



Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe

Working Paper

Civic Strategies Addressing Populism

Initiatives to safeguard liberal democracies

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ABSTRACT

Projects that aim to tackle populism have not attracted particularly great attention from the research community. But it is important to understand better their applied strategies, the circumstances in which they were created, the challenges they have faced, and their indicators for success. This paper analyses ten case studies representing such projects. We find great diversity of action taken and approaches chosen by civil society and the academic community to address the consequences of populist movements. Those findings contribute to designing guidelines for project managers setting up similar initiatives. When it comes to the goals of such projects, we find that some aim to deconstruct populist narratives, while others aim to trigger citizen action. Depending on the goal, project managers have different methodologies at hand that come with diverse challenges and factors that indicate success. Based on those findings, four general recommendations are put forward, namely: ensuring sufficient and easy-to-access public funding for (innovative) projects addressing populism; more proactive use of project outcomes by policy makers; more synergies between different kinds of projects; and dedicated channels to facilitate the exchange of expertise between project managers responding to the challenges posed by populism. The shared willingness of all project managers to connect with one another in the future is another promising finding.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are different approaches taken by liberal actors to tackle populist narratives. One approach that has not attracted particularly great attention from the research community are projects carried out by civic actors dedicated to tackling populism.

This report presents the analysis of the populist narratives addressed by ten projects, their applied strategies, the circumstances in which they were created, the challenges they faced and their indicators for success. The formulated recommendations on the methodologies can serve as a basic guide on how to design future projects addressing populism.

In order to illustrate different civic strategies addressing the populist challenge, ten projects were selected as case studies in a five-step process: An extensive desk research on different databases of EU funding programs and further sources (mainly foundations); the identification of four relevant EU funding programs (Erasmus+, Horizon2020, Europe for Citizens, Creative Europe) and 13 further sources, resulting in a selection of 338 projects; the analysis of the respective project descriptions; the identification of 31 projects that are generally relevant in light of the conceptual framework and the identification of 10 projects that fit best the established conceptual framework and goals of this research effort¹.

The overall conclusion of the report is that there is a great diversity of action taken by civil society and the academic community to tackle populist movements. Every project can do its part to plant the seeds for more democratic, open and pluralistic societies. While there is no silver bullet to countering populist movements, supporting relevant synergies between different projects can help make projects even more effective. The shared willingness of all project managers to connect with one another in the future is a promising finding.

The approaches taken towards addressing populist narratives in participatory projects were more open than in research projects, which tended to focus on more narrowly defined types of populist narratives. Euroscepticism was a common populist narrative addressed in many projects.

Common strategies applied to tackle populism included listening to everyone and their diverse perspectives, implementing intercultural training, creating participatory space, identifying and deconstructing populist narratives, and engaging stakeholders. Research and awareness-raising projects focused more on identification and deconstruction while participatory projects focused more on intercultural training.

Engaging less interested or less active citizens was one of the most common challenges in the implementation of project strategies. The question of how / whether or not to include populist actors

¹ Results of this paper, carried out within task 7.2 (civic engagement and anti-populist movements) of the H2020 DEMOS project work plan, feed into a project deliverable.

or narratives was also found to be a difficult question. Multicultural conflicts in intercultural training environments (including language barriers), the commitment of participants (especially youth) and the bureaucracy associated with project management were also elements that complicated the implementation of some project strategies.

Defining the indicators of success for projects tackling populist narratives was a common challenge. It appears to be difficult to identify suitable qualitative approaches, most projects used numerical indicators to evaluate their success.

All interviewees were adamant that their projects were successful in reaching their goals and contributed to tackling populist narratives.

Project managers shared a number of poignant recommendations for future projects seeking to address populist narratives such as (1) listening to all citizens and all perspectives expressed to create the most inclusive environment possible, (2) embracing self-production by participants and introducing more organic, bottom-up processes and (3) thinking outside of the box in relation to the physical environments of activities.

This report puts forward four general recommendations, namely: ensuring sufficient and easy-to-access public funding for (innovative) projects addressing populism. Policy makers should become more proactive in using the outcomes of projects addressing populism. More synergies between different kinds of projects should be enabled to embrace the added value of diverse projects addressing populism. Civil society actors should establish dedicated channels to facilitate the exchange of expertise between project managers addressing populism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen a rising support for populist movements, actors and narratives throughout Europe². This trend is observed in the **increasing number of populist parties represented in Parliaments and Governments**³. Populist narratives come in many shapes and forms: right wing and left wing, authoritarian and non-authoritarian, or strongly nationalist and list nationalist⁴. Since this report will not contribute to the detailed distinctions between different strains of populism, a more general approach to define populism is applied. In his “Two Faces of Representative Democracy”⁵, Pappas identifies populist models based on three factors: **single cleavage, adversarial politics and majoritarianism**. These factors are opposed to liberal representative democracies based on multiple cleavages, an overlapping consensus and constitutionalism⁶. In short, populist movements are threatening liberal democracies as their fundamental ideas oppose one another. As a consequence, there are different approaches taken by liberal actors to tackle populist narratives, as, for example, reflected in the role of political parties⁷ and in the role of journalism⁸. One strikingly under-researched approach are projects carried out by civic actors dedicated to tackling populism. Such projects come in a variety of different shapes and forms and can be identified all over Europe, with a great number of them also being supported with EU funds.

Given the threat of liberal democracies by populist movements, projects tackling populism play an important role for plural societies. A general understanding about whether or how they work is therefore valuable. Answering questions like ‘what factors of success can be applied to measure their impact?’, ‘what are the problems that such projects face and how do project managers address these challenges?’ and ‘what elements do managers consider worthy to apply in any future projects?’ may help better tackle populism with project work in the future.

The goal of this report is to identify the populist narratives addressed by ten projects, their applied strategies, the circumstances under which the projects were set up, the challenges they

² Louwerse, T., Otjes, S. (2019). How Populists Wage Opposition: Parliamentary Opposition Behaviour and Populism in Netherlands. *Political Studies*, 67(2), 479-495. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0032321718774717#articleCitationDownloadContainer>

³ Boros, T., Freitas, M., Kadlót, T., Stetter, E. (2016). The State of Populism in Europe. FEPS & Policy Solutions, Brussels. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/state_of_populism_in_europe_in_2016.pdf

⁴ Kubát, M., Mejstřík, M. (2020). Populist Parties in Contemporary Europe (Working Paper). Available at: <https://openarchive.tk.mta.hu/424/>

⁵ Pappas, T. S. (2014). Populist democracies: Postauthoritarian Greece and Post-communist Hungary. *Government and Opposition*, 49(1), 1–23. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/populist-democracies-postauthoritarian-greece-and-postcommunist-hungary/C25A68B6B8AD01966AD8C3E6488E7BC7>

⁶ Pappas, T. S. (2014). Populist democracies: Postauthoritarian Greece and Post-communist Hungary. *Government and Opposition*, 49(1), 1–23. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/populist-democracies-postauthoritarian-greece-and-postcommunist-hungary/C25A68B6B8AD01966AD8C3E6488E7BC7>

⁷ Barber, N. W. (2019). Populist leaders and political parties. *German Law Journal*, 20(2), 129-140. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/german-law-journal/article/populist-leaders-and-political-parties/BA883B7AE8798F07E88F85FB66111741>

⁸ Krämer, B. (2018). How Journalism Responds to Right-Wing Populist Criticism. In: Otto K., Köhler A. (eds). *Trust in Media and Journalism*. Springer VS, Wiesbaden. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-20765-6_8

faced, what their indicators for success are and what elements they would recommend to future projects.

Based on this, we will formulate recommendations towards the general public and provide guidance for future projects that aim to address populist movements.

Our first step was to undergo a thorough and solid selection of cases. The detailed selection process is outlined in the DEMOS report ‘*Mapping of Initiatives, EU Programmes and Projects Countering Populism*’, from June 2020 by ECAS. The report listed ten projects that represent four types of activities implemented:

Table 1: Case selection based on the report ‘*Mapping of Initiatives, EU Programmes and Projects Countering Populism*’

Funding program	Project name	Project leader	Project type
Erasmus+	INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries	Internationale Akademie Berlin für Pädagogik, Psychologie und Ökonomie, DE	Awareness-raising
Horizon 2020	Populism And Civic Engagement – a fine-grained, dynamic, context-sensitive and forward-looking response to negative populist tendencies (PACE)	The Manchester Metropolitan University, UK	Developing New Innovative Tools
Horizon 2020	Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism (POPREBEL)	University College London, UK	Research
Foundation: Stiftung Mercator	TruLies – The Truth about Lies on Europe	Institute for European Politics, DE	Research
Erasmus+	Empowering youth - Countering populism	European intercultural Forum e.V., DE	Educating/training young people and youth workers
Erasmus+	Europe - Old Roots, New Stories	Gymnasium Wertingen, DE	Educating/training young people and youth workers
Erasmus+	DEMOcrisis, fostering active citizenship in times of crisis	Stowarzyszenie "Poczucia", PL	Educating/training young people and youth workers
Erasmus+	Media4Democracy*	Europäisches Gymnasium Bertha-von-Suttner, DE	Developing New Innovative Tools
Erasmus+	Youth Democracy Academy	DYPALL Network, PT	Educating/training young people and youth workers
Europe For Citizens	CIDOB: Centre for international information and documentation (operating grant)**	Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, ES	Awareness-raising
Erasmus+	Democracy an idea and an ideal***	Sint-Lodewijkcollege, BE	Developing New Innovative Tools

*Project managers did not reply to request for interview

**Interviewee also referred to the project ‘*FACTS*’, implemented by the same organisation

***Replacement for ‘Media4Democracy’

We approached the consortia of the ten projects selected and invited them to an online interview. All but one project manager (*Media4Democracy*) agreed to such an interview. An eleventh project (*Democracy an idea and ideal*) was therefore chosen based on the following criteria: it was shortlisted by the report ‘*Mapping of Initiatives, EU Programmes and Projects Countering Populism*’, funded by Erasmus+ and fell in the category of ‘*Developing New Innovative Tools*’. Before carrying out the interviews, a privacy statement (Annex A) was signed by all interviewees involved. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of a set of twelve questions (Annex B) and were carried out between October and December 2020 and are listed in Annex C.

This report first provides an analysis of the interviews carried out, structured to reflect the questions asked to the interviewees (2. *Tackling populism by implementing projects*). Based on that, the conclusion provides a summary of the report and an outlook on future steps in this field (3. *Conclusion*). Finally, we provide general recommendations and establish guidance for managers of possible future projects that aim to tackle populism (4. *Recommendations*).

This report is authored by the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) in the scope of the project DEMOS (Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe). DEMOS is a research project aimed at better understanding populism. Funded by the EU Horizon 2020 Framework Programme, the project is carried out by 15 partner institutions in Europe and involves 10 disciplines. DEMOS investigates the phenomenon of populism through the lenses of democratic efficacy. The concept combines attitudinal features (political efficacy), political skills, knowledge, and democratic opportunity structures. The concept, a novelty, is understood as a condition of political engagement needed in order to address the challenges of populism⁹.

2. TACKLING POPULISM BY IMPLEMENTING PROJECTS

The following chapter is an analysis of the responses provided by the project managers interviewed. All interviewees provided answers on the different topics relating to the projects they were implementing: (2.1) *Narratives addressed*, (2.2) *Strategies applied*, (2.3) *Project starting point*, (2.4) *Challenges to the applied strategies*, (2.5) *Indicators for success of the applied strategies* and (2.6) *recommended methods to be applied in future projects*.

As an editorial disclaimer, it must be added that the chapter is written in past tense. Some projects might not have carried out their activities but intended to do so. This is particularly relevant in the light of delays or changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic (*see 2.4.6*). Since we cannot track what has happened already and what not, it was decided to keep the whole chapter in past tense when referring to project activities; no matter if implemented or envisaged.

⁹ DEMOS, Homepage. Available at: <https://demos-h2020.eu/en>

2.1 Narratives addressed

Our research finds that participation-centred projects (mainly educational projects or tool developing projects) tended to adopt a different approach to defining populist narratives than projects focusing on research.

Participatory projects tended to apply an open approach to defining the narratives addressed in their activities, which rendered identifying a specific narrative impossible. Some projects, *such as Democracy an idea and an ideal*, chose to establish the narratives together with participants, rather than having a clear definition set from the beginning: “the questions [...] were supposed to be: what is democracy? What is populism?”¹⁰ Hence, “there was no specific populist narrative that was supposed to be addressed”¹¹. The project manager of *Empowering youth – Countering Populism* started the project from the point that “different countries had different challenges, but we did not know which ones the participants would like to address. [...] The intention was to see what the largest problem they have related to populism in their community is”¹². In another project (*Europe – Old Roots New Stories*) it was outlined that they “have not directly worked with populism as a theme”¹³ and that their focus was more on “understanding what is behind stereotypes and how to deal with them and to break them”¹⁴. Other projects carried out surveys to find out what participants’ thought about populism in the first place (e.g., *DEMOcrisis*)¹⁵.

Two projects took a strikingly different approach, beginning their activities with pre-set narratives but leaving the exact definition to the interpretation of the participants. The *Youth Democracy Academy* addressed “anti-EU narratives”¹⁶ in a generalised way, whereas *INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries* focused on three separate narratives: the exclusion of marginalised people and minorities, the demonisation of elites and Euroscepticism¹⁷. One project that stood out for its unique approach to populist narratives was *FACTS*, which had the goal of raising awareness while maintaining a research-oriented approach. The project sought to “listen to citizens and see what narratives they hear (incl. right- and left-wing populism)”¹⁸ and by doing so, the project implementers aimed to “check if there are different narratives in the member states”¹⁹. *FACTS* constitutes an exception in the way that it carried out research while maintaining an open approach to defining the

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¹⁵ Paweł Tempczyk, Coordinator and Vice President, Stowarzyszenie „Poczucia”

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¹⁷ Representative of Internationale Akademie Berlin (INA) für innovative Pädagogik, Psychologie und Ökonomie.

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populist narratives its activities addressed. Although it is difficult to identify specific narratives addressed by the projects, Euroscepticism appears to be a reoccurring issue.

In contrast, more research-focused projects tended to define the populist narratives addressed prior to beginning their project implementation. The narratives defined were more specific, targeted and differentiated. The project manager of *TruLies* stated that “populism was [...] looked at in the context of Euroscepticism. We unearthed the critiques of the EU, differentiating between hard/soft Euroscepticism and analysing these arguments”²⁰. Others (*PACE*) explained that they sought to divide narratives into “populist, nativist and anti-democratic narratives”²¹. *POPREBEL*’s starting point was a conceptual framework “built around two key concepts, designed to approach the different work packages, to focus on slogans embedded in these two concepts: Neo-traditionalism and Neo-feudalism”²². The narratives addressed by these projects are both detailed and diverse. Euroscepticism is once again a prevalent narrative, but nativist narratives, neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism were all common subjects of more research-focused projects.

These detailed approaches to addressing populist narratives are not surprising. Academic research places a great emphasis on developing well-defined subjects of investigation, which facilitates focusing on more specific narratives. More participatory or awareness-raising projects, on the other hand, are more likely to address broader populist narratives given that participants are encouraged to play a more central role in their identification and definition.

2.2 Strategies applied

One of the core elements of this report is to identify what kind of strategies the projects applied to tackle populist narratives. While there is no universal pattern that can be identified throughout all of the projects in question, some strategies appear to be applied more frequently than others. The identified strategies are: (2.2.1) *Listening to everyone*, (2.2.2) *Intercultural learning*, (2.2.3) *Civic engagement / multiplier approach*, (2.2.4) *Identification and deconstruction* and (2.2.5) *Stakeholder engagement*. Overlap between different strategies also exist.

2.2.1 Listening to everyone

One of the most common strategies that we identified was about ‘Listening to everyone’. In a nutshell, it describes the idea that no opinions or views should be discarded, regardless of whether or not they are in line with the views held by the majority. This strategy is reflected in both direct mentions made by interviewees, as well as indirect references made when explaining a particular inclusive approach.

²⁰ Representative of Institute for European Politics

²¹ Bruce Edmons, Director, Centre for Policy Modelling, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School

²² Jan Kubik, Professor at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London

There are several examples of project managers mentioning the need to listen to everyone as a fundamental principle of their project. One interviewee (*CIDOB / FACTS*) noted that a clear objective of their strategy was to “listen to all points of views. Otherwise, you cannot understand what is really going on and what populism is and why they are attractive to some”²³. Another project (*INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries*) had “the goal of fostering inclusion of marginalised groups in society in general but also in local communities”²⁴. The project manager elaborated further by stating that the project also aimed to “promote diversity and its benefits and advantages”²⁵. By doing so, the importance and the richness of including marginalised groups was portrayed²⁶. In another project (*DEMOcrisis*), “the main goal was to reflect, get a different understanding of the topic, and change participants point of view”²⁷. The underlying idea of these approaches is summarised by a project manager (*CIDOB / FACTS*) who stated that “you have to understand the phenomenon. Saying ‘populism is bad’ is not constructive. Populist voters may have a point on something that does not work. They have a reason to protest and be angry. The solutions that [populists] propose may not be the best one”²⁸.

PACE did not have the concrete strategy to ‘listen to all’ but provided an inclusive space for citizens to raise their voice: the tool developed by the project aims at better structuring debates to make them “less divisive and less polarised”²⁹. The interviewee explained that people can “discuss issues, but it is quite difficult to argue directly against someone else”³⁰. This illustrates the idea of taking into account all opinions, without directly judging or evaluating them. The ultimate goal here is to establish “better communication between citizens”³¹, what also feeds in the strategy of civic engagement (see 2.2.3 *Civic engagement / Multiplier approach*).

To ‘listen to everyone’ (or similar phrasings) was also mentioned in the recommendations for what future projects should include in their strategies (see 2.6 *Recommended methods to be applied in future projects*).

2.2.2 Intercultural learning

Another strategy identified is the need to set up spaces for intercultural learning experiences. All organisers recognised the key role that the exchange of culture, mindsets and realities between participants played in their strategies. Countering populism was often not the only goal of intercultural

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³¹ Bruce Edmons, Director, Centre for Policy Modelling, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School

learning projects, but the project managers argued that decreasing levels of prejudice and stereotypes towards other groups should decrease the likelihood of successful populist narratives.

The project manager of *Europe - Old Roots, New Stories* stated that “participants spend a week [...] in a country that they might be prejudiced against”³². This kind of experience was considered an essential part of their project strategy as, by spending a week abroad, participants understood “that their ways of living have much more in common with other cultures than they had imagined”³³. The interaction between young people from different backgrounds and its participatory element was also a clear part of *Democracy an idea and an ideal*³⁴. On top of this, *INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries*’ strategy was built on the “pillars [of] exchanges”³⁵, with the interviewee stating that one of their goals was “promoting Europe and its benefits [which was] not a very difficult task with young people because they get to travel and meet peers from ten countries in the project. These are life changing events”³⁶. *DEMOcrisis*³⁷ and *Democracy an idea and an ideal*³⁸ also brought together (young) people from different cultural backgrounds and incorporated intercultural learning into their strategies. One of the project managers said that “for the participants, the most important thing is to get to know each other and working together”³⁹.

2.2.3 Civic engagement / Multiplier approach

Another strategy put forward was to implement projects that stimulate civic engagement among participants. On the one hand, it was supposed to stimulate action. By doing so, it would help the participants understand how they can make a change through democratic means. This did not necessarily target populism specifically, instead seeking to get participants more involved in their local community in general. On the other hand, this action could inspire others in their community and empower participants to be examples of active civic engagement.

In the case of *INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries*, the approach was to “foster inclusive communities and societies”⁴⁰. By doing so, participants were not only able to learn about society, but they were “also invited to look at their communities”⁴¹. The ultimate goal of this project was “youth and community empowerment: making young people act and let them be actors of change”⁴². The

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multi-step approach of another project, *Empowering youth - Countering populism*, started with “carrying out community research to identify the driving forces of populism in their local communities”⁴³. Once the driving forces had been identified, participants then learnt about “project development tools and collective planning tools”⁴⁴ that they could apply in their project activities. Those activities would then lead to the “empowerment of people who work closely with youth so that they can become more active at a grassroots level and tackle populism”⁴⁵ in local contexts. Here again, the follow-up action on the ground was central to the organisers. Another project (*Youth Democracy Academy*) also applied a multiplier approach, aiming to raise awareness of the European Parliament elections and to empower young people to become civic activists on the ground. The project was “aimed at young people so that they can train other young people on understanding about EU institutions”⁴⁶. Many materials were designed by young people during the campaign - they had a role in the decision-making of what was produced. Likewise, it was hoped that “they would be involved with the outcomes at a local level”⁴⁷.

FACTS also applied a civic engagement strategy approach to raise awareness of their project. The project manager stated that “citizens participating in the focus group will tell other citizens [...] of their experience”⁴⁸. This is a good example of how even more academic projects can make use of multiplier effects by citizens - even if just to spread the word.

The principle of this strategy is to help participants “to look at their communities, the place where they live, to see and analyse what is going on [on the ground] and where they can act locally and be proactive”⁴⁹. This approach comes with many advantages. It is not only easier to reach out to a large number of people by training multipliers, projects can also trigger change at a local level without having to be on the ground themselves. Such projects have a “local emphasis by carrying out activities across 12 different municipalities. This was not intended as a national campaign, but rather to focus on a local level with the support partner organisations”⁵⁰. At the same time, measuring the success of multiplier activities remains a considerable challenge (see 2.5 *Indicators for success of the applied strategies*).

The strategy of ‘Listening to everyone’ is somewhat linked in this regard given that a multiplier approach could lead to more inclusive results if the multipliers concerned succeed in reaching out to a diverse group of people in their constituencies. This is also illustrated by *PACE*’s approach which was not to trigger direct action by citizens on the ground but to provide a safe space for constructive

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⁴⁶ Bruno António, Coordinator, DYPALL Network

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⁴⁹ Representative of Internationale Akademie Berlin (INA) für innovative Pädagogik, Psychologie und Ökonomie

⁵⁰ Bruno António, Coordinator, DYPALL Network

debates (see 2.2.1 *Listening to everyone*). The project manager indeed mentioned that they “guess, a good way to address populist narratives is [...] civic engagement”⁵¹.

2.2.4 Identification and deconstruction

We found that several projects applied strategies involving the identification and / or the deconstruction of populist narratives. These strategies were mainly applied by research-based projects and did not tackle populist narratives directly. However, a sophisticated identification of populist narratives is necessary to get a better understanding of them. Therefore, some projects also applied ways to deconstruct the narratives, seeking to highlight their weaknesses or their flawed factual basis.

For *PACE*, the first step is to identify populist narrativ⁵². Another implementer (*TrueLies*) stated that their project was “a hybrid project between research and communication”⁵³. This project was based on three steps: “a conceptual discussion on what Euroscepticism/populism is, the identification of the arguments found, and the fact-checking & communication”⁵⁴. The latter point (fact-checking and communication) is a good example of possible ways to turn the identification of populist narratives into their deconstruction. The project manager explained that they started from the “assumption that in every populist or Eurosceptic statement, there must be at least one valid argument (or a piece would be valid) and that it is worthwhile to identify these arguments and deconstruct them”⁵⁵. The project then analysed these statements to distinguish valid ones from “total nonsense”⁵⁶. Another way to implement a deconstruction strategy is to create counter narratives. However, this is not an easy task as emphasised by the project manager of *PACE* who stated that they “do not foresee crafting counter narratives”⁵⁷.

Europe - Old Roots, New Stories provided an example of a less research-oriented approach to deconstructing populist narratives. In this case, “the transfer process that would be desired from the pupils when living in another other country for a week, is to understand that stereotypes are just constructed”⁵⁸. Another project worth highlighting here is *DEMOCrisis*, whose project manager stated that one process led to the conclusion that “populism [turns] against the elite and the fact that regular people are ignored”⁵⁹. They then identified that, in fact, “there is a certain ‘need’ for it”⁶⁰. This statement highlights the sense of being ignored by political leaders, which can drive people to support

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populist movements. Similar to *Europe - Old Roots, New Stories*, the project applied an identification strategy of populist narratives first before looking into the reasons for their success. This represents a different approach from the more academic way of deconstructing populist narratives by seeking to highlight the flaws or misleading qualities of populist narratives. Helping people grasp that stereotypes and prejudices as social constructs also contribute to weakening the ground upon which future populist narratives can grow. This strategy is of course closely interlinked with intercultural learning (see 2.2.2 *Intercultural Learning*).

2.2.5 Stakeholder engagement

The final strategy we identify is ‘stakeholder engagement’. This strategy is undoubtedly similar to the multiplier approach (see 2.2.3 *Civic engagement / Multiplier Approach*). However, whereas a multiplier approach counts on individuals to take action in their home communities, a stakeholder engagement strategy requires exchanges between a more informed audience. In the projects that applied stakeholder engagement strategies, the results of activities were shared with interested communities of researchers, politicians and political elites.

The approach of *TruLies* exemplifies a stakeholder engagement strategy best. The project manager outlined that “Communication was a key element, focusing on having an informed debate”⁶¹. Given the relatively short length of the project, their strategy was to address relevant stakeholders rather “than speaking with citizens directly”⁶². In the case of another project (*POPREBEL*), one of the goals of “the programme [...] was to convene a series of meetings with various stakeholders, from policymakers to businessmen and academics, students and researchers. The notion was that the scenarios identified would be discussed in the light of potential policy ideas on how to adapt to shifting realities”⁶³. It goes without saying that a single stakeholder meeting is insufficient to have a significant impact on populist narratives, but this strategy remains an important means of disseminating research findings and raising awareness.

2.3 Project starting point – long-term or *ad hoc*?

Besides the strategies applied by the projects, another point of analysis is the embeddedness of the projects in further activities by the implementing organisation. Our main question here is whether the initiatives were part of a long-term approach by the implementers or if they were more akin to *ad hoc* exercise. Evidence on this enables us to better understand the motivation of the organisers when undertaking their projects: did they see themselves as long-standing opponents of populist movements

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or was it more circumstantial that they carried out their projects in this field? Is it possible to identify a community of civil society actors that aim to tackle populist tendencies in European societies?

The responses of the interviewees to these questions paint a clear picture: most of the interviewees stated that “it was definitely part of a long-term strategy”⁶⁴ (*INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries*) or that “populism has been an issue in Europe at least since 2008. So ever since it is on [our] agenda”⁶⁵ (*CIDOB / FACTS*). The long-term potential of continuing to work in the field of populism was also identified by *PACE*⁶⁶, *POPREBEL*⁶⁷, *TruLies*⁶⁸ and *Old Roots, New Stories*⁶⁹. For other projects, the implementers (partially) built the project on the experiences of the partners. In the case of *Democracy an idea and an ideal*, “the German partner school has a democracy day each year and the project was part of this”⁷⁰. A similar situation (previous experiences of a project partner) led to the implementation of *Empowering Youth – Countering Populism*⁷¹. Another project (*Youth Democracy Academy*) was the first of its kind managed by its organisation but “the idea is that it continues [by] focusing on having young people understanding democracy and [...] understanding what is its risk and to not only accepting what it is, but to be critical and to have the capacity to innovate, to propose new things, new tools and new ways citizens can get engaged, while also defending what we have by not stepping back”⁷². Only one interviewee (*DEMOCrisis*) indicated that their project was conceived as an *ad hoc* endeavour and they were unsure if there would be follow up activities as a coordinator⁷³.

It is fascinating that an overwhelming majority of the interviewees considered their project as either being part of a long-term strategy or having great long-term potential. Moreover, it appears that some civil society organisations have developed strong track records of facilitating projects tackling populist movements. It is perhaps symbolic that when we asked the interviewees whether they might be interested in connecting with the other consortia included in this study, a unanimous positive response was received with everyone expressing their interest in joining such a network.

2.4 Challenges to the applied strategies

After identifying the populist narratives addressed, strategies applied, and different environments of projects launched in the study, we now seek to better understand the challenges faced by projects

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when pursuing their strategies. Understanding the challenges faced can help assess the limits of such projects and provide important evidence for 4. *Recommendations*.

The nature of the projects at hand is indeed very diverse, thus different methodologies also come with heterogeneous challenges. The goal of the following analysis is not to find challenges that apply to all projects, but rather to identify the challenges that are most likely to occur for specific types of projects. The chapter therefore focuses on (2.4.1) *Engaging the unengaged*, (2.4.2) *Inclusion of populist actors or narratives*, (2.4.3) *Multicultural conflicts*, (2.4.4) *Commitment to participation*, (2.4.5) *Bureaucracy* and (2.4.6) *COVID-19*. Some situations or phenomena observed by project managers may be an indicator for several of the challenges identified.

2.4.1 Engaging the unengaged

One challenge appears in a number of different contexts: the difficulty of reaching out to the right target group. This mainly relates to reaching the ‘unengaged’ or the “non-committed”⁷⁴ parts of society, who may be the most likely to be exposed to populist narratives. A great number of projects relied on the willingness of citizens to proactively take part. As a consequence, participants were often people who had already developed a critical distance to populist narratives and were better able to identify and disregard them.

For one interviewee (*CIDOB / FACTS*), “the real challenge would be to go to smaller towns, even villages to talk to people there and understand what they think”⁷⁵. Others (*POPREBEL*) mentioned that “self-selection was one of the problems of the project. People who are on social media and who have experience with engagement are often those who [indeed] engage”⁷⁶. To tackle this challenge, *POPREBEL* aimed to engage people from outside their social bubble by having people travel through the region, holding events and starting conversations⁷⁷. The importance of this was outlined by one project manager (*TrueLies*) who said that they “may have remained in their bubble, which meant that we might not have reached out to less interested or engaged communities. We attempted to tackle this with multipliers, but the success of the approach remains uncertain”⁷⁸. This point is explored further in section 2.5 *Indicators for success of the applied strategies*. Finally, when referring to engage people online, one interviewee (*PACE*) stated that “on the whole, there is a lack of interest”⁷⁹.

All of the projects mentioned in this subsection are research or awareness raising projects. Educational projects did not seem to be as badly affected by this challenge. In fact, these projects managed to have a rather diverse pool of participants (see 2.2.2 *Intercultural learning* and 2.4.3

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Multicultural conflicts). The challenge of reaching the target audience applies even less towards projects implemented by schools: teachers work with a ‘natural pool’ of participants - their students. All in all, this challenge highlights a very relevant problem when trying to tackle populist narratives, especially from a more research-oriented perspective: how can projects engage with people most affected by populist narratives? The stakeholder strategy (or even more the multiplier strategy) is interesting in this regard⁸⁰, as it shifts the focus from reaching out to people directly towards addressing multipliers instead, who may be better placed to engage with their local communities.

2.4.2 Inclusion of populist actors or narratives

Another challenge that a number of projects are confronted with is the question of how, or whether, to integrate populist actors or narratives into their projects. We found these obstacles in a great variety of projects. This comes down to the dilemma of discussing populist narratives or actors without providing a platform to populist rhetoric. Practically, this may then lead to the question of whether or not to invite populist actors to a discussion panel or how to discuss populist narratives and demands with (young) people in an educational project.

In the interviews, research-centric or awareness-raising projects often discussed the question of “do you include the extreme voices in seminars and conferences?”⁸¹. In the specific case of *FACTS*, the managers did not do so but they were unsure if a similar approach would be adopted in the future. The project manager of *TrueLies*, who carried out research in Germany, asked if “you want to deconstruct populism, do you need to engage the AfD in your activities in order to convince those to change their minds?”⁸². Likewise, their institute decided that it was ultimately not worthwhile to approach populist actors to change their minds in the scope of their project, choosing to focus on the voters instead: approaching people comes with the goal to equip them to assess whether or not they wish to agree with populist statements⁸³. This dilemma was not limited to academic projects, however. *INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries* is one example for this:

“As an example, there was an interesting discussion about Roma people. We had some Roma people in the room from Slovakia and we also had people from Romania. First of all, they used the term ‘Gypsies’ and the Slovakian Roma people were quite offended by that, and then it triggered a whole discussion that was interesting. At the beginning, there were a lot of stereotypes put forward by the Romanian group but then it was quite a shock to begin with, but it led into a long discussion and exchange”⁸⁴.

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It is questionable whether or not calling Roma people ‘Gypsies’ would already count as a populist narrative but the conflict during the project was deliberately permitted. Participants confronted one another openly on the subject of difficult, controversial content. Ultimately, the managers found this discussion to be enriching since it diminished stereotypes against minority groups. In this sense, the inclusion of controversial content in open discussions may provide less ground for populist narratives to flourish.

Another curious example of including populist narratives was provided by *DEMOcrisis*, who implemented a “group process about fake news, because it is something also used by populists”⁸⁵. The chosen method was splitting participants into two groups: one that argued for something (in this case ‘the use of fake news’) and one that argued against it. It was noticed that: “On the side that [fake news should be] used, the main strength was that it works. [...] For example, we had hate speech about immigrants used by the populist [Polish] government. And although you can say later it is not right, [...] it leaves the association to immigrants that they are a threat”⁸⁶. Space was intentionally provided for participants to confront populist narratives with the goal of deconstructing them.

To summarise, the research and awareness-raising projects opted not to directly include populist voices in their projects, whereas educational and more participatory projects deliberately included open confrontation with populist narratives. Nevertheless, it is worth noting, that the aforementioned confrontation during educational project came without the invitation of a populist actor itself. This would have been the case, when, for example, inviting such actor on a panel in the scope of a research project. Therefore, the project manager that allowed for such confrontation stayed in control of the discussion and not provide a direct platform for populist actors.

2.4.3 Multicultural conflicts

The third major challenge is closely linked with the strategy of intercultural learning (see 2.2.2 *Intercultural learning*), relating to the creation of spaces for (young) people of different backgrounds to spend time together. Participants cooperate and learn about each other’s cultures and this is used as a means of decreasing prejudice and stereotypes that populist narratives often build upon. We not only identified the multicultural aspect as a promising strategy to address populist narratives, but also as a challenge to project implementation.

In light of the cultural diversity of participants, the project manager *INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries* stated that having people from “ten countries is a big group. It was a challenge in terms of logistics and cultural backgrounds [...]”⁸⁷. The interviewee explained that “including people from minorities is also a logistical challenge”⁸⁸. He referred to, for example, accompanying people with

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disabilities, but also language barriers or diverse educational backgrounds of participants. Likewise, another project (*Empowering youth - Countering populism*) that also worked with a diverse group of young people stated that a clear challenge was to “work on an international level. [...] we are looking at eight different contexts during our work, meaning that we cannot go into the same depth as if we were focusing on one isolated case”⁸⁹. They were working with communities who were in conflict or with political tensions, which represented an obstacle at times⁹⁰. Others (*Democracy an idea and an ideal*) outlined the challenge presented at an organisational level: “a problem that came up in every project so far: education is different in each country. Practical things like holidays or moments when you can meet (even virtually) may be difficult to find”⁹¹. This also applied to more content-related matters given that “some schools can put European issues in the curriculum, while others do not”⁹². Some project managers also identified multilingualism as a challenge (*CIDOB / FACTS*)⁹³ with the scope of some projects being limited by its language barriers (*POPREBEL*)⁹⁴. It therefore appears that practical considerations can limit project objectives and strategies of being as inclusive and multicultural as possible.

Interestingly, the biggest obstacle outlined by the *PACE* implementer also points at intercultural conflicts. However, those are not related to the plurality of cultures related to ethnical or geographical origins but to working cultures in different fields of research. The implementer stated that “the biggest challenge is getting people to cooperate rather than doing business as usual. [...] Getting people to meaningfully cooperate is always an effort”⁹⁵.

2.4.4 Commitment to participation

Projects that aimed to have a truly participatory approach sometimes faced difficulties implementing a high level of engagement with participants. One of the main reasons identified is the voluntary commitment of participants.

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One project manager (*INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries*) summarised this obstacle by stating that their main challenge was to “make it truly participatory”⁹⁶. Another interviewee (who implemented *DEMOcrisis*, a one-week project) stated that the motivation of participants was difficult. “A week was quite a lot”⁹⁷. Similarly, participant fluctuation also appeared to be a problem for *Empowering youth - Countering populism*: “due to the length of the course being six months, the long period means that people’s realities and lives change and there are drop-outs, which can be disruptive and limit the initiative’s potential”⁹⁸. The commitment of participants is particularly crucial for projects that embrace a multiplier approach, which also presents its own challenges as exemplified by one project (*INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries*): “Youth exchanges are a lot of fun, very stimulating but once people go home, it can be more difficult for local youth workers to keep them engaged”⁹⁹. The *Youth Democracy Academy* faced similar issues¹⁰⁰: “Maybe today, even more than in the past [...], the concentration span of young people is very short. Not to say that adults have not gone down the same path”¹⁰¹. The interviewee also provided potential solutions: “the methods are important here. You need activities that keep people interested”¹⁰².

Similar to the challenge of involving unengaged citizens (see 2.4.1 *Engaging the unengaged*), school projects have a different starting point that facilitates the recruitment of participants. The environment of schools comes with a natural commitment to participate (even if the project is not part of the curriculum). Finally, the question of commitment also feeds into the obstacle of ensuring follow up activities. This is especially relevant for projects that relied on multipliers to take action in their communities once their project cycles concluded (see 2.5 *Indicators for success of the applied strategies*).

2.4.5 Bureaucracy

A general challenge that projects faced, albeit less related to strategy implementation, is the bureaucratic burden when implementing EU-funded projects. The challenge ranges from “ethical approvals [...] and data management plans straight from the beginning”¹⁰³ to “waiting for the national agency to read and accept [the project]”¹⁰⁴ what resulted in postponing the initiative. In relation to another EU-funded project that he is managing, a researcher of POPREBEL mentioned “endless reporting. [...] we wish we were being trusted a bit more and didn’t need to ask permission to do

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everything to adapt our project action”¹⁰⁵. In the case of *Youth Democracy Academy*, the “two main challenges for the project were management of a such large consortium of partners (13 in total), and administration and finance”¹⁰⁶. In short, the legal, bureaucratic, administrative challenges created additional hurdles for some projects. These hurdles might have drained valuable resources that could have been used elsewhere to deal with more content-related elements.

2.4.6 COVID-19

Finally, one crucial challenge is project implementation during a pandemic. Although this obstacle can be considered *force majeure*, there are not many strategies available to address it. Postponement was the most common approach to overcome this challenge, but projects were often left with no alternative. This hurdle is not discussed in detail in the report but has to be mentioned because of the quantity of projects explored that were implemented in 2020 and therefore had to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that, despite the enormous challenge that the pandemic represented, most consortia were confident that their cancelled events would be rescheduled eventually.

2.5 Indicators for success of the applied strategies

The definition and means of measuring success vary significantly across the projects, not least as a result of the different goals, strategies and methodologies adopted. Nevertheless, a number of common approaches towards and challenges with measuring success can be identified in the projects. In this section, we explore these commonalities and elaborate on the most frequent approaches adopted by project managers.

As mentioned in section 2.4.6 of this report, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted a number of projects. Therefore, the inevitable delay in reaching project objectives also made it difficult to assess whether or not a project could ultimately be considered a success. What was still possible in most cases, however, was to grasp the factors of how the projects measured the success of their projects and how they believed that they had gone so far. Depending on the project, this can refer to either how things went prior to the emergence of the pandemic or during the pandemic itself.

One project manager (*Democracy an idea and an ideal*) stated that "up until the COVID breakout, the project went very well"¹⁰⁷. This assessment was not unique. In spite of the challenges faced by projects and the divergent approaches adopted to measure their success, all interviewees affirmed that their projects had been successful in spite of the challenging circumstances. It is not surprising that project managers were generally positive about the success of their work, but it is remarkable that every interviewee believed that their overall goals had been achieved despite the pandemic.

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When it comes to the indicators used to assess the success of projects, we found two common means of measurement: numbers and observations. The following analysis is therefore divided along these two factors. Such approaches are not mutually exclusive; project managers may have measured the success of their project numerically while also providing a more perceptive assessment of their success.

2.5.1 Numeric indicators to measure success

Simple indicators tended to be used in numeric approaches to measure the success of projects. This was the case for *FACTS*, for example, in which “the numbers of citizens you can reach and the level of implication of citizens you can reach”¹⁰⁸ were used as core indicators for determining success. Other projects (e.g., *Youth Democracy Academy*) measured the total amount of sessions and the number of unique participants to assess their impact: “most of our indicators are quantitative, relating to concrete numbers (e.g., turnout, number of sessions etc)”¹⁰⁹. The reason for the widespread use of numeric indicators to measure the success of projects may lie in the methodology applied for this report. Almost all projects explored were supported by EU funding, for which the development of quantitative, numeric indicators is often encouraged as part of application, implementation and reporting processes.

The prerequisite of developing concrete indicators to determine the success of a project may have been a double-edged sword for some projects. One project manager (*Europe - Old Roots, New Stories*) claimed that “during an Erasmus+ project, many outcomes go beyond the concrete results of the working processes as such”¹¹⁰ and one project (*PACE*) referred to “three big goals, besides the formal goals”¹¹¹, implying that their overarching goals did not always correspond to those identified in their funding application and may not have been mutually inclusive. At the same time, the development of concrete, often numerical, indicators meant that projects had clear indicators in place from the beginning to measure their success and impact.

Some projects such as *INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries* combined numeric indicators, such as the number of participants and countries represented in their project, with more qualitative indicators. In relation to this, the interviewee stated that qualitative factors “are measurable, but this is not always that easy”¹¹².

2.5.2 Observed measurement of success

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While most projects had concrete indicators, determining the success was difficult for some managers due to the more abstract goals of their respective projects. The applied strategies of ‘listening to everyone’, ‘making multipliers engage on the ground’ or ‘engaging stakeholders’ (see 2.2 *Strategies applied*) are difficult to display in numbers. For the projects that addressed young people, personal development and the empowerment of participants were also often prioritised, and their success was not always easy to quantify.

INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries required participants to pitch their project ideas in front of their peers at the end of the project cycle. The ability of participants to hold a public presentation was considered a mark of success in comparison to the earlier stages of the project, when some participants felt shy and sometimes struggled to get involved¹¹³. Interviewees considered the empowerment of young people a part of the success of the project: participants were likely to become more visible and active in their community having taken part in the project. However, the project manager also flagged the challenge that comes with it: “this is [...] difficult to measure but you can definitely observe it, and this is a part of success”¹¹⁴

In a similar vein, the awareness raised of the issues and concepts explored in *Democracy an idea and an ideal* were considered an important element of its success¹¹⁵. Even if the impact could not always be measured, the fact that the students participating in the project became more aware of the themes explored was an important indicator of the success of the project. This was illustrated by how participants would sometimes discuss their project with students who were not taking part¹¹⁶. Other consortia also prioritised awareness-raising and sparking discussion as some of their key goals. For *DEMOcrisis*, “the goal was not to find a solution [...] but to focus on democracy, hate speech and populism. [...] Many people who weren’t from Poland had no clue about the situation in the country”¹¹⁷. Success in terms of awareness-raising played an important role in this regard. If participants learnt more about Poland through attending and participating in the project, for example, this was also considered a success. The manager of *CIDOB / FACT* measured its success partly through the discussions and reflections it provoked¹¹⁸.

FACTS sought to tackle populist narrative but “the objective is not eliminating it as a political option. The goal is to be aware that it exists and that then people make their own choices”¹¹⁹. The project manager believed that “discussions and reflections about it is already a success”¹²⁰. Discourse can be difficult to quantify and measure but the extent to which people engaged with the topics explored in

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the project, and reflected upon the findings of their activities, was often considered an additional indicator of success. Other projects, such as *PACE*, had more overarching goals in order to evaluate the success of their project. The project sought to achieve a better analysis of populist narratives, a better understanding of populist politics and to create constructive dialogue between citizens online¹²¹.

Given that *PACE* aims to establish new tools to tackle populism in the long run, the sustainability of these tools was also mentioned as an aspiration. “I hope that some tools do come out of the project that will help others”¹²². The project aims to “give others a concrete starting point so that they can improve on what we do and use it”¹²³. Other projects also considered the sustainability and its continued impact outside of the scope of their activities as an important part of their success. *Europe - Old Roots, New Stories* defined the extent to which young people “approached and dealt with the new situations [being abroad] themselves, how the discussions with their [exchange] peers went”¹²⁴ as an important indicator. The fact that numerous participants “stayed in touch with some of the people they met”¹²⁵ was considered a part of its success.

Other projects also prioritised the role of multipliers for the success of their project. Referring to the impact of multiplier effects, the manager of *CIDOB / FACTS* concedes the difficulties to measure it¹²⁶. The *Youth Democracy Academy* recognised that, despite a tangible impact seen in the local municipalities where their project was active, measuring their ultimate impact was impossible “as there were many other campaigns for EP elections”¹²⁷. The success of projects was not always dependent upon an applied strategy or the ability to identify key indicators. Rather, it was often seen in the empowerment of participants, the personal development of participants and the impact they had in their local community.

Empowering Youth - Countering populism assessed the completion and sustainability of the projects created by participants, measuring whether “they actually began their local initiatives framed during the programme and whether they continued working with it”¹²⁸. Similarly, whether or not participants “used any of the tools / methods that they used during the project four to five months after its completion”¹²⁹ was considered indicative of the sustainability of the project and achieving one of its goals. On the other hand, the project placed an emphasis on the lessons learnt by students and their personal journeys over the course of the project. The potential to measure these factors was also

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limited: “we do not track if there is anything that has changed at a communal level, as it is too difficult to track. We do not have the financial resources to do so”¹³⁰. To this end, a self-assessment approach was adopted in which participants were asked “before and after the project if they feel they have developed”¹³¹ on a personal level and the responses of participants were used as an indicator for the overarching success of the project.

Another common theme among projects was the desire of some project implementers to engage and converse with participants on a more personal level to evaluate the success of the project (see 2.2.2 *Intercultural Learning*). *INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries* considered the personal aspect of its youth exchanges pivotal to the project as it was often “the first [opportunity] people get to leave their village, their community or even travel abroad”¹³². Besides, youth exchanges with people with disabilities is another important element: “the Berlin youth exchange was with people with disabilities, including one visually impaired participant and one hearing impaired participant. So, 70 people had to adapt to impaired person and one hearing impaired person, which was definitely a learning experience for all involved. [...] This was what a lot of people reported on, that they had never worked or dealt with people with disabilities, and it was huge learning element for them”¹³³. The broader perspective these interactions evoked, in conjunction with the conversations that followed, broadened the horizons of participants and contributed to the success of the project, which was deemed as a life-changing exchange.

TruLies placed an emphasis on the production of factsheets as a means of tackling disinformation surrounding Euroscepticism and populism among youth. The fact that the sheets were “taken up by certain ministries and by certain stakeholders [and] brought into schools”¹³⁴ is symbolic of the success of the project in provoking discussion and conversations among the general public.

Another project manager (*Democracy an idea and an ideal*) found that the outcome of their project could be measured “by the fact that when looking for new students, the brothers and sisters of those that were previously participating joined”¹³⁵. The assessment was that the “siblings seemed to have liked it a lot”¹³⁶, leading them to act as multipliers. Hence, they spread their personal learning experiences and contributed to the sustainability and enduring success of the project. In the case of ongoing projects, one project (*POPREBEL*) shared that they “still don’t know what is going on the ground in a number of communities where their project is taking place”¹³⁷, which significantly hampered the potential of measuring its impact at the time of the interview. The issues consortia faced

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in terms of measuring the success of their projects transcended the global pandemic, however, with more conventional difficulties such as the evaluation and measurement of abstract concepts such as populism and the lack of financial resources also being fairly common.

To summarise, there are a variety of ways that projects sought to observe the success of their activities. The indicators of success are difficult to compare due to the diverse methodology of each project and the unique context in each case.

2.6 Recommended methods to be applied in future projects

This chapter presents the recommended methods shared by project managers that could be of use when designing or applying projects dealing with populist narratives in the future. We asked all interviewees whether or not they would like to share any advice or recommendations for future projects relating to populist narratives. The answers vary significantly, reflecting the sheer diversity of conceptual designs and methodologies in the projects selected. In spite of this, three common set of recommendations emerge: (2.6.1) *the importance of listening to all citizens regardless of their views*, (2.6.2) *facilitating meaningful participation methods* and (2.6.3) *transcending conventional project environments*. Other notable ideas that do not fall into these common themes are outlined in section 2.6.4.

2.6.1 Listening to everyone

As highlighted in the identified strategies section of the study (see 2.2.1 *Listening to everyone*), listening to people of all backgrounds and perspectives was a fundamental part of many projects. Some project managers recommended this strategy for future projects to apply at their cores.

Future projects could benefit from placing citizens and their lives at the centre of their activities. *POPREBEL* underlined the importance of “producing more information about what is happening in people’s daily lives”¹³⁸. Through prioritising how people saw the world and how they viewed their cultures and values in relation to others, the project gained deeper insight into the daily struggles and perspectives of ‘ordinary’ citizens. In this regard, prioritising ‘listening to citizens and their views’, regardless of what political or populist views they may espouse, could assist in facilitating more meaningful conversations. This approach may also help “go[ing] beyond dealing with only directly political questions”¹³⁹, which was considered essential by many interviewees to the discussion of populist narratives. This finding is also supported by the statement of several interviewees that populist views should not be discarded from the start but that their roots must be taken seriously (see 2.2.1 *Listening to everyone*).

¹³⁸ Jan Kubik, Professor at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London

¹³⁹ Jan Kubik, Professor at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London

In a number of cases, to “listen to everyone” ‘Listening to everyone’ was an integral first step towards creating an inclusive, welcoming environment for projects on populist narratives. Discourse became “tricky”¹⁴⁰ already when discussing the definition of populism but, as one project manager (*INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries*) put it, “we have to listen where people are coming from before we stigmatise people who have a certain discourse”¹⁴¹ or there would be the risk of alienation and exclusion. Social media bubbles may complicate this process further, given that people often live in their own echo chambers and it can be difficult to listen to views different to their own, but future projects could prioritise “opening up and listening to everyone”¹⁴². According to another interviewee (*TrueLies*), this process was an important first step in order to “seek to understand arguments which are widespread and how best to approach and speak with people who have populist statements”¹⁴³. Future projects are therefore recommended to listen to and include as many views as possible, irrespective of how controversial or populist their perspectives might be.

2.6.2 Meaningful participation

In order to create engaging and fulfilling projects, a number of interviewees highlighted the importance of empowering participants and introducing meaningful participatory activities. The main advice shared by the manager of *INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries* was to include participants in the design of the project and “not to make [projects] top down, but truly participative instead, and not only on paper”¹⁴⁴. The design phase of a project plays a key role in this process and it is recommended that projects seek to be as participatory for participants as possible¹⁴⁵.

One recommendation was to provide the participants of a project with the resources, support and know-how they require before providing them with a blank slate to carry out their projects. We found an example of this in *Democracy an idea and an ideal*, which prioritised the creative process for participants. Once participants were sufficiently prepared and had the necessary skills and know-how for their projects, “participants [were allowed to] take it from there and go ahead with producing something themselves”¹⁴⁶. In the project manager’s own words, “self-production by participants”¹⁴⁷ was a priority from the beginning and they recommend that future projects embrace a more organic, bottom-up approach to their projects. Similarly, the *Youth Democracy Academy* project recommended embracing “a step-by-step approach, engaging young people with flexibility, enabling young people

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to own their own project”¹⁴⁸. In doing so, youth were empowered to take ownership of their projects by enabling them “to have the power and flexibility to make their own decisions”¹⁴⁹.

Future projects dealing with populist narratives could therefore benefit from considering a more bottom-up approach that places participants at its core. If projects have the resources, time and ability to provide participants with the support and preparation they require to carry out their work, participants may become more passionate about their projects and get more involved when provided with greater flexibility and leadership opportunities.

2.6.3 Alternative environments

One common recommendation was to transcend traditional working environments to enhance the engagement of participants and boost inclusion. This aspect is twofold: on the one hand, the interviewees highlighted how a change of environment (outside participants' usual geographical and social surroundings) could trigger special learning situations. On the other hand, this element equally applied to the project managers themselves, meaning that it was better for them to leave the settings with which they were accustomed and to explore new methodologies and target groups beyond their standard procedures.

In the case of *Europe - Old Roots, New Stories*, “leav[ing] the school, when there the chance, as opposed to spending a whole week in a school” was an important element¹⁵⁰. The project manager mentioned that even day trips “resonated the most with the young people who took part. Students want to discover things and, for me, it’s essential for them to leave the school to be able to do so best”¹⁵¹.

TrueLies, centred its activities around one national context and lamented the lost potential that international perspectives could have brought to their project. The suggestion of the interviewee was to “take a comparative approach across countries to populism [and to avoid] only looking at arguments in one single country”¹⁵². Through adopting such an international approach, it would be possible to “[better] identify common strategies to tackle”¹⁵³ Euroscepticism and populism. For future projects, a comparative approach applied across multiple countries could provide unique insight into populism and shed light on some of the common themes and challenges of populist narratives shared across borders.

CIDOB / FACTS also recommended other projects to plan activities in a variety of different locations and to go beyond the traditional settings of projects in metropolitan areas and capital cities. For

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example, if focus groups were made then one could be located “in the capital and one focus group outside the capital”¹⁵⁴. Through reaching outside of cities and large metropolitan areas, projects have the opportunity to engage with more diverse audiences and may be more likely to attract a wider array of perspectives and opinions. This is of course also linked to the ‘listen to all’ element (see 2.2.1 *Listening to everyone*).

2.6.4 Additional ideas

While the three themes above represent the most common recommendations received, a number of other unique suggestions and ideas were mentioned in our interviews. The *PACE* project manager shared their thoughts on the potential for developing a “toolbox for an online democracy lab”¹⁵⁵, which could provide other projects with more concrete starting points to build upon the success of similar projects. In the same vein, both teachers that were interviewed (*Democracy an idea and ideal*¹⁵⁶, *Europe - Old Roots, New Stories*¹⁵⁷) explained that they plan to upload their outcomes on the platform ‘e-twinning’. This makes them accessible for further schools in Europe. In the case of *Democracy an idea and ideal*, the developed toolbox is also planned to be used by students of the school that were not participating in the project¹⁵⁸.

DEMOcrisis recommended more practical suggestions or activities, suggesting taking “a group process-oriented psychology approach”¹⁵⁹ and analysing populism and hate speech by using the Six Thinking Hats approach of Dr. Edward de Bono¹⁶⁰. One of the key processes of *TruLies* was fact-checking, which they recommended to future projects: “Fact-checking is necessary and important and worked rather well for the project. It also raised interest, which was beneficial”¹⁶¹. Moreover, even if the *Empowering Youth - Countering Populism* project was not yet complete at the time of interview, they encouraged future projects to embrace “the inclusion of community research as part of their initiative”¹⁶². It was argued that this approach could be to the benefit of both liaising with potential stakeholders as well as mobilising “allies in their local communities, which is often a major obstacle for projects”¹⁶³. They also recommended that projects consider including additional preparation and learning weeks into their structure, which had proven to be a tried and tested practice for them in their four years of experience carrying out similar projects.

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3. CONCLUSIONS

This report presents the findings of ten interviews carried out with managers of projects aiming to tackle populist movements and narratives. The case studies were selected based on the criteria set out in the report ‘Mapping of Initiatives, EU Programmes and Projects Countering Populism’.

We found that the **approaches taken towards addressing populist narratives** in participatory projects were rather open whereas research projects, in contrast, tended to focus on more narrowly defined types of populist narratives. (e.g., neo-feudalism, neo-traditionalism). Euroscepticism was a common populist narrative addressed in many of the projects explored.

The report outlines **common strategies applied to tackle populism**, including projects focused on listening to everyone, implementing intercultural training, creating participatory space, identifying and deconstructing populist narratives, and engaging stakeholders. Not all strategies can be carried out at the same time and the most suitable strategy depends on the individual project design and a number of other factors (e.g., goals, resources). Research and awareness-raising projects focused more on identification and deconstruction of populist narratives while participatory projects (e.g., tool creation, multiplier training or educational projects) focused more on intercultural training.

Being part of an organisation or network with a proven track record in implementing projects tackling populist narratives is a clear benefit when starting new projects. Most project managers in the report had previous experience with the implementation of projects tackling populist narratives and their experience proved highly beneficial to their projects. It must be noted, however, that the methodology of this report was to look at EU-funded projects and, as stated by the interviewees, EU funding applications involve a relatively high bureaucratic effort.

The difficulty associated with **engaging less interested or less active citizens was one of the most common and pressing challenges** in the implementation of project strategies. The question of how / whether or not to include populist actors or narratives was also found to be a difficult question to answer for many project managers. Multicultural conflicts that could take place in intercultural training environments (including language barriers) were also a challenge. Aside from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the commitment of participants (especially youth) and the bureaucracy associated with this type of project management were also found to be elements that complicated the implementation of project strategies.

Defining the indicators of success for projects tackling populist narratives remained a common challenge regardless of the individual goals and strategies of projects. Project managers struggled to identify suitable qualitative approaches to measure their projects, leading the vast majority of projects to use numerical indicators to evaluate their success. There were nevertheless a number of projects that observed the behaviour, participation and impact of activities in order to evaluate their success. Educational youth projects often prioritised the empowerment and personal development of young participants, for example, with the goal of empowering youth to become more active in their local communities and to act as multipliers for the enduring success of their projects. Some interviewees interpreted broader public conversations and discussions surrounding the issues explored in their project as a mark of their success, whereas others prioritised the mid-to-long term sustainability of

projects as a means of enacting local change. Regardless of the approach adopted to measure success, all interviewees were adamant that their projects were successful in reaching their goals and, in their own unique ways, contributing to tackling populist narratives.

The project managers interviewed shared a number of **poignant recommendations for future projects** seeking to address populist narratives. First, projects should seek to listen to all citizens and seek to understand all perspectives expressed in order to create the most inclusive, approachable environment possible. Second, future projects should seek to embrace self-production by participants and introduce more organic, bottom-up processes to empower participants. Through involving citizens from the planning and design phases through to the implementation stages, projects' participatory activities can evoke a sense of ownership in participants and increase the likelihood of project sustainability. Lastly, projects can benefit from thinking outside of the box in relation to the physical environments of their activities. Populist narratives transcend national borders and undertaking activities outside of the conventional environment of conference or youth projects can boost the engagement of participants and contribute to more inclusive projects.

In summary, the report shows that there is **a great diversity of action taken by civil society and the academic community** to tackle populist movements. Civic reactions come in different shapes and sizes but, ultimately, every project can do its part and plant the seeds for more democratic, open and pluralistic societies. While there is **no silver bullet to countering populist movements**, supporting relevant synergies between different projects can help make projects even more effective. Therefore, the shared willingness of all interviewees to connect with one another in the future is a promising finding.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides general recommendations towards the concerned stakeholders for any projects aiming to tackle populism (4.1) and introduces a basic guide for managers that could help design such projects (4.2).

4.1 General recommendations

The analysis of the ten projects not only shows the great potential for civic responses to populist movements, but also the abundance of possibilities that exist to address them. Implementing smart and innovative projects can be a successful way to prevent populist actors and narratives from gaining traction. At the same time, projects cannot flourish without **new ideas or innovative means of implementation**. This does not only require civil society to support new approaches and strategies for such projects. Also, funders (including public actors) must support the implementation of innovative ideas. Here, a **reduced bureaucratic burden** is an important factor to consider.

Recommendation 1: Sufficient and easy-to-access public funding for (innovative) projects addressing populism must be ensured.

The examples in this report show that **projects are not isolated initiatives separated from the work of other societal actors**. Research and awareness-raising projects in particular have great potential to assist political, academic and civil society leaders in providing public alternatives to populist movements and deconstructing populist narratives. In parallel, projects with more participatory approaches can lay the foundation for preventing individuals from supporting populist actors.

Recommendation 2: Policy makers should become more proactive in using the outcomes of projects addressing populism.

The study shows that there are **substantial differences between diverse types of projects** in relation to their goals, methodologies, challenges and means of measuring success. However, this does not indicate a patchwork of approaches. This diversity is a clear strength of projects tackling populist narratives and represents great potential for improved synergies. At first glance, it might be difficult to draw a connection between a project addressing young people, which engages youth politically in their local community, and an academic project that undergoes theoretical research on populist narratives. Yet, upon closer look, these two projects may be able to **profit from one another and support each other**. Project managers who design educational youth projects can build upon the findings of researchers when defining the goals of their projects. At the same time, researchers can make use of the outcomes of participatory projects to better formulate their strategies to counter populist narratives.

Recommendation 3: More synergies between different kinds of projects should be enabled to embrace the added value of diverse projects addressing populism.

All interviewees in the study stated that they would be interested in **joining a network of initiatives or projects that aim to tackle populist movements**. The potential for further cooperation between projects in the future is twofold: on the one hand, projects with similar scopes, goals or problems can discuss among themselves how to best overcome common challenges. On the other hand, a community of civic actors aiming to tackle populism can share their approaches and display the diversity of their projects to cultivate new synergies and innovation. This would facilitate dedicated channels for exchange and communication on projects addressing populist movements.

Recommendation 4: Civil society actors should establish dedicated channels to facilitate the exchange of expertise between project managers addressing populism.

The findings in this report are based on exchanges with only ten project managers. As stated above and highlighted in the mapping report by ECAS, there has been a large variety of projects implemented in the field globally in recent years. While the selection of this report is based on carefully chosen criteria, we cannot claim absolute representativeness. Still, a certain level of generalisation may be applied.

Our report does not enable an objective assessment of the efficiency of the different strategies identified as it represents solely the views and experiences of its interviewees. However, the observations included remain valuable and reliable sources of information, especially when considering the common interest of all project managers to contribute to the broader community tackling populist narratives.

What can be stated is that there is **no one-size-fits-all approach to tackling populist narratives** and every project is unique (considering the constituency, funding, goals, etc). With the caveats mentioned above, it is possible to take this report as a starting point when designing a new project. Moreover, it can help project managers to select methodologies that might be more appropriate for the type of projects they wish to carry out. Bearing this in mind, the following chapter provides general guidance for future managers when designing projects that aim to tackle populist narratives, movements and actors.

4.2 Basic guide for managers to design a project tackling populism

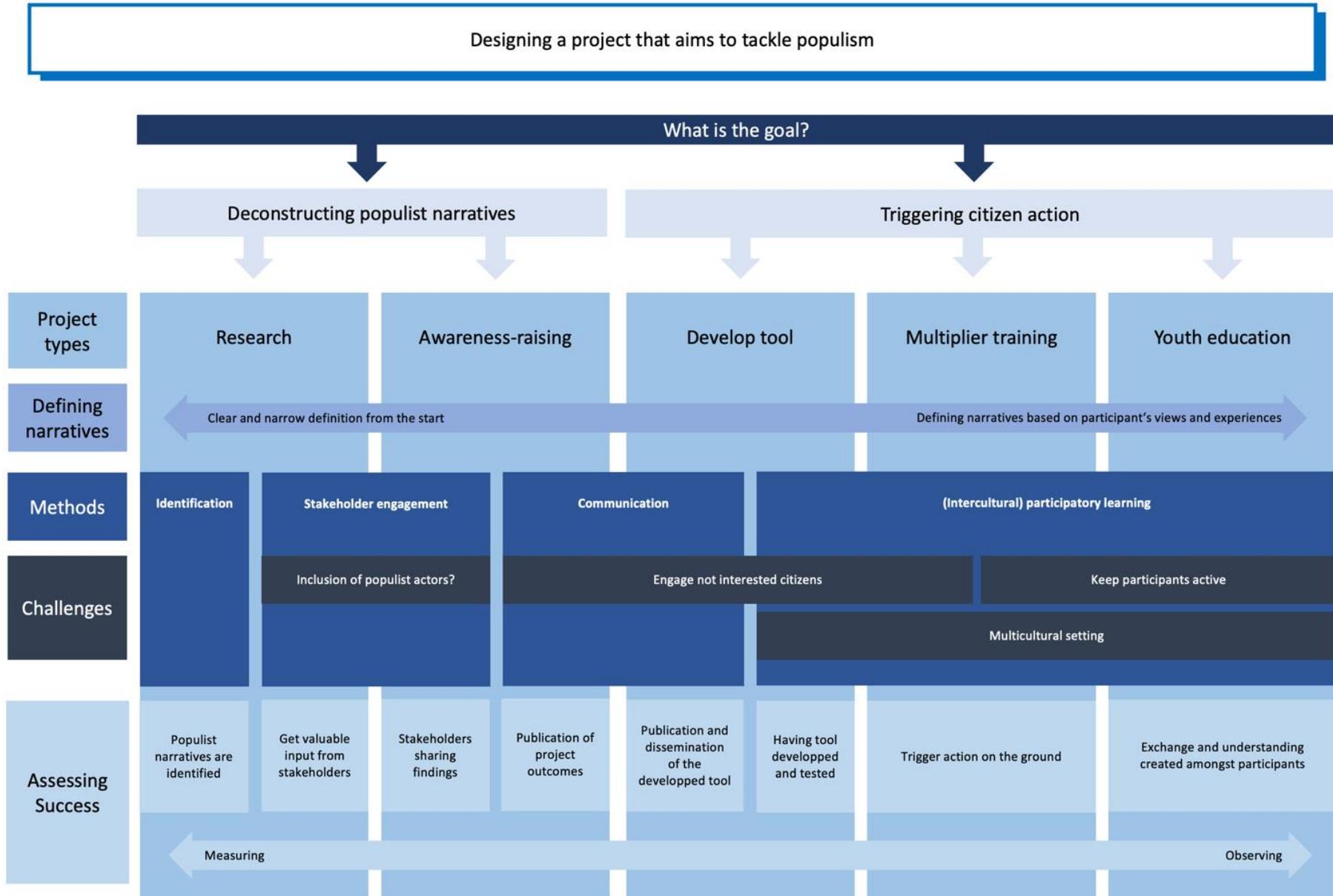
The following guide is based on the findings of this report. The goal is to provide a first starting point to better understand the overall strategy. This includes the goals, types of projects, how to define the narratives addressed, what methods can be used and the challenges that should be considered as part of a future project. The guide should, however, not be understood as an exhaustive roadmap for a complete project design.

While it is impossible to combine all of the complex, multi-faceted aspects outlined in this report into simple categories and claim universal validity, this guide aims to provide a starting point for **establishing ideal types of projects**¹⁶⁴. When applying the guidance practically, there may be the need for further modification depending on the environment in which the project is set to be implemented. In spite of this, the report leads us to believe that **certain types of projects are better suited towards certain goals and require specific methodologies** and set of measurement criteria to evaluate success.

As a first step, project managers should decide whether their project aims to deconstruct populist narratives or trigger citizen action (see figure 1 on the following page).

¹⁶⁴ ECAS (2020), Mapping of Initiatives, EU Programmes and Projects Countering Populism'

Figure 1: Designing a project that aims to tackle populism



4.2.1 Goal A: Deconstructing populist narratives

1. As displayed in figure 1, this report identifies two types of projects that serve the goal of deconstructing populist narratives: research projects and awareness-raising projects. **Research projects** are better at identifying populist narratives or engaging stakeholders on the respective topics. When applying the latter methodology, the question of whether or not to include populist actors must be addressed and there are multiple different ways of measuring success. While the recognised narratives can serve to assess the success of an identification project, stakeholder engagement can also be considered successful if sufficiently valuable input is collected.
2. Another type of project that may serve the purpose of deconstructing populist narratives are **awareness-raising projects**. These projects can be carried out with the help of stakeholder engagement or solely as communication projects. Projects that seek to engage stakeholders would also have to decide whether or not to include populist actors. The way to measure success would be to assess how broadly stakeholders share the findings of the project. When it comes to communication, the biggest challenge would be to reach out to citizens that may not be interested in engaging with the content in the first place. The assessment of success here would be the numbers of interactions achieved with citizens.

4.2.2 Goal B: Triggering citizen action

An alternative overarching goal may be to trigger citizen action. Here, the report identifies three types of projects that can assist this goal.

1. The first type would be to **develop new tools**. Here, projects can focus on communication or intercultural participatory learning as core methods. In both cases, engaging the unengaged is a clear challenge that must be addressed. If managers decide to carry out a communication-based project, the dissemination and the use of the new tool(s) developed could be used to measure its success. In the case of intercultural participatory learning projects, the exchanges between participants when applying the new tool(s) would be the recommended way to observe its success. Additionally, the extent to which other stakeholders use the tool should also be considered when seeking to measure its success.
2. The second type of project identified is one that **trains multipliers**. Project managers in such projects must be mindful about the challenge of keeping multipliers engaged while ensuring that they reach out to people who are more likely to be targeted by populist narratives. The action the project triggers on the ground is the indicator for the success of the project, albeit challenging to measure.
3. Finally, the third type of project is one that sets up **youth education projects**. These projects would ideally take place in intercultural learning settings and the social and cultural exchanges between participants would serve as indicators for success. Once again, these indicators are challenging to measure. For all intercultural learning experiences, the involvement of a variety of different cultural backgrounds represents a substantive challenge.

At this point, it is important to clarify the **difference between multiplier training and education projects**. Although multiplier training is an educational exercise, the goals of both types of projects differ greatly in terms of their immediate output: youth education projects do not have the primary

objective of follow-up actions by participants. Those projects focus on the participants' experience instead (e.g., multicultural setting). This approach is supposed to prevent populist movements from flourishing in the long run by making people's mindsets resilient to populist narratives. These experiences may ultimately also lead to adjusted voting behaviours and civic engagement as a secondary output. In contrast, multiplier training has the immediate goal of triggering direct follow-up action on the ground as a primary output.

4.2.3 Defining populist narratives to address

Every project that aims to tackle populism must eventually define the specific narratives it seeks to address. The report shows that more **research-based projects have a tendency to define narratives** at the very beginning, as they tend to be very specific and detailed. Projects that include **more participatory elements, on the other hand, may apply a more open approach** to defining narratives. Project managers may choose the narratives addressed together with participants once their experiences and views are understood.

4.2.4 Making projects even better

The report also shows that certain approaches to addressing populist narratives have a horizontal importance for all projects. If applicable, project managers should be mindful about

- **Listening to everyone – adopting an inclusive approach;**
- **Ensuring meaningful participation;**
- **Enabling the project in alternative environments.**

To summarise, future projects must take into account the specific environment they operate in and the circumstances in which their activities are implemented. In that given frame, this report generally, in the abovementioned guide specifically, may be a good starting point to design a respective project. By doing so, civic reactions addressing populism have the potential to be further strengthened and to safeguard liberal democracies in the long run.

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6. ANNEXES

6.1 Annex A: Privacy Statement signed by all interviewees

Consent for participation in research interview

DEMOS, funded by European Commission under the program Horizon2020

I, [Name of the interviewee], agree to participate in a research project conducted by [Name of the interviewer] from the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), Avenue de la Toison d'Or 77, 1060 Saint Gilles (Brussels), Belgium.

1. I have received sufficient information about this research project and understand my role in it. The purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project and the future processing of my personal data has been explained to me and are is clear.
2. My participation as an interviewee in this project is completely voluntary. There is no explicit or implicit coercion whatsoever to participate.
3. Participation involves being interviewed by a representative from ECAS. The interview will last approximately [60] minutes. I allow the researchers to take notes during the interview. A taped recording of the interview for research purposes is only possible based on my explicit consent at the end of this statement.
4. The interviewer has the right to store my full name, my email address, my position and the organisation that I work for. The interviewer has the right to store all content recorded (in written or in audio) during the interview. I allow ECAS to store my personal data as long as it is needed to carry out the research in the scope of the DEMOS project. My personal data must be deleted after the publication of the final research report unless I give consent to ECAS to store my name and email address after the publication of the research report (e.g. in order to explore future synergies) at the end of this statement.
5. I know that I have the choice between either (1) my full name, surname, position and [Name of the organisation] or (2) 'representative of [Name of the organisation]' being referenced to in the final research report. I will indicate my preference at the end of this statement.
6. It is clear to me that I am fully entitled to withdraw from participation. I have the right not to answer questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to withdraw from the interview and ask the data collected prior to the withdrawal will be deleted.
7. I have the right to request the deletion of my personal data at any given time, also after the conduction of the interview.
8. I have been given the explicit guarantee that my personal data will be processed in full compliance with ethical guidelines by DEMOS and does not violate the Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation). I was assured that carrying out this research interview is in line with the ethical guidelines of DEMOS. The respective ethical guidelines have been shared with me.
9. I know that my personal data could be transferred to the European Commission as it is the sponsor of the project and that it can be shared with DEMOS project partners for research purposes within the territory of the European Union.
10. I know that any questions concerning the protection of my data can be addressed to the Data Protection Officer of DEMOS (dpo@tk.mta.hu).
11. I am aware of my right to address the responsible data protection authority (L'Autorité de protection des données, dpo@apd-gba.be) in case that I suspect a data protection violation.
12. I have carefully read and fully understood the points and statements of this form. All my questions were answered to my satisfaction and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
13. I obtained a copy of this consent form co-signed by the interviewer.

Opt-in options:

- I allow the recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue by audio tape for research purposes.
- I allow ECAS to save my name and my email-address after the publication of the final research report.

Mandatory choice (please only choose one option):

- The research report should reference the information I share with my full name, surname, position and [Name of the organisation]
- The research report should reference the information I share with 'representative of [Name of the organisation]'

Signature [Name of the interviewee] Date

Signature Assya Kavrakova, Executive Director, ECAS Date

6.2 Annex B: Guiding Questions

- Can you provide a general explanation of what your project was about?

Your Strategy

- Which aspect(s) of populist narratives has been addressed by your initiative?
- What was your strategy to tackle such narratives?
- Was this initiative an ad hoc endeavour or part of a long-term strategy of your organisation/movement?

Your evaluation

- Would you consider your endeavour as successful?
- What are the factors that determine success for you?
- What elements of your project would you recommend to other organisations that may want to carry out a similar project?
- What obstacles/hurdles did you encounter and how did you overcome them?

Follow up

- Would you carry out such a project again?
- (Referring to question 9) If yes would you change anything in your approach? If no – why?
- Would you be interested to connect with others working to address the challenges of populism?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

6.3 Annex C: List of Interviewees

Interviewee	Position	Project	Date
Anonymised	Representative of Internationale Akademie Berlin (INA) für innovative Pädagogik, Psychologie und Ökonomie	INCLUSION! Actions across boundaries	29.09.20
Bruce Edmons	Director, Centre for Policy Modelling, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School	Populism And Civic Engagement – a fine-grained, dynamic, context-sensitive and forward-looking response to negative populist tendencies (PACE)	23.09.20
Jan Kubik	Professor at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London	Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism (POPREBEL)	13.10.20
Richard Mole	Professor of Political Sociology, University College London		
Anonymised	Representative of Institute for European Politics	TruLies – The Truth about Lies on Europe	15.10.20
Anonymised	Representative of European Intercultural Forum e.V.	Empowering youth - Countering populism	02.10.20
Christian Aigner	Studienrat (Senior Teacher), Gymnasium Wertingen	Europe - Old Roots, New Stories	20.10.20
Paweł Tempczyk	Coordinator and Vice President, Stowarzyszenie „Poczucia”	DEMOCrisis, fostering active citizenship in times of crisis	22.09.20
Claude Anthierens	Teacher and Librarian, Sint-Lodewijkcollege	Democracy an idea and an ideal	11.12.20
Bruno António	Coordinator, DYPALL Network	Youth Democracy Academy	06.10.20
Héctor Sánchez Margalef	Researcher & Project Manager, CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)	CIDOB / FACTS	23.09.20