, particularly in countries with populist governments.

We conclude by discussing the options open to civil society actors that are engaged in the fight against illiberalism. In our view, civil society can play an important role in defending democracy if it mobilises clearly against illiberals while at the same time working to overcome societal divisions and build bridges between different groups. Civil society has to pull off the feat of delegitimising illiberals, without increasing polarisation in the process. In countries where there is little space for civil society to operate freely and independently, creative strategies are necessary to create and maintain such space.

2. Populism, nationalism and illiberalism as a challenge for democracy

2.1. Illiberalism in the 21st century

> *"The absence of visible violence allows manipulation*
> *to present itself as the freedom it eliminates."*
>
> Friedrich Hacker

What are the characteristics of political leaders who undermine democracy while they are in power? How can they be recognised early on and how can their negative influence on democracy be prevented? The illiberal political leaders of today are not inclined to propagate a radical, authoritarian ideology or to even call for an end to democracy. They instead base their support on the appeal of populism. They pretend to be democratic and promise to reform and improve democracy by curtailing the influence of elites. For instance, the former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez portrayed himself as a fighter for "revolutionary democracy" and human rights.[2] Evo Morales called himself the "democratic voice of Bolivia".[3] The former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori described himself as the "architect of modern democracy".[4] In 2017, decades after his autogolpe in 1992, he justified his move to dissolve parliament as a step to "safeguard democracy", adding that "in order to make tortillas you have to break eggs".[5]

From these examples it becomes clear that what alone matters to these political leaders is majority rule, along the lines of this narrative: "Doing what the majority wants is democratic, therefore I am democratic." At the vanguard of this movement is the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who declared he wants to transform his country into an "illiberal democracy". There are also prominent liberals who employ the term "illiberal democracy", such as Fareed Zakaria, whose 1997 essay on "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" sparked a debate on this issue among political scientists. In his view, an illiberal democracy is a system of government that holds multiparty elections but does not protect basic liberties.

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2   TeleSUR, 5 March 2016, https://www.telesurtv.net/news/Las-frases-que-inmortalizaron-a-Hugo-Chavez-20160305-0013.html.

3   The Guardian, 20 February 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/22/bolivia-evo-morales-president-national-referendum-fourth-term.

4   Perú21, 5 April 2017, https://peru21.pe/politica/alberto-fujimori-25-anos-autogolpe-arquitecto-democracia-moderna-71652-noticia/.

5   El Comercio, 5 April 2017, https://elcomercio.pe/politica/actualidad/fujimori-desperdicio-oportunidad-consolidar-democracia-421175.

But can illiberalism be democratic? In other words, is democracy – the rule of the people – possible without liberalism?

In our view, this is not possible. Two different aspects of liberalism are essential to democracy: (1) civil liberties and (2) the rule of law.[6]

(1)   Civil liberties facilitate the establishment of pluralistic views on political issues. They enable citizens to express themselves, to share their views with others, to assemble freely and to stay informed. The renowned democracy theorist Robert Dahl (and others) rightfully stressed that before citizens can make democratic decisions, they need to have access to a wide range of information and opinions and be able to choose from a wide range of alternatives.

Each of these civil liberties represents a fundamental condition for the existence of democracy and they are also interconnected (Schedler 2002). If people cannot express themselves freely, then they cannot share their opinions with others. If opinions can be shared but restrictions are placed on the formation of organisations and parties, then the different interests and opinions are not aggregated and strengthened at the societal level. If it is permitted to establish associations but the media are not able to report on them, then citizens are not aware that there are a wide range of political options. Thus, without civil liberties, citizens do not have a real choice on election day and we do not know if their vote reflects their actual preferences. The same holds true for opinions expressed in surveys. A system in which the preferences of the people are unknown cannot be said to be "ruled by the people" and is therefore not democratic. **Thus, without civil liberties, pluralism cannot emerge and there are no meaningful democratic processes.**

(2)   The rule of law and liberal institutions protect the rights of citizens – and especially of minorities – from arbitrary state action and the tyranny of the majority (e.g. Dahl 1956; Hamilton, Madison & Jay 1787/2009; Coppedge et al. 2017, 26). Such protection is not only an end in itself since it helps to guarantee fundamental freedoms, but also serves to safeguard democracy over the long haul. Liberal institutions protect democratic norms and institutions from two different threats: abuse by the executive and dictatorship of the majority.

Much has been written in academic literature about the first protection mechanism – the separation of powers. Such horizontal accountability involves "the capacity of state institutions such as legislatures and the judiciary to oversee the government by demanding information, questioning officials and punishing improper behavior" (Lührmann et al. 2017, 2). This includes, in particular, independent courts and strong parliaments that ensure the rule of law and exercise control over the executive (Merkel 2004, 36; O'Donnell 2004, 36).
The second point – liberal institutions are necessary because they protect democracy from

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6   For an excellent discussion of this issue see Plattner (1998).

being abused by the majority – is more contentious in the literature. Popper (1945/2003, 130), and Plato before him, discussed in their works the "paradox of freedom", pointing out that if freedom were unlimited, citizens would have the right to abolish freedom and democracy. Such a decision would, however, mean citizens could no longer make that very same decision in the future.

Our conception of democracy should therefore be extended to include a temporal dimension. Only those institutions and decisions that do not endanger the long-term survival of democracy can be considered democratic.[7]

In this connection, Przeworski (1995, 11) and colleagues raise an important point: Democracies survive only if they "absorb and effectively regulate all major conflicts [and] change these rules only according to the rules". Dahl (1971, 40) similarly pointed out that stable democracies must establish an "internal system of mutual security" – whereby all social groups can trust that they will not be oppressed after an election loss. Popper (1945/2003, 132) takes a similar view, asserting that the essence of democracy is that "the rulers – that is to say, the government – can be dismissed by the ruled without bloodshed".

Thus liberal institutions that uphold civil liberties and the rule of law are of decisive importance for social peace. Those defeated are more likely to accept an election loss if they know that they can also live a life in dignity and freedom outside the government and that they or their political allies have a realistic chance of winning future elections. That is what is magical about democracy. However, putting civil liberties and liberal institutions up for negotiation means risking the outbreak of civil war, because it calls established processes for the peaceful settlement of conflicts into question.

Without liberal institutions that uphold the rule of law and oversee the executive, democracy is vulnerable and not sustainable.

> *Illiberalism defined*
>
> *The illiberal actor – political leaders, governments, political parties, civil society groups, individuals – is one who is not wholly and fully committed to the norms and institutions that exercise control over the executive and uphold civil liberties and the rule of law. These are the principles that lend meaning to democratic processes and ensure that they endure.*

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[7]   Przeworski (1995, 11) and others have defined democratic institutions as sustainable if they "function" and "survive". Their conception of sustainable democracy is very broad since it also encompasses economic and ecological performance (Przeworski 1995, 11). For reasons of conceptual clarity, we are not of the view that the performance of democratic institutions should be included in the conception of what democracy is. We therefore concentrate here on the aspect that democracy should be sustainable.

Illiberals are neither fully committed to civil liberties – such as the freedom of expression, the press, assembly and association – and the rule of law, nor totally devoted to the institutions that guarantee them. We showed above that both are necessary to ensure that democracy is substantively meaningful and sustainable. **Illiberal democracy is hence an oxymoron that democrats should not include in their vocabulary.** In the words of the founding co-editor of the influential *Journal of Democracy*, Marc Plattner (1998), a "profound kinship" exists between liberalism and democracy.

That does not mean that any criticism of the workings of particular democratic institutions – such as a country's highest courts – is undemocratic. On the contrary, how capable such institutions are at protecting liberalism depends on historical and local circumstances. Some such institutions may need to be updated to be effective in today's networked digital world (see Mounck 2018).

And yet, the civil liberties and the rule of law that these institutions are meant to protect are the non-negotiable foundations of a democratic society. Illiberalism is as such incompatible with democratic norms. We should not allow illiberals to lay claim to democratic legitimacy for their project of eroding democratic norms and institutions.
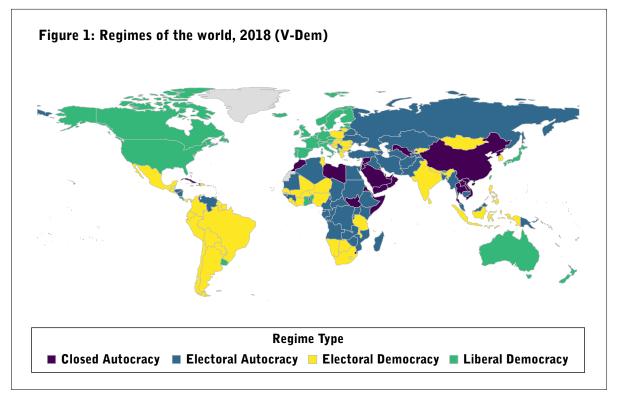
This argument has been put forward repeatedly especially by political scientists in their debates over how to correctly classify regimes located in a "grey zone" (Diamond 2002) between democracy and autocracy (e.g. by Schedler 2002). In the 1990s, many experts assumed the countries that experienced political openings after the fall of the Iron Curtain would inevitably become full democracies (Carothers 2002, 6). At the beginning of the new millennium the expectations became somewhat more realistic, prompting Thomas Carothers to proclaim the "end of the transition paradigm" (Carothers 2002). This view soon became the new conventional wisdom in democracy research and well beyond (Snyder 2006, 219).

There is, however, still no agreement on how to label the new types of hybrid regimes that stand somewhere between democracy and clear autocracy, and on where exactly the dividing line should be drawn (for an overview see Bogaards 2009). Essentially, there are three schools of thought on the issue. The first does not go further than recognising that these regimes lack a distinct character and mainly calls them "hybrid" or "ambiguous" (Diamond 2002, Bogaards 2009). The second tends to classify them as "democracies with adjectives" (Collier & Levitsky 2007), as, for example, does Zakaria (1997) with his term "illiberal democracies" or Wolfgang Merkel (2004), who speaks of "defective democracies".

We subscribe to the third school of thought, which favours a narrow conception of democracy and tends to label many hybrid regimes as electoral autocracies. This school has been primarily influenced by Andreas Schedler (2002, 2013) and Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010). It is based heavily on the works of the eminent democracy scholar Dahl (1971, 1998), who stressed that democracies cannot exist without liberal guarantees such as the freedoms of expression, association and the press. In our Regimes of the World typology (Lührmann, Tannenberg & Lindberg 2018), we thus label regimes

that do not fulfil these requirements as autocracies. In the autocratic regime spectrum, we distinguish between closed autocracies, such as China and Eritrea, which do not hold multiparty elections for the head of the executive, and electoral autocracies that hold such elections but do not guarantee liberal freedoms. If regimes fulfil these requirements and also respect the rule of law and the separation of powers, we label them as liberal democracies; otherwise, we classify them as electoral democracies. This means that all democracies must achieve minimum liberal standards. Thus electoral democracies are to be labelled as semi-liberal and not illiberal. Once regimes become completely illiberal, they are labelled as electoral autocracies or even as closed autocracies.

Using this typology and data from the V-Dem Institute, Figure 1 shows how the world's regimes are classified in 2018 (Coppedge et al. 2019a, Lührmann et al. 2018). Fifty-five countries such as Egypt, Russia, and Turkey are labelled as electoral autocracies because they do not adequately respect fundamental freedoms. Sixty other countries – such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Poland, and Hungary – are listed as electoral democracies because they guarantee a minimum of freedoms but curtail the rule of law and minority rights. The last two countries mentioned are among the group of countries that in the past few years have lost their status as a liberal democracy. In 2018 the overall number of liberal democracies in the world was 39, compared to 25 closed autocracies.

Figure 1: Regimes of the world, 2018 (V-Dem)

Regime Type
■ **Closed Autocracy** ■ **Electoral Autocracy** ■ **Electoral Democracy** ■ **Liberal Democracy**

Source: Own figure based on V-Dem data (Coppedge et al. 2019a).

2.2. Illiberalism and populism

When illiberal political leaders try to claim democratic legitimacy for their rule, they often employ populist rhetoric to insist that they are the only legitimate representative of the "people" and that the "elites" cannot be trusted.

Populism is a contentious term that is used in very different ways (for an overview see Gidron & Bonikowski 2014). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013, 150–151) – two influential political scientists who employ an ideational approach to populism[8] – define it as follows:

> "*Populism is a thin-centred ideology that has three core concepts: the pure people, the corrupt elite and the general will.… [It] is limited in ambition and scope … [and] unable to offer complex arguments and often adjusts to the perceptions and needs of different societies.… These three core concepts represent the sufficient and necessary criteria for defining populism: all of them must be present in order to categorize a phenomenon as 'populist'.… Whereas the former [pure people] is depicted as a homogeneous and virtuous community, the latter [corrupt elite] is seen as a homogeneous but pathological entity.… [The general will] is also about the very idea that all individuals of a given community are able to unify their wills with the aim of proclaiming popular sovereignty as the only legitimate source of political power.*"

Norris and Inglehart (2019, 66) similarly argue that populism is a "rhetorical style of communications claiming that (i) the only legitimate democratic authority flows directly from the people, and (ii) established power-holders are deeply corrupt, and self-interested, betraying public trust".

Within this school of thought, however, there is a debate over what constitutes the opposite of populism. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013, 152) argue that populism has "two direct opposites": elitism and pluralism. According to Norris and Inglehart (2019, 51), only pluralism – and not elitism – can be understood to be the opposite of populism. Pluralism is, however, neither mentioned expressly in Mudde's nor in Norris and Inglehart's definitions of populism.

Here Müller (2016, 2–3) appears to be more consistent, defining populism as a "form of identity politics" that is necessarily both anti-elitist and anti-pluralist.[9] Pluralism stresses that "societies are composed of several social groups with different ideas and interests"

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8   Researchers adhering to the influential ideational approach usually agree on three core ideas that form the necessary defining characteristic of populism: people-centrism, anti-elitism and an antagonistic relationship between the "virtuous people" and the "corrupt elite" (e.g. Rooduijn 2014, Hawkins 2010, Mudde 2004).

9   Based on Müller's definition (2016), populism and illiberalism could be used as synonyms.

(Mudde & Kaltwasser, 152).[10] Other authors focus on depicting elitism as the antithesis of populism, although they themselves note that hardly any political actor today would call themselves "elitist" (McGuigan 1992).

Yet many people tend to use – especially in public discussion – populism in a narrow sense, as solely anti-elitist without including the anti-pluralist tendencies of many populists. Thus populism is not a term which is suitable to describe the full extent of the challenge that such actors pose for democracy.

If one uses the term populism narrowly as an elite-critical rhetorical strategy, then it is not a problem per se for democracy. After all, democratic institutions should represent the will of the people – and citizens often rightfully view elites in a critical light. Populism is therefore not the central focus of this paper. Those currently calling into question democracy are frequently both populist and illiberal. **While illiberalism in all of its forms poses a challenge for democracy, populism as such does not.**

Populist rhetoric, however, gives illiberals a boost. The use of populist rhetoric by illiberal actors is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, populist illiberals often exploit a dire misunderstanding: Many people think democracy means that things develop the way the majority of citizens want them to develop. Secondly, they often assume that what they want is the same as what the majority want. Yet both are usually fallacies. Democratic institutions can only make decisions within concrete financial, international, and political contexts.

Moreover, democracy fundamentally involves finding a compromise among several different views (Zhen 2006, 2). As Przeworski stresses: "It is within the nature of democracy that no one's interests can be guaranteed.…What is possible are institutional agreements, that is, compromises about the institutions that shape prior probabilities of the realization of group-specific interests." On the one hand, such compromises reduce, as already mentioned, the potential for armed conflict. On the other hand, democratic compromises often leave both sides dissatisfied because neither side sees their demands as being completely fulfilled. Populists increase this dissatisfaction by claiming that the only policy solutions that are really democratic are those they support.

On the other hand, populist rhetoric helps illiberals to distract attention from the danger their ideas pose to democracy. They claim they want to reform and strengthen "true democracy", while in reality their illiberal actions undermine it. To a limited extent, the totalitarian movements of the past century have shared this trait. As Hannah Arendt (1951, 312) observed, "totalitarian movements use and abuse democratic freedoms in order to abolish them." To achieve this end, they have often used populist communication strategies, as Cavazza (2019) demonstrated in the case of Mussolini, particularly in

10   Here Mudde and Kaltwasser write about pluralism. They did not, however, use the term in their definition of populism (see above).

the period before seizing power. In the 20th century it was already difficult to identify democracy's challengers empirically because they employed pseudo-legal arguments (Linz 1978, 29).

Furthermore, populists are often divided into left-wing/inclusionary and right-wing/ exclusionary camps (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). The current wave of autocratisation is dominated in particular by proponents of an exclusive nationalist variant of populism, such as, for example, Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. They use a populist rhetoric that emphasises the "people", but define very narrowly who belongs to this community (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, Ochoa Espejo 2015, Rooduijn & Akkerman 2017). A leftist populism, in contrast, focuses on the redistribution of resources to poorer segments of the population (Mouffe 2018). Chantal Mouffe (2018, 19) welcomes the emergence of such a leftist populism, stating that "in the present conjuncture it provides the adequate strategy to recover and deepen the ideals of equality and popular sovereignty that are constitutive of a democratic politics." In response, it should be pointed out that democracy in Latin America has been considerably eroded or even abolished in countries where proponents of a leftist populism have been in power.[11] The impact of right-wing nationalism on democracy is examined more closely in the next section.

2.3. Accelerants: nationalism and polarisation

In addition to populism, illiberal actors also often use nationalism and social polarisation to win over and mobilise supporters.

Over the years, many attempts have been made to define nationalism, but there is still no consensus among political scientists as to what is understood by nationalism (Keating 2011, 1656). Nationalism is roughly defined as "the belief that the nation should form the basis for political order" (Keating 2011, 1654). The considerable difficulty in defining nationalism lies in the fact that is difficult to define what a nation is and who is part of a nation. Nationalism is often divided into civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism. In the ethnic view of the nation, a person is considered to be a member of a particular nation only if he or she was born to parents who are members of this nation. Membership cannot be acquired or changed. The civic view of the nation considers a person to be a member if he or she is a citizen, and it is more integrative because membership in the nation can be acquired (Keating 2011, 1657).

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[11]   See Kaltwasser, Christóbal Rovira. 2018. "Der Sirenengesang des Linkspopulismus", IPG Journal, https://www.ipg-journal.de/regionen/global/artikel/detail/der-sirenengesang-des-linkspopulismus-2982/.

Ethnic nationalism, however, can quickly turn into racism and fascism.[12] Fascism is often referred to as a coup-oriented "form of populist ultra-nationalism" (Griffin 1991, 27). When the exclusionary and ethnic aspects gain the upper hand, nationalism often leads to authoritarianism (Nodia 1992, 14–15; Maiz 2003, 266). Many leaders who instituted autocratic processes in the 20th century invoked nationalist and fascist ideologies.

As a result, nationalists also contribute to the division and polarisation of society, which at the same time strengthens them. Svolik (2019), for instance, has shown that voters in ideologically polarised societies tend to be more willing to place democratic norms in jeopardy in order to implement their own ideological preferences.

Illiberals – especially populist illiberals – often employ a rhetoric that divides a society into followers and enemies. Liberal actors are often tempted to counter such challenges aggressively. A vicious cycle of polarisation ensues. The society ultimately divides into two opposing camps that distrust each other (McCoy and Somer 2019, 234). Such "toxic" polarisation goes beyond healthy, contentious debate about policy preferences and inhibits citizens in opposing political camps from having trusting relations with each other (Lührmann et al. 2019, 902).

As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult to reach the supporters of illiberal political leaders because they distrust information from independent sources or sources affiliated with the opposing side and are less likely to discuss issues with people of opposing views. Hannah Arendt (1951, 369) observed such processes while investigating the followers of totalitarian movements.[13] The notorious "filter bubbles" of social media have exacerbated this problem.

From the perspective of democracy theory, we can in summary say that illiberals pose a threat to the survival of even established democracies. Under the demand for majority rule, they undermine institutions and principles essential to a robust democracy, such as civil liberties and the rule of law. As populist and nationalist rhetoric intensifies, so does social polarisation.

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12   While some believe that nationalism belongs inherently under the same category as radical right-wing ideologies (Mudde 1995, 205–206, and references contained therein), the categorisation of nationalism as a radical right-wing ideology has been called into question (Bonikowski 2017; Erk 2010; Halikiopoulou, Nanou & Vasilopoulou 2012; Valluvan 2019). Instead, nationalism should perhaps be seen as an ideological layer that exists in different ways at both ends of the traditional left-right spectrum, whereby the leftist version of nationalism is often more integrative and adheres to the civic view of the nation, and the right-wing version more exclusionary due to its ethnic view.

13   Members of a totalitarian movement are "protected against the reality of the non-totalitarian world" (Arendt 1951, 367).

2.4. Democracy in times of growing populism and nationalism[14]

Nationalist-oriented movements are gaining support in many countries around the world. Bolsonaro in Brazil won the 2018 elections with clearly nationalist rhetoric. Trump in the United States, Duterte in the Philippines, and Modi in India are beating the same drum. Populism is also on the rise worldwide. In 1995 three countries were ruled by populists in Europe and Latin America. In 2018 there were already eight (Ruth-Lovell et al. 2019).
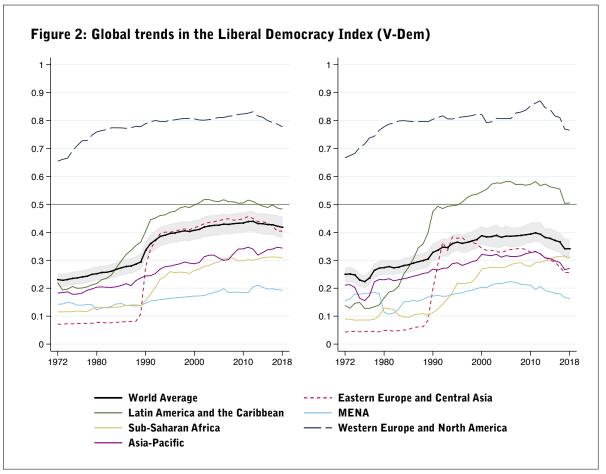
As we touched on in the introduction, these trends have yet to result in a significant decline in the number of democracies in the world. What we have been able to observe, however, is an increase in the erosion of democratic quality in individual countries. Figure 2 shows global trends in the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), which was created by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute.[15] Based on the assessments of some 3,000 experts, the LDI captures the extent to which countries hold free and fair elections; protect the freedoms of expression, association and the press; and implement the rule of law and checks and balances. High scores indicate a high level of democracy and vice versa.

The black line in the left-hand panel of Figure 2 depicts the average global level of liberal democracy. This increased markedly after the Cold War ended and has stagnated since then. In the past several years we have only seen a slight decline in democracy in Western Europe and North America (dotted blue line) and in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This method of presentation assigns the same weight to all countries. However, it is doubtful that the trend in Vanuatu, an island country in the South Pacific with a population of 260,000, is equally relevant to the global state of democracy as the trend in China or Brazil.

Thus the right-hand panel displays the global trends weighted by the countries' population size. The global average (black line) now indicates a more significant decline in recent years. That is because many populous countries are part of the current autocratisation trend, which involves a decline in democratic regime traits. The regional averages provide insights into which regions have been especially affected. The decline is particularly pronounced in Western Europe and North America (dotted blue line), Latin America (green line) and Eastern Europe/Central Asia (dotted red line). Asia has not been spared either – especially in the case of India, the world's largest democracy. We were only able to observe an ongoing upward trend in sub-Saharan Africa, which is partly due to the fact that the region started with relatively low average levels in the 1990s.

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14   Die Analyse in dieser Sektion (insbesondere die Abbildungen) basieren auf dem V-Dem Democracy Report 2019 (Lührmann et al. 2019).

15   See Coppedge et al. (2019b). An overview of the approach taken by the Swedish institute can be found here: https://www.v-dem.net/en/about/.
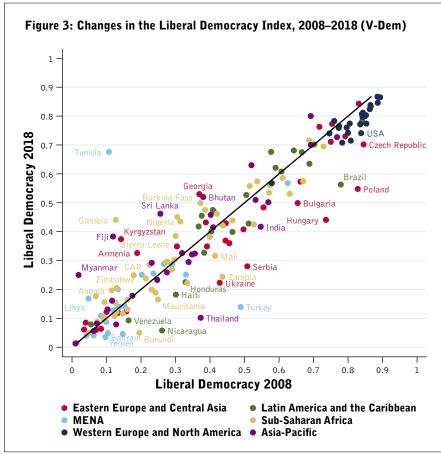
Figure 2: Global trends in the Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem)

Legend:
- **World Average**
- **Latin America and the Caribbean**
- **Sub-Saharan Africa**
- **Asia-Pacific**
- **Eastern Europe and Central Asia**
- **MENA**
- **Western Europe and North America**

Source: Lührmann et al. 2019, 13.

A total of 24 countries have been affected by substantial autocratisation.[16] They are home to a third of the world's population. Figure 3 shows the LDI score for 2008 on the horizontal axis and the LDI score for 2018 on the vertical axis. All countries below the diagonal line are countries where the level of democracy declined markedly over these ten years, while countries above the diagonal line saw an improvement in the level of democracy. Among the autocratising countries are many Central and Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Serbia. Also represented here are large countries in the Americas such as the United States, Brazil, and Venezuela.

Overall, the number of countries undergoing autocratisation has risen significantly, while less and less countries are developing in a democratic direction. Thus Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) speak of a "third wave of autocratisation". The first wave of autocratisation occurred roughly from 1926 to 1942, while the second took place from 1961 to 1977, mainly in Latin America and Africa (see also Huntington 1991).
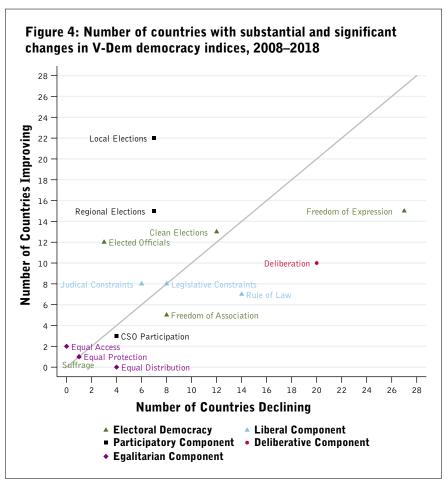
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16   V-Dem regards autocratisation as "substantial" if the LDI declines by more than 0.05 points and this decline is statistically significant (Lührmann et al. 2019, 14).

Figure 3: Changes in the Liberal Democracy Index, 2008–2018 (V-Dem)

Source: Lührmann et al. 2019, 20.

The data from the V-Dem Institute also make it possible to identify precisely which aspects of democracy are affected by the autocratisation movement. Figure 4 shows the number of countries in which a particular aspect of democracy has changed substantially. Indices above the diagonal line indicate that more countries have improved than declined. Here one can still find indices that measure the quality of elections, especially at the local and regional levels. More countries, however, have declined than improved with regard to the liberal aspects of democracy: the freedom of expression and media pluralism (here 27 countries have seen significant declines), the rule of law (14 countries), and the freedom of association (8 countries).[17]

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[17] "Freedom of Expression" and "Freedom of Association" are shown here as part of "Electoral Democracy", because the concept of electoral democracy V-Dem employs already encompasses these liberal aspects of democracy (based on Dahl).

Figure 4: Number of countries with substantial and significant changes in V-Dem democracy indices, 2008–2018

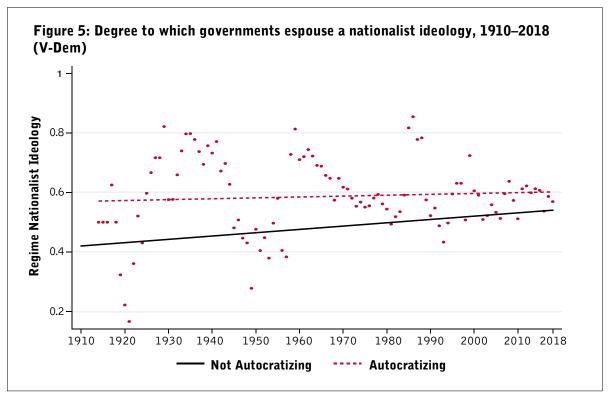Source: Lührmann et al. 2019, 17.

Overall, declines have been seen in the liberal aspects of democracy, especially with regard to the media situation and freedom of expression, while electoral aspects have remained strong or have even improved. This pattern of autocratisation shows that illiberalism is indeed continuing to spread worldwide. Hence autocrats are limiting the ability of the opposition to challenge them, while at the same time trying to maintain democratic legitimacy through the electoral process.

Figure 4 also shows that the deliberative aspects of democracy have declined in 20 countries. This trend reflects the starker polarisation of societies, which is accompanied by the spread of hateful and disrespectful speech in public debate. According to the V-Dem data, in countries where society is heavily polarised there is a greater risk that the quality of democracy will decline substantially.[18]

In addition, the governments of countries undergoing autocratisation are more likely than others to be nationalist. Figure 5 shows the extent to which governments espouse nationalist ideologies. These data are based on the assessments of V-Dem experts,

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[18]   This refers to V-Dem's "Polarization of Society" indicator (available from 2000). Countries not experiencing a significant decline of democracy achieved an average score of 1.5 on this indicator and countries experiencing a decline only 0.8. This difference is statistically significant.

with high scores indicating a high degree of nationalism.[19] The black line depicts the development of nationalism in countries that have, since 1910, not undergone autocratisation. The dotted red line and dots represent the average score in the countries that were affected by autocratisation in the respective year. The figure provides two key insights: Firstly, nationalism is significantly more widespread in autocratising countries than in countries not undergoing autocratisation.[20] Secondly, there has even been a rise in nationalism over time in non-autocratising countries.

Figure 5: Degree to which governments espouse a nationalist ideology, 1910–2018 (V-Dem)

Source: Own figure based on V-Dem data (Coppedge et al. 2019a).

The spread of populism is also correlated with a negative trend in democratic quality. In a recent V-Dem working paper, Ruth-Lovell and co-authors (2019) show that liberal, electoral and deliberative aspects of democracy are declining significantly in the European and Latin American countries ruled by populists.

19   To be precise, experts indicate on a binary scale (0/1) whether the government is based on a nationalist ideology. The more experts who give a score of 1, the higher the score for that particular country. The figure shows the average global score. For more details see Tannenberg et al. (2019).

20   This difference is statistically significant (non-autocratising countries scored an average of 0.48 and autocratising countries an average of 0.60).

In conclusion, populism, nationalism and the rise of illiberal actors are posing a challenge to democracy. We are experiencing a third wave of autocratisation, which finds expression primarily in the gradual erosion of democratic quality. Yet, at the same time, there is no reason to panic. More than half of the world's population still lives in democracies, and the young democracy movements – in Algeria, Sudan, Tunisia, and Hong Kong – attest to the fact that many people want more freedom and democracy. Nevertheless, there is a need for further systematic research into the relationship between nationalism, populism, and the erosion of democracy, as well as for extensive data gathering on sub-aspects of these phenomena.

3. Implications for civil society

In the following, we will analyse how civil society freedoms have been affected by the autocratisation that has taken place in many countries (3.1), how this is related to rising populism (3.2), and what civil society actors can do to counteract autocratisation and populism (3.3).

3.1. How is civil society faring in times of autocratisation?

Civil society, which is comprised "… of a multiplicity of pluralistic (and competing), voluntarily formed organisations and associations … which articulate and autonomously organise their specific material and normative interests" (Lauth 2017, 388), figures prominently in this third wave of autocratisation. On the one hand, it is seen as playing an important role in the fight against autocratisation and populism. Many civil society actors are speaking out against the divisive rhetoric of populist movements and giving a voice to the divergent opinions and interests of particular social groups. They act as a corrective to political processes without themselves being a part of formal political institutions. They influence public debates and facilitate interaction between different subgroups in society. On the other hand, numerous right-wing populist movements that call for a less liberal and pluralistic society have sprung up.[21] Examples of such anti-liberal movements are Pegida in Germany, Reclaim Australia, the Bosnian Movement of National Pride and the Hindu nationalist movement in India. Such groups contribute to divisions in society and facilitate the rise of illiberal political leaders. Thus civil society can in principle be both a cause of, and a remedy for, autocratisation.
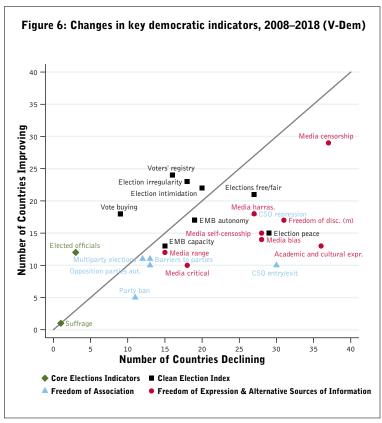
Looking at the liberal segment of civil society, we have observed that since the mid-2000s a number of governments have been systematically inhibiting the free operation of civil society actors. This phenomenon is often referred to as "closing" or "shrinking space" (Carothers & Brechenmacher 2014, Buyse 2018). Physical attacks and intimidation, the criminalisation of civil society engagement, increasing bureaucratic hurdles as well as stigmatisation and verbal vilification are effecting a significant shrinking of space for civil society activity (Terwindt and Schliemann 2017). Autocratic governments are in particular curtailing the efforts of non-governmental organisations in the area of international democracy promotion, justifying such actions by reference to state sovereignty (Poppe & Wolff 2017). Among the reasons for this trend are the comprehensive measures to fight terrorism that prioritise security over civil liberties,[22]

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[21] For a basic discussion of bad civil society, see Chambers and Kopstein (2001).

[22] In democratic countries such restrictions are a side effect of measures that actually aim to combat terrorism. However, as a report by the University of Minnesota shows, restrictive state measures implemented to fight terrorism usually result in no additional security benefit (Charbord & Ní Aoláin 2018).

the success of pro-democracy movements during the so-called coloured revolutions in the former Soviet republics and the threat they posed to autocratic regimes, as well as the technological revolution that has made it easier for civil society actors to influence public discourse (Poppe & Wolff 2017, Buyse 2018).

The shrinking space for civil society can be clearly seen in the quantitative data from the V-Dem Project. Figure 6 shows changes in a number of key indicators of liberal democracy. The figure depicts how many countries recorded substantial and significant improvements (vertical axis) or declines (horizontal axis) on various indicators from 2008 to 2018 (Coppedge et al. 2019a). For indicators that fall above the line, there are more countries recording positive changes than negative changes and vice versa. We see clearly that indicators measuring freedom of association (CSO repression, CSO entry/exit) have registered a negative change over the last decade. Indicators on state control and repression of civil society organisations have declined in more than two dozen countries. Not only V-Dem data but also data from Freedom House corroborate the shrinking of civil society space in the past years, which is a global trend with regional differences (Richter 2018).

Figure 6: Changes in key democratic indicators, 2008–2018 (V-Dem)

Source: Lührmann et al. 2019, 18.

The current state of civil society space in 2019 still gives reason for alarm. According to a recent report by the global civil society alliance CIVICUS[23] and its partner organisations, only three percent of the world's population currently lives in open societies where the freedoms of association and assembly are fully respected. In contrast, nearly 40 percent of the world's population lives under repressive political regimes. Seven countries experienced a decline in 2018, while only two improved. Worth highlighting here are the negative trends in populous countries such as India and Brazil. In addition to a growing intolerance of protest, governments are increasingly targeting activists with censorship, intimidation, and violence. Particularly affected are those who expose corruption and human rights violations, those who mobilise against existing injustices and those who demand government accountability.

This includes in particular civil society groups that critically monitor major resource and infrastructure projects related to raw material extraction and energy production, advocating for adherence to human rights, environmental standards, and for participation in decision-making processes (Terwindt & Schliemann 2017). As a study by the Coalition for Human Rights in Development shows, human rights defenders also face threats and attacks in the context of development activities.[24]

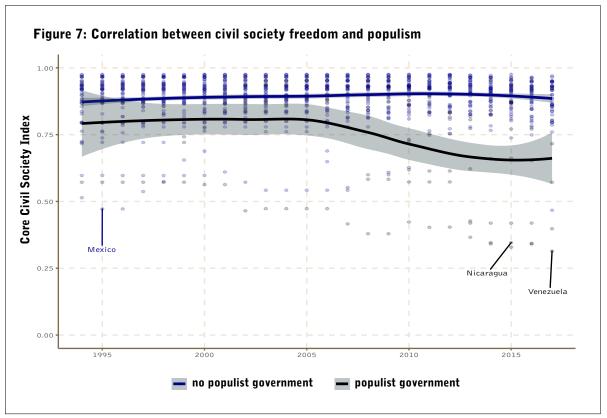## 3.2. The relationship between populism and shrinking space

What is the relationship between autocratisation, populism, nationalism, and shrinking space for civil society actors? As already described, the different phenomena mutually strengthen one another. Moreover, populists and nationalists divide civil society by attributing membership in a people or nation to one part of society while denying such membership to the other part of society. Polarisation increases as a result, and conflicts arise between social groups. The main beneficiaries are illiberal groups that can act as the sole representatives of the interests of their supporters. In such a climate of polarisation, repressive measures against the engagement of the respective outgroup become popular and thus shrink the space for certain civil society groups – often the very groups that represent the interests of minorities and disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, illiberal groups disregard human rights and the rule of law so that when they hold executive power they crack down on their opponents in civil society without, at times, sufficient legal basis.

The correlation between populism and civil society can be illustrated using quantitative data. Figure 7 shows changes in the V-Dem's Core Civil Society Index from 1995 to 2017 for 48 countries in Latin America and Europa. The indicator measures the freedom

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23 The 2019 State of Civil Society Report by CIVICUS can be viewed here: https://www.civicus.org/index.php/state-of-civil-society-report-2019.

24 The study is available online at https://rightsindevelopment.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Uncalculated-Risks-Full-report-cmpr-h.pdf.

and autonomy of civil society actors and is based on a global expert survey (Coppedge 2019b). We also distinguish between populist and non-populist governments with the help of data used in the study by Ruth-Lovell et al. (2019).[25] The index scores of all countries for this period are shown in the figure as dots, black for populist governments, and purple for non-populist governments. The lines, which were smoothed using local regression, depict changes in both types of government over time and reveal basic patterns in the data. On the one hand, we see that over the entire period of analysis populist governments fared worse in terms of autonomy and freedom for civil society than non-populist governments. On the other hand, we see from the

Figure 7: Correlation between civil society freedom and populism

Country sample: Latin America and Europe.
Source: Own figure based on V-Dem data (Coppedge et al. 2019a) and data from Ruth-Lovell et al. (2019).

mid-2000s onwards a deterioration in the scores of populist-ruled countries. The difference between populists and non-populists becomes greater with regard to civil society. Venezuela and Nicaragua fared particularly poorly in this sample of countries from Europe and Latin America. In these two countries, which are led by populist presidents, there have been numerous incidents of state repression against civil society actors. But non-populist governments can also curtail civil society freedom. A good example of this is provided by Mexico under the rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the late 1990s.

25   The classification of governments is based on a qualitative assessment by experts. Further information on measuring populism can be found in Ruth-Lovell et al. (2019, 15).

Although a systematic analysis still needs to be done to confirm the robustness of this correlation, we interpret this as initial evidence of a relationship between populism and shrinking space for civil society actors. In our view, illiberal groups that employ a nationalist or populist discourse or engage in such politics pose a concrete threat to civil society freedom in Europe and the rest of the world.

3.3. Options for civil society action

In the light of growing populism and nationalism, what can civil society groups do to counter autocratisation tendencies and defend existing freedoms? In our view, there are at least three things that can be done. Civil society can *mobilise* citizens when illiberals curtail civil liberties or disregard the principle of the rule of law. Moreover, civil society should try to facilitate *interaction* between different groups with opposing interests in order to prevent divisions in society. Last but not least, civil society has the task of offering a democratic and inclusive *vision of the future* to counter the often backward-looking and exclusive agendas of illiberals. In order not to legitimise illiberals and not to inflame polarisation, a middle road needs to be found between moderate and radical strategies.

Mobilising citizens. Illiberals justify attacks on civil liberties and the separation of powers by invoking the will of the people. Civil society can counter this argument by sending out a clear message, such as calling on citizens to participate in protests that set an example and show that the majority hold a different view. On the one hand, what is important, in our view, is that the protests are not directed against people, but rather against specific policies and projects. On the other hand, civil society groups should adhere to democratic norms and set an example of what democracy is, for example by renouncing the use of violence. In Bolivia the people rose up against irregularities in the presidential election, in Sudan a peaceful protest movement ended the dictatorship of Omar Hassan al-Bashir, and in Lebanon the people are demanding a complete restructuring of the political system. Yet a movement's initial successes do not inevitably lead to sustainable democracy. Movements take different paths of development after large-scale protests subside, and participating in formal political institutions bears the risk of co-option by illiberals (Youngs 2019, 77).

Supporting interaction and overcoming divisions. One effective strategy of illiberals is to divide society into an ingroup and an outgroup. Populist groups in particular claim the right to define who belongs to the people and who does not; nationalists do the same with regard to the nation. There are several ways in which civil society groups can overcome this division of society into antagonistic groups. To begin with they can facilitate interaction between individuals and groups by serving, within their possibilities, as an open meeting place. They should therefore initiate both internal and external debates, allow divergent opinions to be voiced and take an interest in consensus-building based on democratic norms (deliberation). Only in this way can we help develop an understanding

for others and break through the divisive arguments of illiberals. A line must be drawn, however, when it comes to relations with radical forces that are not interested in abiding by fundamental democratic principles. Such forces should have no place in organised civil society.

In addition, civil society groups should articulate alternative and inclusive visions of the people and of the nation in order to take away illiberals' control over defining who is part of these concepts. Such concepts still hold significant meaning for many people, which is why the task of shaping these narratives should not be left to illiberals alone. In particular, in the light of the attack on minorities by populists, civil society should stress that minorities are part of the people or of the nation. Moreover, it may be helpful to highlight supranational identities (European, world citizen) as a means to overcome divisions. The shrinking space for civil society activity renders it more difficult to perform this role, making it necessary for civil society to develop creative action strategies that circumvent state restrictions and expose repression. In particular the internet and social media continue to offer possibilities for civil society networking, even in relatively repressive environments (for an in-depth discussion of the topic, see Diamond 2010 and Mechkova et al. 2019).

Articulating visions of the future. Last but not least, civil society has a key role to play in developing a social vision of the future. A progressive agenda, especially one capable of gaining majority support, offers an alternative to the often backward-oriented politics of populists and nationalists. A programme focused on topical issues helps to highlight the advantages of a networked world in terms of strengthening overall economic development and achieving peaceful coexistence, but also clearly addresses the negative consequences of globalisation and develops solutions that chart a way forward for the affected groups. The challenge lies in driving forward effective solutions for complex problems such as taxing multinational corporations, while at the same time countering the presumably simple solutions put forth by illiberals. Such a strategy requires civil society to be networked internationally, because activism at the national level is markedly less promising than coordinated activities across borders.

In countries where networking is systematically impeded, civil society can exert pressure on governments by building visible alliances with international actors that support human rights defenders. Moreover, civil society should pursue legal action to defend constitutionally protected rights. Even if the judiciary is not always independent, members of the opposition often achieve partial successes, as the example of Russian blogger Yegor Zhukov shows.[26] Such cases also shed light on the autocratic practices of the respective government even if they end in defeat.

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26   See https://cpj.org/2019/12/russian-blogger-yegor-zhukov-handed-suspended-sent.php for further information.

4. Conclusion

We have argued that liberal aspects of democracy, in particular civil liberties and the rule of law, are essential to the survival of a democratic system worthy of this name. Core democratic processes, such as free and fair elections, cannot function properly without these liberal elements. With this notion, we contradict the position of actors who assert that majority decisions taken in illiberal contexts are a sufficient basis for political action: in other words, there is no such thing as an "illiberal democracy".

Populism shares with illiberalism an emphasis on the people's will and its primacy in political decision-making. In contrast to illiberalism, populism does not always pose a danger to democracy – that is, if it appears solely as an elite-critical communications strategy free of anti-pluralist tactics. Populism, however, becomes a threat to democracy if illiberals call the shots and pursue policies aimed at curtailing democracy once they gain political power. Nationalism acts as an accelerant because it fuels polarisation, and thus plays into the hands of illiberals.

Using data from the V-Dem Project, we were able to illustrate a number of trends in the global development of democracy. Although the global level of democracy remains high, there have over the past decade been declines in liberal indicators in many countries – including populous countries such as India, the United States and Brazil. Autocratisation tendencies are greater in countries whose governments use a nationalist ideology to legitimise their rule. As we have shown, it is first and foremost the civil society that bears the brunt of autocratisation. The space for civil society to act has shrunk over the past ten years in a number of countries. We have identified, descriptively, a correlation between such shrinking spaces and populist governments, a finding that needs to be studied in more detail.

We have set out a number of options open to civil society actors that advocate for democracy. In our view, the key to effective engagement lies in actors being able to delegitimise radical forces without further polarising society. They must build bridges to other social groups and win over the moderates to their side, especially those moderates who may be susceptible to illiberal appeals. And they must build an international network in order to stand up to nationalism in a globalised world.

The current autocratisation trend also poses a challenge for international supporters of democracy. Democracy promotion strategies and associated theories of change often still reflect the euphoria of the 1990s, when the main focus was on supporting democratic movements that were already under way.[27] The time has now come to systematically develop democracy promotion strategies that can counteract the global autocratisation trend. Here we suggest three different approaches. Firstly, the erosion processes in countries such as Brazil, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela have shown that even

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27   For fundamental information see Carothers (2015).

countries that were electoral democracies for decades can be affected by autocratisation. Measures to promote democracy should therefore concentrate not only on current transition processes, but also focus more than before on the long-term development of liberal values and institutions. Secondly, non-state actors such as civil society, the media (traditional and online), and political parties are critical to democracy's resilience.[28] They should be at the heart of democracy promotion. Thirdly, democracy promotion – similar to civil society – should support activities that are not just focused on delegitimising and countering illiberal ideologies and actors but also seek to help depolarise societies. Both strengthen democracy in the long term. Depolarisation can be achieved through measures that, first, bring together actors from disparate political camps around one table – e.g. workshops for politicians from different parties – and, second, create joint, cross-factional information channels, for example in social media.

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28   Lührmann and Morgan (2018), for example, have shown that countries that have a high level of diagonal accountability (strong media and civil society) are less susceptible to autocratic rule.

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