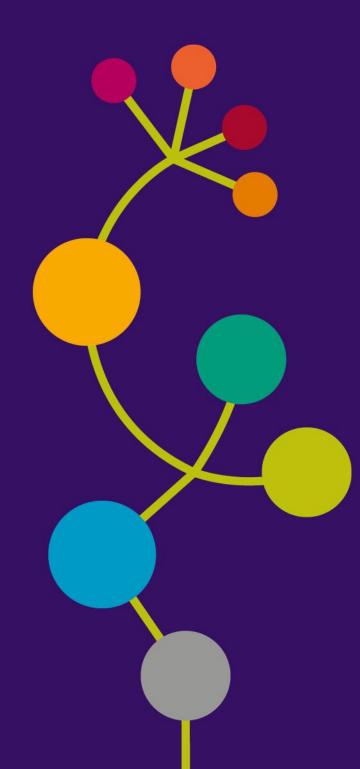# Policy briefing

Journalistic Resilience against Communicative Authoritarian Populism: Challenges, Coping Strategies, and Insights from the POPBACK Project

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The challenge posed by the rise of authoritarian populism

The rise and endurance of authoritarian populism across the world is a serious global challenge for journalism. Populist attacks on news media and journalists threaten a free, pluralistic, and autonomous press, which is a necessary condition for a well-functioning democracy. The media play a watchdog role, facilitate transparency and accountability of political power, and foster an informed citizenry.

Against this backdrop, the POPBACK[i] project aims to inform strategies to increase democratic resilience by studying the mechanisms authoritarian populists use to increase their power over the media. The project also seeks to identify the "coping strategies" societal actors use when faced with authoritarian populism. Our analysis focuses on Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia – three EU member states with varying and transient authoritarian populist tendencies – and Hungary, the most prominent example of illiberal anti-pluralist 'strong man politics' in the European Union (EU). We also include Turkey as a non-EU trendsetter for authoritarian populism where the media and communications systems have been radically transformed under the authoritarian populist administration.

This briefing paper seeks to explain these challenges in greater detail by focussing on:

> **Personal political attacks**: One strategy for authoritarian populist governments to enhance their control over the media sector consists of personal attacks on individual media professionals through exclusion from briefings, law suits, and even physical attacks.

> **Censorship & content manipulation**: Authoritarian populists in power also adopt a range of subtle censorship strategies including denying access to data and information to journalists considered too critical and pressures on editors to influence content.

> **Ownership and employment**: A third strategy to enhance government control over the media sector is via the ownership of media outlets either directly by the government or via aligned businesspeople. Ownership of media outlets allows authoritarian populists to eliminate critical voices by cutting programmes, shutting down outlets, or threatening journalists with redundancy.

This briefing paper provides insights from media professionals in our sample countries as to how to deal with these threats.

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Research carried out by the POPBACK project

We investigated how populists in power employ and instrumentalise external forces to influence journalistic work according to journalists' perceptions across different social contexts. We conducted 97 interviews with journalists, editors, and managers in Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia, and Turkey. This brief presents the insights and lessons taken from the interviews, specifically focusing on coping mechanisms against the impact of authoritarian populism on journalism and journalistic practices.

Coping with communicative authoritarian populism

Personal political attacks

Journalists have identified a range of politically motivated attacks targeting individuals involving populist politicians or their supporters. Common strategies used against reporters critical of politicians include the **discrediting of journalists** through smear campaigns, **exclusion** from press conferences, political briefings, and other journalistic events, and discrediting or **harassment of journalists online**, most commonly through social media.

Legal action and lawsuits are also used, primarily in Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia, as a mechanism to put pressure on journalists and delay reporting with lengthy legal procedures; although, courts typically ruled in journalists' favour as long as proper journalistic standards were followed. In Turkey, the most extreme case of communicative authoritarianism in our sample, such attacks can end in prison sentences. **Physical attacks** were occasionally noted in Croatia and Turkey, mostly limited to intimidation through police raids.

Coping strategies: To cope with such attacks, many journalists have noted the significant potential of both national and international trade unions and professional journalistic associations. These organisations can provide professional support, including legal aid to contest unfair lawsuits and counter defamation attempts through litigation for libel and slander. Additionally, they can offer essential counselling services to support journalists' mental health and wellbeing amid instances of harassment.

Providing education for their members and the public, strengthening networking among their members and journalists in general, and increase project funding opportunities for the media are other important activities of unions and professional organisations that our interviewees mentioned as important collective coping strategies.

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Content manipulation: censorship & message control

Political intervention aimed at manipulating content is commonly cited as a threat by journalists in the context of populist governments. Efforts to **control** or **censor** journalistic reporting manifest in diverse ways, often veering towards "orchestrated" methods rather than overt censorship. Thus, a Slovenian respondent described the practice where – on behest of the media owner – articles mentioning certain names had to be reviewed by the editor-in-chief. This and other practices lead to a "smart system" (Hungarian respondent) of content manipulation that operates subtly but effectively.

Politicians may also directly contact editors or journalists to express **grievances about reporting**, demanding corrections or the exclusion of certain topics from publications. Furthermore, **public interest data requests** by journalists are frequently prolonged, sometimes spanning months or even years, with the intention to delay publication.

However, political interference extends beyond such attempts at **silencing journalists**; our interviewees mention concerted efforts to **influence media content**. In Austria, politicians cultivate close personal connections with reporters, following a "friend-enemy scheme," aiming at furnishing their journalistic allies with exclusive information while preventing access to that information for more critical, non-aligned journalists.

The **erosion of independent journalism under political pressures** is a significant concern for a number of journalists in several sample countries. Thus, whilst in Austria political independence is perceived as "not that big of a deal" (Austrian respondent) and there are few instances where political intervention proved successful, in countries like Hungary and Turkey, where populist governments have a firmer grip on power, interviewees report severe constraints on journalistic independence.

Public service broadcasting (PSB) is particularly susceptible to political pressures and influence, though the degree of severity varies here too. While journalists in Austria feel the "pressure," they are largely "doing a good job" [in fending it off]. In Hungary, by contrast, the PSB operates largely **under government "instructions"**, serving as a platform for propaganda rather than producing genuine journalism. Reporters in PSB are often dismissed as not being "real" journalists. Similarly, the Slovenian PSB faced a comparable fate under its populist government, which appointed party affiliated individuals to its Programme Council resulting in the cancellation of several shows, an exodus of journalists from that institution, and great pressure on journalists who remained and resisted.

Coping strategies: Several journalists observed that pressure from politicians often does not directly impact journalists but instead remains confined to **editors**, who effectively serve as **"gatekeepers" against external pressures** on journalism. This is a notable method of safeguarding journalists' independence. Consequently, editors

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would greatly benefit from support from **national and international professional associations** to assist them in this role. This could be provided in the form of training, fora where editors can share their experiences, and legal assistance. Furthermore, others have highlighted the significance of **editorial statutes** in bolstering the independence of editorial offices and immunising editorial work from economic or political influence.

Innovative strategies to counter outside interference in journalism include journalists raising awareness and leveraging public support by **publishing information about attempted political interventions**. In Hungary, the renowned online news platform *Index* published an "independence barometer" on its website, which informed readers of the outlet's current level of freedom, based on its editorial independence and the extent of outside interference in staffing decisions. In Croatia, journalists emphasized the significance of fostering robust networking, educational exchanges, and dialogue among diverse professions, including media practitioners, non-governmental organizations, students, and academics. This was facilitated by an International Multimedia Journalism Festival (Media Fest).

Other journalists also warned of the **influence of media owners on content**. Slovenian journalists, for example, proposed mitigating their influence by requesting CEOs to issue **instructions in writing**, or even barring CEOs from entering the editorial office. On the other hand, Croatian reporters described a strategy of publishing investigative articles through the **web pages** of journalistic associations or unions in order to circumvent the owners, editors or advertisers who might try to prevent their publication.

Ownership & employment

Beyond interference in independent reporting, politicians and owners are also able to **influence journalism at the organisational level**, jeopardising employment and even the very survival of the media outlets. However, the degree of interference varies across countries. In Austria, most journalists do not see this as a salient issue, although the 'Ibiza scandal'[ii] was cited as a cautionary tale of the dangers of 'Orbanisation'. In Hungary, Turkey, and to a certain extent in Slovenia (under Janša's populist government), on the other hand, ownership of media outlets has become a matter of vital concern to journalists. As one Hungarian respondent put it: "Today, I don't think there is a sane journalist in Hungary who doesn't go to work without first considering who the owner is and what kind of impact it has."

Whilst informal political pressure on owners is often cited as a means to influence media, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia and Turkey have witnessed numerous instances of more drastic measures, where political actors directly or indirectly assume **control of media outlets** through party-affiliated owners. In Hungary and Turkey, where populist

governments have maintained power for over a decade, this process evolved into a concerted and systematic takeover, resulting in nearly 80%[iii] and 90%[iv] respectively of the national news media falling into the hands of **government-affiliated owners**. Furthermore, in the most extreme cases, entire **news outlets have been abruptly shut down** without prior notice, for example, the prominent newspaper *Népszabadság* in Hungary, whilst in Turkey, numerous media outlets were closed through decrees during the rule of emergency following a coup attempt in 2016.

Journalists consistently report attempts at information control through **threats to employment**, particularly targeting management and editor(s). These measures include reassignment to different roles, pay cuts, reassigning journalists to other tasks and positions, individual or mass dismissals. Examples abound in Hungary, Turkey, and even Slovenia, where changes in ownership led to the dismissal of managers and editors. The vacancies are then filled with "friendly" or party-affiliated editors and journalists who "toe the party line," resulting in a noticeable shift towards propagandistic news content. This practice of political intervention is particularly prevalent in public service broadcasting, where **political appointments** are reported even in Austria.

***Coping strategies*:** Journalists have noted the role of **national and international journalistic networks, associations, and trade unions** in defending journalistic rights and promoting independent journalism, particularly in fighting against unfair employment measures such as politically motivated dismissals. Collective action has yielded positive outcomes in several instances. For instance, in the case of two major Hungarian online platforms, *Origo* and *Index*, journalists staged mass walkouts in solidarity following the dismissal of their editors-in-chief for political reasons. In both cases, they successfully **established alternative media outlets**. Similarly, in Slovenia, three strikes by PSB employees decelerated the dismantling of the broadcaster by Janša's government. In Turkey, many prominent journalists established their own small outlets largely by using the availabilities of digital platforms and environments.

In Turkey and Hungary, journalists have employed strategies of **financial independence** to safeguard political autonomy. Some Hungarian journalists have achieved this by consolidating ownership among themselves through the acquisition of ownership stakes. Similarly, in Turkey, many reporters emphasise the significance of funding from donations, particularly from international sources, rather than relying on domestic advertising revenue. Funding from foundations, exemplified by the now defunct Feral Tribune in Croatia, offers a viable short-term alternative to relying solely on advertising revenue, thus mitigating potential pressures from companies seeking to influence editorial content.

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