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The Authoritarian Turn of The Left in Latin America
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Is Democracy in Retreat? Authoritarianism, Populism and Regional Prospects. Interview with Lisa Zanotti

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In recent years, the rise of populist leaderships and authoritarian discourses has reshaped the geopolitical and social landscape across different regions of the world. From Europe to Latin America, governments and political movements have increasingly resorted to rhetoric that invokes *"The People"* and *"Democracy"*, yet in practice rejects pluralism, attacks the opposition, and undermines democratic institutions. In this interview, Dr. Lisa Zanotti, Postdoctoral Researcher at Diego Portales University, Associate Researcher at the Laboratory for the Study of the Far Right (Ultra-Lab), and Director of the Fondecyt Project, whom I thank for her time and willingness to participate, analyzes the similarities and differences between radical left- and right-wing projects, populism, the opportunities and challenges of a possible democratic transition in Venezuela, and the early warning signs that allow us to identify processes of democratic deterioration in the region and the world.

Sergio Angel [S.A.] Much of the existing literature has addressed the authoritarian and populist turn of left-wing and right-wing governments separately. From your perspective, what similarities and differences do you observe between these two models in terms of leadership and political discourse?

Lisa Zanotti [L.Z.] A useful way to think about the relationship between the far left and the far right is to shift attention away from programmatic content and toward the authoritarian logic that can structure leadership and political discourse across both camps. The overlap is most visible in threat-based narratives of social breakdown, moral boundary-drawing that delegitimizes opponents, and the normalization of disciplinary or exceptional measures in the name of restoring order. In Zanotti (2026), I argue that the far right (and the far left) may converge on a similar authoritarian logic even when their substantive goals diverge. Here, authoritarianism does not operate as an *a priori* preference for non-democratic regimes but as a normative commitment to a tightly ordered society in which deviance is to be sanctioned. This commitment becomes politically activated when leaders frame (social) change as a "normative threat" to cohesion and predictability an understanding that resonates with classic accounts of authoritarianism as a threat-responsive orientation toward order and conformity (Stenner 2005; Feldman and Stenner 1997).

Seen from this perspective, authoritarianism is not inherently tied to a specific ideological project but functions as an interpretive lens shaping how conflict is diagnosed and managed. Across both far-left and far-right contexts, leadership communication often adopts a rhetorical style that moralizes conflict, elevates discipline and unity, and treats institutional constraint as obstruction thereby normalizing disciplinary or exceptional measures necessary to restore order and protect the community. The claim is about convergence in justificatory logic and rhetorical repertoires, not about convergence in ideological content or policy ends.

Where these models diverge is primarily in the objects of exclusion rather than in the underlying logic itself. In other words, authoritarianism "molds the targets of exclusion", the same demand for order and conformity is redirected toward different groups depending on historical context and coalition structure. The core similarity, then, lies in how authority is justified and enacted, through threat narratives, moral boundary-drawing, and the legitimation of coercion, rather than in the substantive ideological ends pursued.

S.A. In autocratic regimes and left-wing governments, the notion of *"The people",* is often invoked to legitimize restrictions on individual rights and freedoms. To what extent has populism weakened political pluralism and democratic participation?

L.Z. When illiberal leaders invoke *"The People"*, what is striking is not only the restriction of rights that may follow, but the *discursive route* through which those restrictions are justified. A growing body of work shows that far-left and far-right actors rarely reject democracy in explicit terms. Instead, they increasingly rely on *liberal language*, rights, representation, sovereignty, freedom of expression, to advance policies and practices that ultimately weaken pluralism and democratic participation (Zanotti and Marcos-Marné 2026). Rather than opposing liberal democracy from the outside, illiberal leaders operate within its normative vocabulary, reinterpreting core democratic concepts in exclusionary ways. Appeals to *"The people"* are framed as inclusive and emancipatory, yet they

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are used to delegitimize opposition, constrain media autonomy, politicize courts, or narrow the boundaries of acceptable dissent. In discursive terms, pluralism is recast as obstruction, accountability as sabotage, and minority protection as privileges that allegedly undermine the collective will. The consequence is a subtle but powerful erosion of democratic participation. Citizens are not necessarily discouraged from voting or engaging politically; instead, the range of legitimate voices, claims, and alternatives is progressively narrowed. This aligns with broader scholarship on democratic backsliding, which emphasizes that contemporary illiberalism advances through gradual, low visibility shifts rather than abrupt institutional rupture (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

S.A. In your most recent research, you have analyzed the rise of the populist radical right in Europe, particularly the case of the political party VOX in Spain. What lessons does the rise of VOX offer for analyzing populism and authoritarianism in Latin America, even when these phenomena manifest under different leaders and ideological discourses?

L.Z. The case of VOX offers several analytically useful lessons for understanding the populist radical right beyond Europe, even when institutional settings and ideological vocabularies differ. First, it highlights the central role of *cleavage activation* in enabling PRR actors to achieve electoral relevance. For decades, Spain, together with Portugal, was an outlier in Western Europe, lacking a PRR party with parliamentary representation. VOX's breakthrough is best explained by the reactivation of the center–periphery cleavage following the Catalan crisis, which reorganized political conflict around territorial unity, sovereignty, and the legitimacy of dissent. This shift created a political opportunity structure in which PRR discourse could be framed not as extremist, but as the defense of constitutional order and national integrity (Rama et al., 2021).

Second, the Spanish case underscores the importance of the relationship between the PRR and the mainstream right. Spain is characterized by high levels of affective polarization (Torcal, 2023), and VOX's rise has taken place in a context where the Partido Popular remains the dominant force on the right. Empirical research shows that VOX's entry into the party system has been associated with a partial radicalization of the PP's discourse and positioning, particularly on issues related to national identity, territorial integrity, and institutional contestation (Rovira et al., 2024). This suggests that the democratic impact of the PRR depends not only on its own strength, but on how mainstream actors respond to their agenda-setting capacity.

Third, VOX illustrates the relevance of discursive contagion and selective transnationalism. As shown in Zanotti et al. (2025), PRR actors increasingly draw on shared narratives and frames circulating across Europe and Latin America yet adapt them strategically to domestic contexts rather than pursuing coordinated ideological convergence. VOX plays a central role in this process, functioning as a hub for symbolic diffusion rather than organizational integration. The broader lesson is that PRR influence often operates indirectly, through discursive resonance and mainstream accommodation, rather than through direct institutional takeover.

S.A. Along the same lines, in your work *"Supporting and Rejecting the Populist Radical Right: Evidence from Contemporary Chile"*, you analyze the factors that shape both support for and opposition to the populist radical right. What does this analysis reveal about the democratic limits of populism and about the agency of Latin American societies in resisting autocratic dynamics?

L.Z. Our analysis of Chile suggests two things at once. First, the profile of support for the populist radical right is not just "more polarization." It is disproportionately linked to nationalist reactions to immigration and to weaker attachments to liberal-democratic rules, including greater tolerance for authoritarian alternatives. The implication is not that supporters are uniformly anti-democratic, but that a meaningful segment is more willing to trade pluralism and institutional constraints for promises of order, control, and decisive leadership when those priorities are made salient (Rovira, Salas-Lewin & Zanotti, 2024).

Second, the same evidence points to real societal capacity to resist illiberal drift through electoral and civic dynamics. Opposition to the PRR in Chile is large and socially broad, and it can become politically mobilizing when citizens interpret the choice as having higher democratic stakes. In practice, that means resistance is not only a matter of elite bargaining or institutional vetoes, it also comes from the ability of diverse groups to coordinate around a minimal democratic baseline and translate that into turnout, coalition-building, and electoral defeat. The broader takeaway is a dual one: PRR politics can activate preferences that put pressure on liberal-democratic constraints, but publics are not passive, under certain conditions, they can also generate counter-mobilization capable of blocking illiberal trajectories (Rovira, Salas-Lewin & Zanotti 2024).

S.A. Some populist governments in Latin America, including Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, have transitioned from democratic systems to authoritarian and repressive regimes. What early warning signs make it possible to identify the moment when a populist government begins to systematically violate democratic rules and human rights?

L.Z. Early warning signs of democratic breakdown rarely take the form of a single rupture. Instead, they emerge as a *patterned sequence* of incremental changes that normalize rule-breaking over time. One of the earliest and most reliable indicators is discursive. Leaders begin to delegitimize opponents as enemies of the people, portray independent media as conspiratorial or anti-national, and recast pluralism as obstruction rather than democratic contestation. As shown in Zanotti and Marcos-Marné (2026), this illiberal shift in language typically precedes formal policy change, reshaping what citizens come to perceive as legitimate political action.

A second cluster of warning signs is institutional, and it tends to concentrate first on arenas of *contestation* rather than participation. Early moves include politicizing courts, undermining checks and balances, and systematically attacking media independence. Comparative evidence from *V-Dem* shows that these pressures on horizontal accountability and the information environment are among the most consistent early predictors of democratic backsliding, often appearing well before elections are openly manipulated (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019; Sato et al., 2022).

Crucially, many violations surface initially at the micro level. Selective law enforcement, administrative harassment, and targeted intimidation of journalists, activists, or opposition figures often precede generalized repression. These uneven practices are easily missed by aggregate indices but are critical for identifying the *moment* when a government shifts from democratic erosion to systematic rights violations. This is why recent work, including a new project I am currently involved in, emphasizes micro-level and discursive evidence as an early-warning system, by the time democratic breakdown is unmistakable, the decisive warning signs have usually been visible for quite some time.

S.A. Once populist governments become authoritarian and engage in systematic practices of violating rights and democratic rules, how does their relationship with international actors and dynamics change? What role do isolation, sanctions, and recognition play in the rise and maintenance of such regimes?

L.Z. It is worth stating upfront that there is no deterministic sequence in which popular, majoritarian projects, or even governments that speak in the name of *"The people"*, inevitably become authoritarian. The international dimension matters, but it typically *mediates* trajectories rather than mechanically producing them. Whether a government consolidates systematic rights violations depends on domestic institutional constraints, coalition incentives, and the availability of material resources and coercive capacity. International pressures can accelerate, slow, or reshape these dynamics, but they do not substitute for them.

Once a regime does shift into systematic rule violation, its external relations tend to reorganize around three mechanisms: legitimation, resources, and alignments. First, international recognition becomes a political asset and a battlefield. Regimes seek diplomatic normalization, through elections, constitutional claims, or multilateral participation, because recognition affects access to finance, contracts, and reputational shields. Conversely, contested recognition can signal illegitimacy and raise the costs of repression.

Second, sanctions and isolation reconfigure the regime's material and political toolkit. Targeted sanctions can constrain elites and reduce resources for co-optation; broad sanctions may also be reframed domestically as external aggression, potentially strengthening nationalist cohesion and justifying further repression. The contrasting experiences of long-isolated cases and sanction-heavy crises illustrate the same conditional logic: effects depend on design, enforcement, and whether rulers can shift costs onto society.

Third, authoritarian regimes often respond by reorienting externally diversifying trade and finance, cultivating protective patrons, and leveraging selective integration. Cases as different as Cuba's "siege" narrative and Russia's ability to combine partial isolation with alternative economic and diplomatic channels underscore a key point, regimes can survive condemnation when they retain external options and sometimes can convert pressure into domestic legitimation.

S.A. In Venezuela in particular, the recent detention of Nicolás Maduro and his possible prosecution in U.S. courts have opened a debate between foreign intervention and the defense of universal democracy. To what extent do Washington's discourse and actions affect the legitimacy and sustainability of the regime's populist and authoritarian model?

L.Z. In Venezuela, Washington's discourse and actions affect the regime's legitimacy and sustainability through two competing, and often simultaneous, mechanisms. Externally, framing the detention and possible prosecution of Nicolás Maduro as a matter of law enforcement and democratic accountability undermines the regime's international legitimacy. It raises reputational costs for diplomatic recognition, constrains access to financial and institutional channels, and reinforces the characterization of the regime as systematically violating democratic rules and human rights rather than merely pursuing a controversial political project. In that sense, U.S. action can strengthen transnational accountability narratives and narrow the space for international normalization, which matters for regime sustainability insofar as it limits resources, credit, and diplomatic cover.

At the same time, these actions can reinforce internal legitimacy among supporters by activating a sovereignty-based

narrative. U.S. involvement is easily reframed as foreign intervention rather than democratic defense, allowing the regime to portray repression as national self-defense and to delegitimize domestic opposition as externally aligned. This dynamic tends to increase short-term regime hardening and raise the perceived exit costs for incumbents. Whether Washington's actions ultimately weaken or entrench the authoritarian model therefore depends less on discourse alone than on coalition effects: if external pressure credibly threatens elite assets, mobility, and future security, it can generate fractures within the ruling bloc; if it instead heightens external confrontation without narrowing the regime's international options, it may consolidate elite cohesion and justify deeper repression. The broader implication is that international intervention reshapes incentives and narratives, but it does not mechanically resolve the durability of authoritarian rule.

S.A. In your view, and based on your research on populism and party systems, what role do the opposition and Venezuelan society play in the possibility of achieving a democratic transition?

L.Z. In my view, the opposition and Venezuelan society matter in two tightly connected ways, they can shift the incentives of regime insiders, whether defections, bargaining, and negotiated guarantees become rational; and sustain a credible alternative that helps coordinate expectations in moments of uncertainty. The transitions literature is clear that durable openings usually require some combination of elite splits, credible guarantees, and sustained societal coordination, not *"Popular will"* alone (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 1991; Linz & Stepan, 1996). In Venezuela today, that logic is reinforced by an unusually strong external veto, U.S. tutelage functions as a key veto player shaping recognition, sanctions relief, and the boundaries of any acceptable transition package, which in turn reorders the incentives of domestic actors.

The current configuration illustrates the constraint. De facto authority remains concentrated in the governing inner circle under Delcy Rodríguez, while the opposition figures who claim the strongest electoral mandate, Edmundo González and María Corina Machado, are not incorporated into decision-making or a visible transition framework. Under those conditions, the opposition's most consequential role is coordination: staying unified around a minimal, verifiable program (electoral guarantees, restoration of party competition, credible protections for participation) and avoiding fragmentation that lowers the costs of exclusion. Society's role is different but complementary, sustaining non-violent mobilization, information flows, and civic networks that raise the administrative and reputational costs of continued closure, while broadening the opposition coalition beyond a narrow partisan base. Measures like prisoner releases and an amnesty law can be meaningful signals of bargaining space, but only if they are paired with enforceable institutional commitments rather than unilateral agenda-setting.

S.A. The detention of Nicolás Maduro and the tensions between the United States and other left-wing regimes and governments introduce an unprecedented precedent in the region's history. How does this development affect the stability and sustainability of authoritarian regimes and populist governments in the region?

L.Z. The detention of Nicolás Maduro is analytically consequential less because it mechanically destabilizes authoritarian regimes, and more because it shifts expectations about external constraint and personal risk for incumbents. At the same time, it is important not to read this as evidence of a deterministic pathway from majoritarian rhetoric to authoritarian consolidation. Many elected governments that claim to speak for *"The people"* remain electorally accountable and institutionally constrained. The relevant pivot is behavioral and institutional, when incumbents start treating pluralism and oversight as illegitimate, securitize dissent, and deploy coercive and legal instruments to police political boundaries, international dynamics cease to be background context and become part of the survival calculus.

In practice, the international environment shapes regime sustainability through three channels. First, recognition becomes a contested resource, diplomatic normalization affects access to credit, trade, and institutional cooperation, while contested recognition raises reputational and transactional costs. Second, sanctions can constrain elites and reduce resources for co-optation, but effects are conditional, targeted measures may fracture coalitions when exposure is individualized, whereas broad measures can be reframed as external aggression and shift costs onto citizens. Third, regimes adapt via external reorientation, diversifying patrons, finance, and markets, and reducing elite vulnerability, so isolation can coexist with selective integration. The broader implication is conditionality rather than inevitability: external shocks matter insofar as they reshape domestic coalition incentives and the regime's viable international options, either increasing hardening and closure or facilitating bargaining and elite exit (Levitsky Way, 2010; Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann Lindberg, 2019).

S.A. Finally, looking ahead to the coming decades for democracies in Latin America and Europe, what reforms and mechanisms could help rebuild political representation and reduce the appeal of populist and authoritarian alternatives?

L.Z. Three sets of reforms matter most if the goal is to rebuild representation while lowering the attractiveness of illiberal shortcuts.

First, strengthen the channels of programmatic accountability. Parties need incentives to invest in organization, recruitment, and policy offers rather than permanent campaigning. Reforms that improve internal party democracy, regulate candidate selection transparently, and reduce the role of opaque money, paired with professional, independent electoral management, help restore the link between citizens' demands and governing responsibility. Next, protect the infrastructure of pluralism. Democracies are most vulnerable when oversight and information are weakened. Safeguarding judicial independence, insulating watchdog agencies, and strengthening media freedom and transparency (including rules on platform accountability and political advertising) reduces the ability of actors to delegitimize opponents and hollow out checks while claiming to speak for *"The people"*. Third, expand meaningful participation beyond elections. Participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies on high-conflict issues, and structured consultation with civil-society organizations can increase responsiveness and reduce the sense that politics is a closed cartel. But these mechanisms work only if they are institutionally linked to legislatures and policy implementation, not treated as symbolic add-ons.

In short, the most effective "antidote" is not a single institutional fix but a package that makes representation more credible, oversight more resilient, and participation more continuous.

S.A. I thank Lisa Zanotti for her valuable insights, perspectives, and contributions to the debate on authoritarianism and democratic transitions in the region. Drawing on the analogy between Latin America and Europe, the researcher demonstrates that democratic backsliding does not stem exclusively from ideologically defined left-wing and right-wing projects, but also involves power logics, populist discourses, and autocratic practices that can emerge across the entire political spectrum. In the face of such dynamics, the strengthening of institutions, the protection of pluralism, and the active participation of society become indispensable factors in preserving democratic systems. In a world marked by polarization and uncertainty, analyzing and reflecting on these issues is vital for anticipating risks and defending democracy.

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