

POPULISM AND CLOSING CIVIC SPACE: A POST-TRUTH CHALLENGE

The ongoing surge of right-wing populism and the post-truth environment in Europe and the US have cast a global threat to civic space. Recent developments in national and international politics render us, citizens of the world, incapable of fully enjoying our rights to free assembly, protest, travel, or simply to speak out. This narrowing trend revives discriminatory debates over refugees, minorities, and racism, and is reinforced by populist leaders speaking “for the people.” The danger of populism asserts itself in ways ranging from restricting civil society through limiting foreign funding for civil society organizations to closing space for peaceful assembly. The future is concerning. However, it can be saved through sustainable support to civil society actors.

Hilal Tekmen*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Spring 2017

* Hilal Tekmen works as a Project Expert at the Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (TÜSEV) in Istanbul.

The wave of populism currently facing the world is fed by profound changes in international relations and a surge in nationalist and/or populist parties. Recent and upcoming elections are worrying in terms of right-wing populism further influencing European politics. The political instability fueled by populism causes significant changes both in the international political arena and in the public space, where people are entitled to enjoy the fundamental rights and freedoms that are granted to them.

Radical populist right-wing parties have appeared as strong actors in terms of their increasing presence in the media as influencers and as policymakers in parliaments, and they have been boosted by Brexit and Donald Trump’s victory in the US presidential elections.¹ The rise of populist leaders around the world, the recently adopted majoritarian vision in the US and Europe, and the awakening of authoritarian-like leaderships all pose an existential threat to the fundamental values and practices embraced by democratic societies as we know them. Freedoms that are recognized as non-negotiable are eroding in the current political climate.

Is Populism an Organic Reaction?

There are ongoing debates on whether populism has risen as a result of peoples’ will, or an imposition put forward by political leaders. What is argued in this article is that there is a remarkable mass of people dissatisfied with the status quo in their country, and an undeniable push on the policymakers’ side in order to convince the masses that they will make things right. On the one hand, some argue that populism is a result of global economic failure.² Although it has been 10 years since the global financial crisis, according to this view, its impacts on the global political order continue to reverberate. In the US, for example, economic instability and inequality are on the rise. It would make perfect sense for people to vote for an alternative way of rule in the country as a last resort, when they are at the bottom of the population in terms of income. On the other hand, as this article suggests, the new generation of populist leaders and parties are on the rise because there is a mounting public discontent over the status quo in the US and Europe.³ The World Report 2017 published by Human Rights Watch presents migration as the most perceived threat, intersected by concerns about economic inequality, cultural identity, and transnational terrorism. The “enemization” of the migrant figure in the US and Europe has resulted in

¹ Benjamin Ward, “Responding to Populism, Europe’s Real Test,” *EU Observer*, 17 March 2017, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/137283>

² Larry Elliott, “Populism Is the Result of Global Economic Failure,” *The Guardian*, 26 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/mar/26/populism-is-the-result-of-global-economic-failure>

³ Kenneth Roth, “The Dangerous Rise of Populism: Global Attacks on Human Rights Values,” in *Human Rights Watch World Report 2017*, 12 January 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/dangerous-rise-of-populism#537fde>

President Trump dramatically reducing the flow of immigration to the US.⁴ Within this political climate, populism does not allow for political opposition. The problem with populism appears to be the denial of pluralism, which in turn leads to more polarization in society.⁵ An example of this fragmentation can be found in the majoritarian extremism trend in Europe, for example Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's appeal to close Europe's borders to refugees – an appeal which has been backed by many political figures.⁶

Populism claims to speak “for the people,” by giving voice to the marginalized masses, and to defend the people from whatever danger or evil is out there, namely migration and extremist religiousness. However, as the trend of post-truth politics develops, the enmization of “the other” – migrants or other disadvantaged groups – is being imposed on the masses as an appeal to their emotional and personal belief systems. People have come to believe that they are “the majority,” meaning that their identities are recognized and cherished by the ruling party, yet feel uncomfortable with interventionist parties, namely, minorities. Truth has become a frequent casualty in populist and nationalist regimes.⁷ Such an approach has fueled the deepening of political, social, and cultural polarization in societies.

“The problem with populism appears to be the denial of pluralism, which in turn leads to more polarization in society.”

The influx of refugees into Europe and transnational terrorist attacks executed or inspired by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have played a fundamental role in the rise of nationalist views in Europe, and also in the weakening of democratic standards.⁸ The “othering” of asylum seekers and Muslims has exposed an inclination towards xenophobia, religious intolerance, and the neutering of democratic institutions.⁹ Anti-immigration and anti-Islam sentiments and the daily exposure thereof in the media, have become something that we normalize. These

⁴ Joel Rose, “In Trump’s First 100 Days, a Dramatic Reduction in Immigration,” *National Public Radio*, 27 April 2017, http://www.npr.org/2017/04/27/525584236/in-trumps-first-100-days-a-dramatic-reduction-in-immigration?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social

⁵ Cas Mudde, “The Problem with Populism,” *The Guardian*, 17 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/17/problem-populism-syriza-podemos-dark-side-europe>

⁶ Kenneth Roth, “The Dangerous Rise of Populism: Global Attacks on Human Rights Values,” *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/dangerous-rise-of-populism>

⁷ Roth (2017).

⁸ Freedom House, “Populists and Autocrats: The Dual Threat to Global Democracy,” *Freedom in the World 2017 Report*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

⁹ Freedom House (2017).

two approaches have, as explained above, acted as significant drivers in the development of populist regimes in the world.

The Undeniable Effect of Populism on Civic Space

When considering the increasingly embraced trend of right-wing populism in the US and Europe, one key question arises regarding the extent to which the rise of populist and/or nationalist forces shapes civic space in both continents. Prior to addressing this issue, the meaning of civic space must be clarified. Civic space, as defined by CIVICUS, is the set of conditions that are key in open and democratic societies, of which three civil society rights are non-negotiable: freedom of association, the right to peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression.¹⁰ Human rights, which have long been positioned as a cornerstone in democracies, looks shakier than ever in light of the political instabilities posed by the rise of populist and nationalist rule.¹¹

“Human rights looks shakier than ever in light of the political instabilities posed by the rise of populist and nationalist rule.”

Contrastingly, a “closing civic space” refers to a dramatic disruption of the conditions providing civic rights and freedoms to the people. Backsliding civic space has become a trend in places where there are ongoing challenges posed towards political opponents under populist regimes. An open civic space is the bedrock of a rights-based democracy; however, there is a gap between the principle and what is being practiced on the ground.¹² Robust civic space is observed in developed countries that have low levels of inequality and hold fair elections. However, research shows that currently a mere three percent of people live in countries where their fundamental freedoms and rights are both enabled and secured by governments.¹³

Setbacks in political rights and civil liberties in a number of countries rated “free” in the world – such as France, Hungary, Poland, Spain, and the US – have cast a shadow over the civic space.¹⁴ Political figures with authoritarian leanings are fostering

Setbacks in political rights and civil liberties in a number of countries rated “free” in the world – such as France, Hungary, Poland, Spain, and the US – have cast a shadow over the civic space.¹⁴ Political figures with authoritarian leanings are fostering

¹⁰ CIVICUS, “Civic Space,” 4 April 2017, <https://monitor.civicus.org/whatiscivicspace/>

¹¹ Amnesty International, “Amnesty International Report 2015/16: The State of the World’s Human Rights,” 15 May 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2016/02/annual-report-201516/>

¹² Mandeep Tiwana, “Backsliding on Civic Space in Democracies,” *Open Democracy*, 20 April 2017. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/democraciaabierta/mandeep-tiwana/backsliding-on-civic-space-in-democracies>

¹³ Danny Sriskandarajah, “Global Assault on Our Basic Freedoms Signposts a Dangerous Return to the Past,” *The Huffington Post*, 4 April 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/global-assault-on-our-basic-freedoms-signposts-a-dangerous_us_58e3719ee4b09dbd42f3da13

¹⁴ Freedom House (2017).

a radical reduction in democratic values, which are a prerequisite for civic rights and freedoms.¹⁵ We live in a new era of restricted freedom and increased governmental control, which is narrowing the space in which civil society and individuals can freely aggregate their interests and demonstrate.¹⁶ Moreover, populism has raised the specter that if “the majority” wants to limit the rights

“The phenomenon of a closing civic space results in the prevention, limitation, and/or eradication of civil society activities.”

of refugees or minorities, according to populist leaders, they should be allowed to do so.¹⁷ Major political events such as Brexit or antidemocratic reforms by the government in Poland have exploited vulnerabilities in Europe and led to the development of anti-minority tendencies.¹⁸ A demonstration of these anti-minority and anti-immigration tendencies would be the controversial “Vote Leave” poster during the Brexit campaign saying, “Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU. Vote Leave, take back control.”¹⁹ By repressing individuals or groups of people through violence and threats, populist and nationalist governments are violating the human and civic rights entitled to every citizen of the world.²⁰

In addition to restricting fundamental freedoms, closing civic space refers to the ways in which civil society organizations and individual advocates or activists are experiencing crackdowns. This ranges from limitations on foreign funding or freedom of assembly, to internet censorship or physical violence.²¹ Increasing government control in the US and Europe has spurred a wave of deepening extremist nationalism and protectionism, and although the governments’ motivations for restricting civic space may differ based on the country, they share a common desire to control foreign funding flows and to limit the powers of civil society.²² The ways in which a closing civic space exerts itself can be examined from both short and long-term perspectives. In the short-term, a closing civic space paralyzes the

¹⁵ Freedom House (2017).

¹⁶ World Economic Forum, “The Global Risks Report 2017,” 24 January 2017, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GRR17_Report_web.pdf

¹⁷ Roth (2017).

¹⁸ Freedom House (2017).

¹⁹ Daniel Boffey and Toby Helm, “Vote Leave embroiled in race row over Turkey security threat claims,” *The Guardian*, 22 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/21/vote-leave-prejudice-turkey-eu-security-threat>

²⁰ Camila Bustos, “The Shrinking of Civic Spaces: What Is Happening and What Can We Do?” *Dejusticia*, 18 April 2017, <https://www.dejusticiablog.org/new-blog/2017/4/18/the-shrinking-of-civic-spaces-what-is-happening-and-what-can-we-do>

²¹ World Economic Forum, “The Global Risks Report 2017.”

²² “Closing Space Survey: Responses from around the World,” *Alliance Magazine*, 24 May 2016, <http://www.alliance-magazine.org/opinion/closing-space-survey-responses-from-around-the-world/>

daily work of activists, and threatens the infrastructure and progress of human rights movements in the long-term.²³ Both ways are reinforced by restrictions that apply to the freedoms and the power of activists and civil society organizations. Restrictive laws on civil society organizations and increasing protectionism and surveillance are taking away the rights that we see as non-negotiable and essential to pursue civil society activities.²⁴ Essentially, the phenomenon of a closing civic space results in the prevention, limitation, and/or eradication of civil society activities.²⁵ Under most of the populist regimes, this phenomenon appears as an intentional intervention in order to suppress the voices of “the minority” supporting the rights of refugees, LGBTQI individuals, or any kind of disadvantaged groups that are not recognized by the masses. The tightening control of civil society imposes a critical threat to these groups’ right to free assembly.

“In order to regain the civic freedoms and civic space, civil society everywhere should be strengthened.”

With the surge of populism in Hungary and Poland, the understanding of “the will of the people” through populist practices has become more important than sustaining democratic values.²⁶ This is an example of the fact that although populism is supposedly the voice of the majority and leaves out the elite, it actually realizes the sin it criticizes the most: excluding citizens.²⁷ Hungary ranks high in the list of governments adopting restrictive measures against civil society actors. In 2016, for example, a bill proposal was put on the table by the opposition far-right party, infamous for their anti-Semitic stance, that aims to expose the civil society organizations which receive foreign funding and call them “foreign agents.”²⁸ The Hungarian example resembles what is called a “Putinist tactic,” which restricts civil society’s ability to fulfill its vital roles.²⁹ Increasing surveillance programs in the UK and ongoing challenges

²³ “Challenging the Closing Civic Space for Civil Society: A Practical Starting Point for Funders,” 29 April, 2016, https://ilhrfg.org/sites/default/files/ClosingSpaceReport_May2016_DigitalVersion.pdf

²⁴ Sriskandarajah (2017).

²⁵ World Economic Forum, “The Global Risks Report 2017.”

²⁶ Benjamin Ward, “Responding to Populism, Europe’s Real Test.”

²⁷ Jan-Werner Müller, “Trump, Erdoğan, Farage: The Attractions of Populism for Politicians, the Dangers for Democracy,” *The Guardian*, 2 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/02/trump-erdogan-farage-the-attractions-of-populism-for-politicians-the-dangers-for-democracy>

²⁸ Peter Kreko, “Closing Space in Hungary with a Russian Cookbook,” *Open Democracy*, 28 October 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/p-ter-krek/closing-space-in-hungary-with-russian-cookbook>

²⁹ Mandeep Tiwana and Andrew Firmin, “Can Democracy Stand Up to the Cult of the Strongman?,” *CIVICUS*, 18 April 2017, <http://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/op-eds/2815-can-democracy-stand-up-to-the-cult-of-the-strongman-leader>

with anti-protest laws in Spain have cast further concern over civic space.³⁰ Turkey, following the failed coup attempt of July 2016, witnessed mass arrests of academicians, journalists, and opposition figures along with the closure of several civil society organizations.³¹ Within one week following the failed coup attempt, the number of associations banned stood at 1,125.³² The deepening political fragility in Turkey that followed the failed coup attempt also shows a declining trend in citizens' rights to freely assemble and express themselves.³³ Outside Europe, several states in the US have witnessed drafts being brought to the table to weaken the right to peaceful protest.³⁴ All demonstrations over the narrowing trend of civic space, again, points to populist leaders' motivation to hold on to power, to rule out opposition, or to simply elevate their interests.³⁵

Concluding Remarks: Regaining Civic Freedom

Populism is not disappearing, rather, it will continue its incursion on civic space. The crackdown on human rights, democracy, and civic space will continue to be reinforced by the fictional "homogeneity" put forward by populist leaders – that everybody should conform to the same ideal.³⁶ It has become challenging and risky to fight attempts to close the civic space because power holders stifle free speech, restrict the right to protest, and manipulate the law to arrest civil society activists, as demonstrated in the above examples of Hungary, Poland, the UK, Turkey, and the US.³⁷ The question of where the future of Europe and the US lie in terms of shrinking civic space for individuals and civil society actors is worrying, but not hopeless.

In order to regain the civic freedoms and civic space, civil society everywhere should be strengthened. Concerned civil society and international organizations should show sustainable efforts to improve standards for the protection of civil society, which often appear weak against the influence of populist power holders.³⁸ They

³⁰ European Foundation Centre, "The Shrinking Civic Space for Civil Society: Philanthropic perspectives from across the globe," 15 April 2016, http://efc.issuelab.org/resource/the_shrinking_space_for_civil_society_philanthropic_perspectives_from_across_the_globe

³¹ Freedom House (2017).

³² Tulay Cetingulec, "State of emergency shuts down Turkey's NGOs," 21 November 2016, *Al-Monitor*; <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2016/11/turkey-emergency-rule-cracks-down-on-ngos.html>

³³ Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, "Under threat: five countries in which civic space is rapidly closing," *Open Democracy*, 18 January 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/dhananjayan-sriskandarajah/under-threat-five-countries-in-which-civic-space-is-rapidly-closing>

³⁴ Tiwana (2017).

³⁵ Danny Sriskandarajah, "Global Assault on Our Basic Freedoms Signposts a Dangerous Return to the Past."

³⁶ Jan-Werner Müller, "Trump, Erdoğan, Farage: The Attractions of Populism for Politicians, the Dangers for Democracy."

³⁷ CIVICUS, "Civic Space."

³⁸ Thomas Carothers and Saskia Brechenmacher, "Closing Space: Democracy and Human Rights Support Under Fire," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/closing_space.pdf

need to be supported by all to regain the space that belongs to them, and to foster the revival of civic freedoms. External funding to civil society organizations, upon which many organizations are dependent on, is also a crucial matter in regaining civic space. The fundamental crackdown of democracies and civic freedoms, as we know them in the US and Europe, can be overturned through strong civil societies and eventually, a return to true democratic values.