

The Authoritarian Regime Survival Guide

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Martin Mycielski | 26 March 2018

The text below, dubbed the “Authoritarian Regime Survival Guide”, was published in social media in January 2017 in a series of improvised, spontaneous tweets, which reached 3 million views within one month. Their common element was their trademark signature, “- *With love, your Eastern European friends*”, and the accompanying hashtag *#LearnFromEurope*.

The Guide went viral in the US and many other countries, being translated into several languages, from Turkish to Filipino. It was printed on placards during anti-Trump protests, studied at two American universities, quoted by CNBC’s Joy Reid on national TV and recommended by former US Secretary of Labor Robert Reich.

Excerpts and summaries were published by various on-line media, but this is the first time it is published as a whole.

YEAR 1 Under Authoritarianism

What to Expect?

1. They will come to power with a campaign based on fear, scaremongering and distorting the truth. Nevertheless, their victory will be achieved through a democratic electoral process. But beware, as this will be their argument every time you question the legitimacy of their actions. They will claim a mandate from the People to change the system.

Remember – gaining power through a democratic system does not give them permission to cross legal boundaries and undermine said democracy.

2. They will divide and rule. Their strength lies in unity, in one voice and one ideology, and so should yours. They will call their supporters Patriots, the only “true Americans”. You will be labelled as traitors, enemies of the state, unpatriotic, the corrupt elite, the old regime trying to regain power. Their supporters will be the “People”, the “sovereign” who chose their leaders.

Don’t let them divide you – remember you’re one People, one Nation, with one common good.

3. They will subjugate state media, turning them into a propaganda tube. Then, through convoluted laws and threats they will attempt to control all mainstream media and limit press freedom. They will ban critical press from their briefings, calling them “liars”, “fake news”. They will brand those media as “unpatriotic”, acting against the People (see point 2).

Fight for every media outlet, every journalist that is being banned, censored, sacked or labelled an “enemy of the state” – there’s no hope for freedom where there is no free press.

4. They will create chaos, maintain a constant sense of conflict and danger. It will be their argument to enact new authoritarian laws, each one further limiting your freedoms and civil liberties. They will disguise them as being for your protection, for the good of the People.

See through the chaos, the fake danger, expose it before you wake up in a totalitarian, fascist state.

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5. They will distort the truth, deny facts and blatantly lie. They will try to make you forget what facts are, sedate your need to find the truth. They will feed “post-truths” and “alternative facts”, replace knowledge and logic with emotions and fiction.

Always think critically, fact-check and point out the truth, expose ignorance with facts.

6. They will incite and then leak fake, superficial “scandals”. They will smear opposition with trivial accusations, blowing them out of proportion and then feeding the flame. This is just smokescreen for the legal steps they will be taking towards totalitarianism.

See through superficial topics in mainstream media (see point 3) and focus on what they are actually doing.

7. They will propose shocking laws to provoke your outrage. You will focus your efforts on fighting them, so they will seemingly back off, giving you a false sense of victory. In the meantime they will push through less “flashy” legislation, slowly dismantling democracy (see points 4 and 6)

Focus your fight on what really matters.

8. When invading your liberal sensibilities they will focus on what hurts the most – women and minorities. They will act as if democracy was majority rule without respect for the minority. They will paint foreigners and immigrants as potential threats. Racial, religious, sexual and other minorities will become enemies to the order and security they are supposedly providing. They will challenge women’s social status, undermine gender equality and interfere with reproductive rights (see point 7). But it means they are aware of the threat women and minorities pose to their rule, so make it your strength.

Women and minorities have to be ready to fight the hardest – reminding the majority what true democracy is about – and you must fight together with them.

9. They will try to take control of the judiciary. They will assault your highest court. They need to remove the checks and balances to be able to push through unconstitutional legislation. Controlling the judiciary they can also threaten anyone that defies them with prosecution, including the press (see point 3).

Preserve the independence of your courts at all cost, they are your safety valve, the safeguard of the rule of law and the democratic system.

10. They will try to limit freedom of assembly, calling it a necessity for your security. They will enact laws prioritizing state events and rallies, or those of a certain type or ideology. If they can choose who can demonstrate legally, they have a legal basis to forcefully disperse or prosecute the rest.

Oppose any legislation attempting to interfere with freedom of assembly, for whatever reason.

11. They will distort the language, coin new terms and labels, repeat shocking phrases until you accept them as normal and subconsciously associate them with whom they like. A “thief”, “liar” or “traitor” will automatically mean the opposition, while a “patriot” or a “true American” will mean their follower (see point 2). Their slogans will have double meaning, giving strength to their supporters and instilling angst in their opponents.

Fight changes in language in the public sphere, remind and preserve the true meaning of words.

12. They will take over your national symbols, associate them with their regime, remake them into attributes of their power. They want you to forget that your flag, your anthem and your symbols

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belong to you, the People, to everyone equally. Don't let them be hijacked. Use and expose them in your fight as much as they do.

Show your national symbols with pride, let them give you strength, not associate you with the tyranny they brought onto your country.

13. They will try to rewrite history to suit their needs and use the education system to support their agenda. They will smear any historical or living figure who wouldn't approve of their actions, or distort their image to make you think they would. They will place emphasis on historical education in schools, feeding young minds with the "only correct" version of history and philosophy. They will raise a new generation of voters on their ideology, backing it with a distorted interpretation of history and view of the world.

Guard the education of your children, teach them critical thinking, ensure their open-mindedness and protect your real history and heritage.

14. They will alienate foreign allies and partners, convincing you don't need them. They won't care for the rest of the world, with their focus on "making your country great again". While ruining your economy to fulfil their populist promises, they will omit the fact that you're part of a bigger world whose development depends on cooperation, on sharing and on trade.

Don't let them build walls promising you security instead of bridges giving you prosperity.

15. They will eventually manipulate the electoral system. They might say it's to correct flaws, to make it more fair, more similar to the rest of the world, or just to make it better. Don't believe it. They wouldn't be messing with it at all if it wasn't to benefit them in some way.

Oppose any changes to electoral law that an authoritarian regime wants to enact - rest assured it's only to help them remain in power longer.

And above all, be strong, fight, endure, and remember you're on the good side of history.

EVERY authoritarian, totalitarian and fascist regime in history eventually failed, thanks to the PEOPLE.

- With love, your Eastern European friends

Authoritarian Checklist

- Win elections on fear & populist promises
- Reclaim power for the People from the "elites"
- Purge highest positions in key government institutions
- Place cronies in positions of highest power regardless of their competence
- Brush off any critical press as "fake", "corrupt", "acting against the People"
- Bluntly lie to the People
- Ban press from parliament/congress/White House or selectively limit their access
- Limit press freedom & quietly take control of mainstream media
- Label opposition & protesters as "traitors", "elites trying to reclaim power"
- Limit freedom of assembly
- Fix highest court to be able to bypass Constitution "for the good of the people"

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- Limit minority & women's rights
 - Ruin the economy to fulfil your populist promises in the short term
 - Alienate international partners and allies, "making your country great again"
 - Quietly fix electoral law under the disguise of making it better
 - Start over, until there's nothing left...
- With love, your Eastern European friends.**
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6 RULES for Survival under an Authoritarian Regime

Rule 1

Don't stay indifferent. It WILL concern you eventually. It will concern your family, your friends. Voice your objection IMMEDIATELY. Show them you care. RESIST.

Rule 2

They thrive on FEAR & IGNORANCE. Expose their scaremongering, show flaws in their arguments. Raise awareness, EDUCATE people around you. They will try to distort FACTS, rewrite history. DON'T LET THEM.

Rule 3

Organize protest movements, mobilize civil society. They're well organized, so should you be. FLOOD THE STREETS. They WILL back off when they see your numbers. They depend on you – the PEOPLE.

Rule 4

Don't let them DIVIDE you into different classes of citizens, "true Americans", "patriots" vs "traitors", "enemies of the state". You're ALL citizens, ONE nation, despite different beliefs and ideology. Make your diversity your STRENGTH. Stay TOGETHER for a common goal – survival of your country, of freedom and democracy.

Rule 5

Don't give up, don't get tired, and don't try to wait it out. Don't hope it will pass. It WON'T. They will manipulate the people, control the media to sway public opinion, fix the electoral system and STAY FOR GOOD.

Rule 6

If you don't get them to back off or to step down, you better make goddamn SURE that when the next elections come, assuming there's still any democracy left, NO ONE will vote for the same bastard(s) again!

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7 RULES on Approaching Authoritarian Supporters

What if your neighbour, friend or family member supports the authoritarian regime?

Rule 1

Don't look down on them, don't patronize them, even if you know what they're saying has no factual basis or you find it offensive. Don't preach, ask questions. Try to understand them, where they are coming from, what their problems are and why they see solutions to them in the regime. Treat them as people, as equals. They believe what they're saying is true and they might have valid reasons for their support.

Rule 2

Don't get emotional, don't get provoked into heated arguments. Fight the other side's emotions with your calm, logical approach. The angrier they get, the calmer you should be. They'll calm down eventually.

Rule 3

Focus on what you have in common. Do you live in the same neighborhood? Do you work in the same company or sector? The smaller the community, the easier it is. Give examples, like "we all need to get this done for all of us, if we don't cooperate neither of us will have it".

Rule 4

Use their language, don't treat it as inferior or below you – don't seem patronizing (see rule 1). If they curse, curse with them. If they approach you with humor, don't get angry or uptight about it, reply with humor. Show them you're actually not that different (see rule 3). As long as you communicate on two different planes, you will never meet.

Rule 5

Don't block their news sources, don't turn away from their leaders and authority figures. Treat them as an insight to their worldview and tactics. Use them to your advantage, to better prepare for their arguments. Whenever you don't agree with something or detect a lie, voice it calmly, expose it with factual arguments.

Rule 6

Pinpoint the practical, negative effects of their side's actions, ones that affect them directly. Find examples of how they, their families, children or friends will be personally impacted by their policies, or how it will affect your shared community.

Rule 7

If all else fails, don't turn away, don't abandon your friends and family, don't shun your neighbors. Remember, an authoritarian wants to divide you to control you. So invite them over to your BBQ, crack open a beer, and who knows, maybe they'll realize you're not so different after all.

– With love, your Eastern European friends.

A previous version of this article contained a slightly different phrasing in point 8.

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