Cultural and Cognitive Transformations Amidst a Global Shift Towards Authoritarianism (2020-2025)

This is detailed 25 page report on the subject, For an easier reading version click here.

I. Executive Summary

The past five years, from 2020 to 2025, have witnessed a profound and accelerating global shift towards authoritarian governance, fundamentally reshaping societal structures and individual thought processes. Data from leading democracy assessment organizations, such as the V-Dem Institute and Freedom House, consistently illustrate a sustained decline in democratic freedoms, with an increasing majority of the world's population now residing in autocratic states. This report delves into the pervasive cultural and cognitive transformations occurring as a direct consequence of this authoritarian expansion. Culturally, there is a marked erosion of fundamental freedoms, a severe shrinking of civic space, and a global rise in nationalism and populism that actively exploits societal divisions. This is accompanied by a systematic undermining of minority rights and an increasing state control over artistic expression, often leading to widespread self-censorship. Cognitively, the world is experiencing a sophisticated manipulation of information environments, contributing to a decline in critical thinking skills and an increased susceptibility to cognitive biases. Concurrently, public trust in independent institutions and scientific expertise is eroding, fostering a "post-truth" phenomenon where objective facts are challenged and cynicism prevails. These cultural and cognitive shifts are not isolated but form complex, self-reinforcing feedback loops that entrench authoritarian power,

making it increasingly challenging for societies to reverse these trajectories and uphold liberal democratic values.

II. Introduction: The Global Authoritarian Context (2020-2025)

The global political landscape has undergone a significant transformation over the past five years, characterized by a sustained and accelerating decline in democratic freedoms and a corresponding rise in authoritarian governance. This trend is not merely a statistical anomaly but a fundamental reordering impacting the lives of billions worldwide, setting the stage for profound cultural and cognitive changes.

The V-Dem Institute's 2022 dataset (V13) provides a critical baseline, indicating that the level of democracy experienced by the average global citizen has regressed to 1986 levels.[1] This alarming statistic is further underscored by the fact that 72% of the world's population now lives in autocracies, a substantial increase from 46% just ten years prior.[1] This rapid shift signifies a fundamental reordering of global governance. Freedom House reports corroborate this trend, documenting a continuous decline in global freedom for 16 consecutive years as of 2022 [2], a trajectory that extended to 19 consecutive years by 2024.[3] In 2021 alone, 60 countries experienced declines in freedom, while only 25 improved.[2] By 2024, the imbalance persisted, with 60 countries facing deterioration in political rights and civil liberties against only 34 improvements.[3] This sustained pattern highlights a systemic and pervasive assault on democratic principles.

The "third wave of autocratization" reached a new peak in 2022, with 42 countries actively moving towards authoritarianism, encompassing 43% of the world's population.[1] In stark contrast, only 14 countries, representing a mere 2% of the global population, were democratizing, a low not seen since 1973.[1] This imbalance underscores the intensity and broad geographical reach of the autocratization wave, spanning all regions, with Asia-Pacific being particularly affected due to declines in populous nations like India.[1] Beyond political shifts, autocracies are also gaining economic power. Their share of world GDP, measured by purchasing power parity, reached 46% in 2022, nearly doubling from 24% in 1992.[1] This economic leverage provides a significant foundation for their political entrenchment and global influence. Geographically, the Middle East and North Africa remain the most autocratic regions, with 98% of the population residing in autocracies, followed by Asia-Pacific (89%),

Sub-Saharan Africa (79%), and Eastern Europe–Central Asia (73%).[1] This illustrates the widespread nature of the authoritarian shift across diverse geopolitical contexts.

A critical observation from this trend is the normalization of authoritarianism as a viable governance model. The significant increase in the proportion of the global population living under autocratic rule, coupled with a substantial rise in the economic power of these regimes, indicates a strategic effort by authoritarian states to present their governance model not as a deviation, but as a legitimate, and even superior, alternative for achieving prosperity and security. Leaders of China, Russia, and other dictatorships have successfully shifted global incentives, challenging the consensus that democracy is the only viable path to prosperity and security.[2] This re-framing fundamentally impacts international relations, trade, and the willingness of other nations to resist autocratic tendencies, as the perceived "cost" of authoritarianism diminishes and its "benefits," such as stability and economic growth, are highlighted.

Another important observation is the interconnectedness of political and economic power in authoritarian expansion. The substantial increase in autocracies' share of global GDP establishes a direct causal link: the economic power accumulated by authoritarian regimes is actively leveraged to provide support and investment to other nations.[1] China, for instance, offers an alternative to democracies as a source of international support and investment, helping would-be autocrats to entrench themselves in office, adopt aspects of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) governance model, and enrich their regimes while ignoring principles like transparency and fair competition.[2] This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where economic influence facilitates political consolidation, and political consolidation, in turn, allows for further economic expansion without the constraints of democratic accountability.

Furthermore, the lines between established democracies and autocracies are blurring through internal erosion. While the primary focus is on the rise of authoritarian regimes, reports also point to internal forces within long-established democracies that exploit systemic shortcomings to promote hatred, violence, and unbridled power.[2] Specific examples include the January 6 Capitol riot in the United States, actions by President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, the undermining of democratic institutions in El Salvador, setbacks in political rights in India, and challenges to the rule of law in Poland.[2] This suggests that the global shift towards authoritarianism is not solely an external phenomenon of countries becoming autocratic, but also an internal process of "democratic backsliding" [5] where established democratic norms and institutions are systematically eroded from within. This internal erosion makes the global landscape more complex, as the ideological and practical distinctions between "free"

and "not free" states become less clear, potentially weakening the global front against outright authoritarianism and making it harder for citizens to discern genuine democratic processes from those being subtly undermined.

This report aims to delve beyond these political and economic statistics to analyze the profound cultural and cognitive shifts occurring within societies as a direct consequence or concomitant phenomenon of this global authoritarian turn. Understanding these deeper societal and individual transformations is crucial for comprehending the full scope of the challenge to liberal democratic values.

III. Cultural Shifts: Societal Fabric Under Strain

The global retreat of democracy has directly translated into a tangible erosion of fundamental freedoms and a severe constriction of civic space, impacting political rights, civil liberties, and the ability of civil society to operate independently. This systematic narrowing of public and private spheres for expression and association is a hallmark of the authoritarian shift.

A. Erosion of Freedoms and Shrinking Civic Space

Global freedom continued its decline for the 19th consecutive year in 2024, as documented by Freedom House.[3] This persistent negative trend is evidenced by 60 countries experiencing a deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties, while only 34 secured improvements in 2024.[3] This consistent imbalance underscores a systemic and ongoing assault on foundational democratic principles. Efforts by authoritarian governments to "extinguish opposition" are a clear driver of this decline, leading four countries—Thailand, Kuwait, Niger, and Tanzania—to transition from "Partly Free" to "Not Free" in 2024.[3] This signifies a deepening of repression and a move towards more restrictive governance models where political dissent is actively suppressed.

The shrinking of civic space is widely recognized as a direct consequence of the growing trend of authoritarianism worldwide.[6] Alarmingly, only 3% of the world's population resided in "open civic space" as of 2024 [6], indicating a near-universal

constriction of the environment for civil society organizations (CSOs) and public engagement. Governments, particularly those with authoritarian tendencies, are actively developing and amending laws to restrict CSOs, especially those involved in human rights and advocacy.[6] Tanzania serves as a case study where new laws specifically target non-governmental organizations. Other countries mentioned for developing laws that restrict civic space include Bolivia, China, Egypt, India, Israel, Malaysia, Russia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.[6] This demonstrates a legalistic approach to repression.

Beyond legal frameworks, repression has evolved from "blunt-force censorship to precise, targeted techniques".[7] This includes the weaponization of modern surveillance technologies such as AI-based facial recognition, spyware (e.g., Pegasus), metadata analysis, and social listening platforms. These tools enable governments to "profile and preempt dissent," effectively stifling opposition before it can even materialize.[7] Authorities also employ "material sanctions like fines and firings, or physical and psychological punishments like arrests, trials" to silence civil society.[8] These measures create a climate of fear, discouraging independent action and expression.

A significant observation is the strategic nature of legal and technological repression. The evidence reveals that the shrinking of civic space is not a haphazard consequence but a deliberate, multi-pronged, and increasingly sophisticated strategy. Governments are not merely reacting to dissent; they are proactively codifying repression through new laws targeting NGOs and weaponizing advanced technology for surveillance and pre-emptive control.[6] This indicates a highly adaptive authoritarian playbook that leverages legal frameworks and technological advancements to create a pervasive chilling effect, moving beyond overt violence to systemic, institutionalized control. This shift from reactive suppression to proactive, legally sanctioned, and technologically enhanced control suggests a more durable and harder-to-challenge form of authoritarianism, as it operates within the guise of legality and technological efficiency.

Furthermore, there is a global export and emulation of authoritarian control models. The research indicates a transnational diffusion of authoritarian tactics. China and Russia are noted for supporting "undemocratic tendencies over other countries," and a "new cohort of authoritarian regimes" is eager to emulate influential players like these.[6] This suggests that the "authoritarian playbook" [10] is not confined to individual states but is being actively shared, adapted, and implemented across borders. This implies that cultural and cognitive shifts observed in one authoritarian context might soon appear in others, as successful repressive strategies, such as surveillance

techniques and legal frameworks for NGO control, are emulated. This makes the global challenge more interconnected and complex, necessitating a coordinated international response rather than isolated national efforts.

Table 1: Global Freedom and Autocratization Trends (2020-2024)

Metric	Value	Source
Consecutive Years of Global Freedom Decline	19 years (as of 2024)	Freedom House [3]
Countries Experiencing Deterioration vs. Improvement (2024)	60 declined, 34 improved	Freedom House [3]
% of World Population Living in Autocracies (2022)	72%	V-Dem Institute [1]
% of World Population Living in "Not Free" Countries (2022)	38%	Freedom House [2]
Countries Autocratizing vs. Democratizing (2022, past decade)	42 autocratizing, 14 democratizing	V-Dem Institute [1]
Autocracies' Share of Global GDP (by PPP, 2022)	46% (up from 24% in 1992)	V-Dem Institute [1]

B. Rise of Nationalism and Populism

The global shift towards authoritarianism has been significantly intertwined with the ascendance of nationalist and populist ideologies. These movements exploit societal divisions and anxieties, often redefining national identity and governance in exclusionary terms, thereby reshaping cultural norms and political discourse.

Since the turn of the millennium, particularly from the mid-2010s onward, there has been a notable "rise of global populism".[11] This trend is manifested by the increasing traction of populist movements, parties, and leaders in both the Global South and

Global North. Examples include Donald Trump's election in the United States and the influence of populist parties leading to events like Brexit in the United Kingdom, with such parties also entering governments in Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Switzerland.[12]

Populist narratives are fundamentally characterized by an "antagonistic struggle between 'the people' and 'the elites'" [11], a discourse often coupled with fervent "anti-immigration and nationalist rhetoric".[14] This rhetoric frequently frames migrants as "threats to national security, cultural identity, and economic stability," leading to the development of negative stereotypes and deepening social divisions within societies.[14] This phenomenon is often described as a "cultural backlash" theory [12], which explains the increasing polarization over the cultural cleavage dividing social liberals and social conservatives. This value-based division directly translates into support for authoritarian-populist parties and leaders.

Populist regimes frequently favor "jus sanguinis" (citizenship based on bloodline or ancestry) over "jus soli" (birthright citizenship). This preference creates a narrower, ethno-nationalist definition of national identity, which in turn marginalizes immigrants and minorities and can deepen societal divides.[14] A key operational feature of authoritarian populism is the "need to have enemies and to have some social group to blame," with "diversity" increasingly becoming the designated target.[15] This demonization of "the other" is presented as a "permanent strategy" that systematically erodes civility and respect for differing viewpoints, fostering an environment of intolerance and distrust.[15]

A critical observation is that populism serves as a gateway to authoritarianism through the erosion of democratic norms. Populist leaders, even when initially elected through democratic processes, often "progressively deconstruct the pillars of our democracies" once in power.[15] They "trample upon norms of live-and-let-live fair play, constraints on partisanship, the protection of civil liberties, and the value of consensus-building".[12] This indicates a clear causal pathway: populist rhetoric, by undermining public confidence in liberal democracy and actively corroding its foundational principles, creates an environment ripe for authoritarian consolidation. The "leaderless struggle for democracy" [4] indicates a vacuum that populists exploit, leading to a "far-right, extremist view of the world capturing the conservative camp".[15] This implies that the cultural acceptance of populist narratives directly facilitates the shift towards more authoritarian governance, even if the leaders initially gain power through electoral means, by systematically dismantling the checks and balances inherent in democratic systems.

Another significant observation is the deepening of societal fragmentation and polarization as a deliberate strategy. The emphasis on "us-them" thinking, the demonization of political opponents, and the explicit targeting of "diversity" [15] are not accidental byproducts of political discourse but rather deliberate strategies employed by authoritarian populism. This active cultivation of division deepens societal fragmentation and political polarization, making compromise harder and normalizing divisive rhetoric throughout the country.[16] This fragmentation, in turn, weakens the collective ability of a society to resist authoritarian encroachment, as citizens become too preoccupied with internal conflicts and distrust to unite against a common threat. The cultural impact is a profound loss of civility and a heightened sense of tribalism, which is then strategically exploited by authoritarian actors to consolidate and maintain power.

C. Impact on Minority Rights and Social Cohesion

The rise of authoritarianism and populism has directly led to increased abuses against minority groups and a fracturing of social cohesion. This is often achieved through policies that codify discrimination and exploit existing societal anxieties, creating a more homogenous and controlled social environment.

Ethnic, religious, and other minority groups have consistently "borne the brunt of government abuses" in both democracies experiencing backsliding and outright authoritarian states.[4] A prominent example is the Indian government's Hindu nationalist agenda, which has abrogated the rights of its Muslim population.[4] Attacks on the rights of immigrants continue even in democratic states, contributing to a "permissive international environment for further violations".[4] This suggests that a global climate of tolerance for such abuses enables their spread. China's "extreme programs of ethnic and religious persecution," particularly against the Uyghur population, illustrate how violations of minority rights serve to erode broader institutional barriers that protect freedom for all individuals within a society.[2] This demonstrates a systematic approach to control.

In the United States, "Project 2025," an "authoritarian playbook," explicitly calls for the deletion of terms such as "sexual orientation," "gender identity," "diversity, equity, and inclusion," "gender equity," "reproductive health," and "reproductive rights" from every federal rule, regulation, contract, and piece of legislation.[17] This signifies a systemic effort to remove legal protections for LGBTQI+ individuals and other

marginalized groups. Policies advocated by Project 2025 also aim to restrict access to gender-affirming care, redefine sex-based rights based on biological sex, and prohibit federal funds from promoting "gender ideology".[18] These actions have direct implications for LGBTQ+ health equity and contribute to societal stigma. The rhetoric of "utero in affitto" (womb for rent) in Italy, which aligns with anti-immigrant and racist "great replacement theory," demonstrates how cultural anxiety and social backlash are leveraged to promote a far-right vision centered on "God, homeland, and family." This strategy fuels discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals and immigrants.[19] Amnesty International's 2025 report further documents a "growing backlash globally against the rights of migrants, refugees, women, girls and LGBTI people," indicating a widespread and accelerating trend of human rights regression.[20]

A significant observation is the instrumentalization of minority rights erosion for political consolidation. The consistent targeting of minority groups is not merely a byproduct of authoritarianism but a deliberate, calculated strategy.[2] By identifying and demonizing "enemies" or "social groups to blame" [15], authoritarian regimes and populist movements achieve multiple objectives: they create internal cohesion among their political base, distract from governance failures, and test the limits of institutional safeguards.[4] The erosion of minority rights serves to normalize discriminatory practices and consolidate power by appealing to a socially conservative or nationalist segment of the population. This indicates that the cultural shift towards intolerance is actively engineered and leveraged for political gain, rather than being a spontaneous societal development.

Furthermore, there is a transnational nature of anti-minority agendas. The explicit mention of "Project 2025" in the United States and its striking similarities to agendas implemented in other countries strongly suggests a cross-border exchange and emulation of anti-rights strategies.[17] The existence of a "permissive international environment for further violations" [4] further indicates that these policies are not isolated national phenomena but are part of a broader, interconnected ideological movement. This implies that the cultural shifts regarding minority rights are not confined by national borders but are part of a global ideological struggle, with authoritarian actors actively collaborating or emulating each other's successful repressive tactics to undermine universal human rights norms.

D. Artistic Expression and Cultural Control

Artistic expression, often a barometer of societal freedom and a vehicle for dissent, faces increasing suppression under authoritarian regimes. This leads to widespread censorship, self-censorship, and the co-option of culture for state-sponsored propaganda, fundamentally altering the cultural landscape.

Authoritarian regimes have "historically attempted to censor artistic endeavors in favor of propaganda".[21] This is a consistent tactic because "art and culture often allow opposition through political commentary," making them a direct threat to unchallenged power.[21] Freemuse's 2025 report documents "yet another difficult year for artists around the world" in 2024, citing global conflicts, political instability, and tightening restrictions on freedom of expression as creating increasingly hostile environments for artistic voices.[22] Artists face direct threats, including arrest, violence, and institutional pressure, with cultural programming increasingly influenced by political agendas.[22] This direct interference stifles creative independence.

A significant and insidious trend is the "widespread self-censorship" among artists, which has become a "survival mechanism in oppressive environments".[21] This "autocensura" [21] indicates a deep psychological impact on the creative community, where the fear of retaliation leads to pre-emptive suppression of dissenting or critical art. Key global trends identified include the expanded use of "foreign agent" laws to silence dissenting voices, political influence over public arts institutions curbing independent programming, and religious/moral-based restrictions that disproportionately affect women, LGBTQ+ artists, and minority communities.[22] State-sponsored art and propaganda are explicitly part of the "authoritarian playbook" [21], aiming to supplant independent artistic endeavors with content that aligns with state narratives. Project 2025, for instance, encourages research funded by taxpayers to "serve the national interest in a concrete way in line with conservative principles," potentially limiting artistic and academic freedom.[24] Despite these mounting pressures, the global artistic community demonstrates resilience, with artists continuing to "create, resist, and speak truth to power" even under the harshest conditions.[22] Art is recognized as "one of the most important and impactful forms of protest," capable of connecting and unifying democracy movements around the world.[25]

A critical observation is the dual role of art as a target of repression and a vector of resistance. The evidence clearly illustrates that art is simultaneously and intensely targeted by authoritarian regimes and serves as a crucial, often subversive, form of protest and resistance.[21] This reveals a dynamic tension: the more authoritarian regimes attempt to control or suppress artistic expression, the more art becomes a powerful and symbolic medium for dissent. The prevalence of self-censorship

highlights the immediate success of repression, but the continued "resistance and resilience" [22] indicates that the fundamental human impulse for free expression persists, often adapting by moving underground or finding new, indirect forms. This implies that cultural control is a constant battleground, not a static outcome, with profound psychological implications for both artists, who face fear and difficult choices, and audiences, who may seek out or interpret art as a form of coded communication.

Another significant observation is the weaponization of law and funding to control cultural narratives. The use of "foreign agent" laws, politically motivated funding restrictions, and the demand for taxpayer-funded research to align with "conservative principles" [22] demonstrates a sophisticated legal and financial strategy to control cultural output. This goes beyond direct, overt censorship to manipulate the very conditions under which art and intellectual work are produced. By controlling the resources and legal frameworks, authoritarian regimes can proactively shape the cultural environment, effectively institutionalizing state-sponsored propaganda and limiting independent thought at its source. This implies a long-term strategy to cultivate a compliant cultural landscape, rather than merely reacting to individual acts of dissent.

IV. Cognitive Transformations: How People Think

The authoritarian shift has profoundly reshaped the information landscape, leading to increased state control over media, the proliferation of propaganda, and a significant impact on how citizens access, consume, and interpret news and information. This manipulation of the information environment directly influences public thought processes.

A. Information Control and Media Consumption

Erosions in press freedom are explicitly identified as both a "contributor to, and a symptom of, current global trends of democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism".[26] A free, independent, and pluralistic media sector is considered "an

essential condition for genuine and well-functioning democratic governance" [26], highlighting its foundational role. The direct suppression of critical voices is evident: as of December 2023, 320 journalists globally were detained or imprisoned in relation to their work, with China, Burma, Belarus, Russia, and Vietnam being the top five countries of detention.[26] "Modern authoritarian governance" relies on an "evolving playbook for repressing independent sources of information".[26] This playbook includes sophisticated tactics beyond direct censorship, such as the selective or arbitrary application of tax laws or licensing practices, ownership takeovers, unfair distribution of government subsidies or advertising budgets, and expensive, time-consuming strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs).[26]

Global internet freedom declined for the 12th consecutive year in 2022, with the sharpest downgrades documented in Russia, Myanmar, Sudan, and Libya.[27] A record number of national governments blocked websites containing nonviolent political, social, or religious content, often targeting sources located outside their borders.[27] The scope of online repression is vast: more than three-quarters of the world's internet users now live in countries where authorities punish people for exercising their right to free expression online.[27] Russia, for instance, has "doubled down on censorship online, internet disruptions, and surveillance" since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.[28]

Authoritarian governments are not acting in isolation; they are "actively collaborating with one another to spread new forms of repression".[2] This includes using "transnational repression to silence their own exiled dissidents through tools like detention, rendition, Interpol abuse, coercion by proxy, and digital surveillance".[2] The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) extends its influence by "employing economic and technological leverage to pressure governments, international institutions, and the private sector to echo its preferred narratives".[2] Furthermore, the CCP requires platforms to use their "algorithmic systems to promote CCP ideology" [27], demonstrating a sophisticated approach to shaping online discourse. Authoritarian regimes and their proxies utilize social media, other online platforms, and traditional media for multiple purposes: to "shape global and domestic narratives," "sow chaos and confusion within democracies," and "undermine democratic processes".[29] This includes manipulative behavior via "armies of bots, AI-generated content and censorship".[30] The European External Action Service (EEAS) detected and analyzed 505 foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) incidents between November 2023 and November 2024, involving 38,000 unique channels across 25 different platforms. The report highlights that Russia and China have put in place "massive digital arsenals" specifically to conduct their FIMI operations.[30] The Reuters

Institute reports a "continuing fall in engagement with traditional media sources such as TV, print, and news websites," while "dependence on social media, video platforms, and online aggregators grows".[31] This shift in consumption patterns makes audiences more vulnerable to platform-driven manipulation and less exposed to traditional journalistic standards.

A significant observation is the sophistication of digital authoritarianism and its impact on information ecosystems. The evidence reveals a significant evolution in authoritarian information control, moving beyond blunt censorship to a more sophisticated, multi-layered approach. This includes not just direct blocking of websites and arrest of journalists [26], but also the subtle manipulation of algorithms [27], the deployment of AI-generated content and bot armies [30], and the leveraging of economic influence to pressure international actors into echoing preferred narratives.[2] This indicates that authoritarian regimes are not just suppressing information; they are actively engineering information environments to ensure state-endorsed narratives dominate and dissent is marginalized. The cognitive implication for citizens is that they are increasingly operating within curated, often biased, information bubbles, making it significantly harder to access diverse perspectives, critically evaluate information, and discern objective truth from propaganda.

Another critical observation emerges from the consistent reporting that governments are implementing "anti-disinformation laws" that "more often than not act as a smokescreen for clamping down on press freedom and muzzling critical journalism".[9] This highlights a cynical and strategic co-option by authoritarian regimes: they are leveraging the legitimate global concern about disinformation to justify their repressive measures. This creates a paradoxical and deeply damaging situation where the purported fight against "fake news" is used to silence legitimate news and independent reporting, further eroding public trust in all media and making it increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish between genuine and manipulated information. This strategy also serves to legitimize state control over the information sphere by framing it as a necessary public good.

Furthermore, there is a global interoperability of authoritarian information control. The explicit mention of "antidemocratic alliances" [2] and the active collaboration between authoritarian leaders to "spread new forms of repression" [2], including transnational repression and the sharing of governance models [2], indicate a coordinated global effort in information control. The EEAS report on FIMI [30] further details "massive digital arsenals" put in place by Russia and China for information manipulation. This suggests that the tactics of information control are not developed in isolation but are shared, refined, and deployed across borders, creating a more robust and resilient global

authoritarian information ecosystem. This implies that the cognitive impact of these trends is not localized but is part of a global phenomenon, affecting how people think about truth, trust, and reality across diverse societies, making the challenge of countering disinformation an international imperative.

Table 2: Trends in Media Freedom and Online Repression (2020-2024)

Metric	Value	Source
Consecutive Years of Global Internet Freedom Decline	12 years (as of 2022)	Freedom House [27]
Journalists Detained or Imprisoned (as of Dec 2023)	320 globally (top 5: China, Burma, Belarus, Russia, Vietnam)	CRS [26]
Countries/Territories with Virtually No Independent Media (0/4 score, 2024)	34 (tripled from 13 in 2005)	Freedom House [3]
Countries/Territories with Attacks on Media Recorded (2024)	Over 120	Freedom House [3]
% of World's Internet Users Punished for Online Free Expression (2022)	Over 75%	Freedom House [27]
Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference (FIMI) Incidents Detected (Nov 2023-Nov 2024)	505 incidents, 38,000 unique channels	EEAS [30]

B. Decline in Critical Thinking and Rise of Cognitive Biases

The manipulated information environment and broader societal shifts under authoritarianism have contributed to a noticeable decline in critical thinking skills and an increased susceptibility to cognitive biases. This fundamentally alters how

individuals process information, form beliefs, and engage with complex societal issues.

A study by Carnegie Mellon University and Microsoft found a direct correlation: the more humans rely on AI tools for tasks, the less they utilize their critical thinking skills, potentially making it harder to use these skills in the future.[34] This suggests a technological accelerant to cognitive decline, especially as AI tools become more ubiquitous. Public perception identifies technology (29%), changing societal norms (28%), and the education system (22%) as the primary causes for deficits in critical thinking skills.[35] This indicates a multifaceted problem rooted in both structural societal issues and individual behavioral patterns. Within the education system, a significant challenge is that many teachers harbor misconceptions about how to effectively teach critical thinking, often separating it from the learning of basic facts. However, research strongly suggests that critical thinking skills are best acquired when integrated with subject area knowledge.[35] This highlights a systemic pedagogical gap. Media literacy, a crucial skill for navigating today's complex information landscape, is still not widely taught in schools, with 44% of teachers reporting no such courses. This leaves a significant portion of the population ill-equipped to critically evaluate information.[35]

Research identifies over 200 cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, the Dunning-Kruger effect, and the availability heuristic, that lead to inaccurate or irrational judgments and decisions.[36] These biases are particularly amplified in polarized societies where information is politicized and presented in partisan terms.[37] Motivated reasoning, defined as the tendency to accept information that confirms pre-existing beliefs and dismiss contradictory evidence, is especially pronounced in politically divided countries where issues like climate change are politicized as partisan matters rather than objective facts.[37] The Dunning-Kruger effect, a cognitive bias where individuals with low competence overestimate their knowledge, can amplify misinformation as people "assertively deny scientific consensus" without properly comprehending the complexity of the subject matter.[37] Political polarization is characterized by both "affective polarization" (increasingly dissimilar attitudes toward parties and their members) and "ideological polarization" (dissimilar attitudes toward ideologies and policies). Mounting psychological evidence suggests that affective polarization is growing more rapidly and may even be driving ideological polarization, often rooted in "political tribalism" and "us-them" thinking.[16] Intolerance of uncertainty, a personality trait, exacerbates polarized perception. Individuals less tolerant of uncertainty tend to interpret political information through an "ideologically biased, subjective 'lens'" that produces clear-cut judgments, fueling

polarized attitude formation.[38]

A significant observation is the self-reinforcing cycle of digital dependence, cognitive bias, and political polarization. The evidence illustrates a dangerous and self-reinforcing feedback loop. Increased reliance on AI tools and digital platforms for information and tasks [31] is shown to reduce critical thinking skills.[34] This weakened critical thinking, combined with a significant lack of media literacy education [35], makes individuals more susceptible to pervasive cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and the Dunning-Kruger effect.[36] These biases, in turn, are actively exploited by authoritarian actors through sophisticated disinformation and propaganda campaigns [29], which further entrench "us-them" tribalism and political polarization.[16] This creates a cognitive environment where objective truth is secondary to ideological alignment and group identity, making societies more vulnerable to manipulation and less capable of rational, collective problem-solving.

Another critical observation is the deliberate exploitation of cognitive vulnerabilities by authoritarian regimes. The extensive research on cognitive biases [36] coupled with the documented, active use of disinformation and propaganda by authoritarian regimes [29] indicates that these regimes are not just incidentally benefiting from inherent human cognitive vulnerabilities but are actively studying and exploiting them. The "weaponization of uncertainty" [39] is a prime example of this deliberate strategy, where the natural human aversion to ambiguity is manipulated to promote specific narratives. This implies a sophisticated understanding by authoritarian actors of human psychology, allowing them to tailor propaganda and control narratives more effectively, thereby fundamentally altering the cognitive landscape of their populations and potentially influencing global discourse.

C. Erosion of Trust in Institutions and Expertise

A significant cognitive shift observed under the global authoritarian turn is the widespread erosion of public trust in foundational institutions, including government, independent media, and scientific expertise. This erosion is often deliberately fostered by authoritarian actors to consolidate their power and reduce accountability.

Public trust in the federal government in the United States has declined significantly, with only 23% of Americans trusting it in 2024, a notable drop from 35% in 2022.[40] This decline is observed across all demographic groups studied, including

Republicans (10%), Democrats (39%), and Independents (19%), indicating a broad societal issue.[40] Further illustrating this distrust, only 15% of Americans believe the government is transparent, and a substantial 66% believe it is incompetent.[40] Low levels of trust in government are directly linked to reduced civic participation, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where the government becomes less responsive to public needs.[40] Low levels of social trust, or trust in other people, are strongly associated with less confidence in national news organizations, local news outlets, the police, and the federal government.[41] Political polarization is identified as a key contributor to this decline, as negative views of opposing parties and their supporters have grown significantly.[41]

Authoritarian regimes "invariably target science and scientists," treating scientific evidence not as a tool for understanding but as an "obstacle to overcome".[39] This is a direct attack on the independent pursuit of knowledge. Tactics employed to undermine scientific expertise include fabricating facts, such as "Sharpiegate" where political figures manipulated scientific data, weaponizing uncertainty to suggest that evidence simply does not exist, and actively silencing scientists who challenge official narratives.[39] This suppression can lead to a "brain drain," as scientists seek opportunities in environments more compatible with open discourse and innovation.[39] Research indicates that supporters of populist incumbent parties are "more likely to hold reservations about science".[42] Populist leaders often perceive scientists as part of the "elite structure" and attack them as "corrupt elites" who are against the "will of the people".[42] Governments with authoritarian tendencies "fortify their propaganda machineries" while simultaneously "reengineering regulatory frameworks to muzzle independent journalism, all under the pretext of tackling disinformation".[9] This "weaponization of disinformation" directly erodes public trust in the media.[9] Politicians increasingly "discredit critical media by branding them as sources of 'fake news,'" a strategy that diminishes public confidence in journalism and allows politicians to avoid accountability.[33]

A significant observation is the deliberate strategy of undermining trust as a precursor to authoritarian control. The consistent and systematic targeting of government institutions, independent media, and scientific communities [9] is not a coincidental outcome of authoritarianism but a deliberate and calculated strategy within the "authoritarian playbook".[10] By systematically eroding public trust in these foundational pillars of liberal democracy, authoritarian regimes create a vacuum of credibility that they can then fill with their own narratives and state-controlled information. This indicates that the decline in trust is a calculated move designed to weaken societal resistance, dismantle checks on power, and ensure unchallenged authority,

fundamentally altering the cognitive landscape by making citizens more reliant on official, often biased, sources and less capable of independent judgment.

Furthermore, there is a link between declining social trust and susceptibility to authoritarian narratives. The finding that lower social trust, or trust in other people, correlates with less confidence in institutions like news organizations and government [41] suggests a deeper societal vulnerability that authoritarian regimes exploit. When people do not trust each other or their established institutions, they become more susceptible to simplistic, strongman narratives that promise order, stability, and a clear enemy.[15] This implies that the erosion of both interpersonal and institutional trust creates a fertile ground for authoritarian ideologies to take root, as individuals seek certainty and clear answers in a perceived chaotic and untrustworthy world, making them more willing to trade freedoms for perceived security.

D. The "Post-Truth" Phenomenon

The rise of authoritarianism has been accompanied by, and indeed thrives on, a "post-truth" environment where objective facts are challenged, "alternative facts" gain traction, and a shared understanding of reality becomes increasingly elusive. This phenomenon has significant psychological and societal consequences, impacting civic engagement and collective decision-making.

The emergence of terms like "alternative facts" and the concept of a "post-truth" era describe a period where false statements gain currency, leading to widespread "hand-wringing about the fate of democratic societies".[43] This highlights a fundamental challenge to the epistemic foundations of democracy. Misinformation, disinformation, and "fake news" have become "much more prevalent during the last decade" [44], leading to "increasing misperceptions and knowledge resistance" among the populace.[44] This signifies a deliberate effort to distort public understanding. A critical aspect of the post-truth phenomenon is not just that citizens believe false information, but rather a "peculiar kind of cynicism—an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established".[43] This pervasive cynicism leads to further withdrawal from the public realm and a "loss of faith in the possibilities of democratic politics".[43]

Cognitive biases play a significant role: people tend to prefer information congruent with existing beliefs (confirmation bias) and actively avoid or counter-argue

contradictory information (disconfirmation bias), with motivated reasoning biasing their information processing.[44] The proliferation of disinformation "wreaks havoc on society in the form of polarization, manipulation, and, at its most extreme, acts of violence".[9] This demonstrates the tangible and severe consequences of a fractured information environment. The constant exposure to negative media news and uncertainty-inducing information, such as war, governance changes, and economic downturns, leads to significant psychological distress, anxiety, heightened vigilance, and "cognitive rigidity".[45] This creates a "self-perpetuating vicious circle of worry and excessive media consumption" that can result in maladaptive coping strategies.[45] Emotions, particularly "non-epistemic" ones such as anger, fear, and disgust, play a significant role in the spread and belief in fake news, often proving more influential than analytical thinking in shaping perceptions.[46] This highlights the emotional manipulation inherent in disinformation campaigns.

A significant observation is the psychological toll of the post-truth era and its impact on civic engagement. The constant bombardment of misinformation, the erosion of a shared reality [43], and the resulting "peculiar kind of cynicism" [43] are not merely intellectual challenges but profoundly psychological ones. This environment induces "distress and anxiety," leading to "cognitive rigidity" [45] and a "loss of faith in the possibilities of democratic politics".[43] This indicates that the post-truth environment fostered by authoritarianism does not just mislead people but also exhausts them emotionally and cognitively, making them less likely to engage in civic life, challenge authority, or participate in collective action. The strategic use of emotional manipulation [46] further bypasses rational thought, creating a populace that is more reactive, less deliberative, and ultimately more pliable to authoritarian control.

Another critical observation is the strategic cultivation of cynicism and apathy by authoritarian regimes. The "loss of truth" and the deliberate use of social media to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories [15] are described as a "permanent strategy" of authoritarian populism. The resulting pervasive cynicism [43] and disengagement from civic participation [40] are not unintended consequences but rather desired outcomes for authoritarian regimes. By making people doubt everything, fostering a belief that "no one believes anything anymore" [43], and encouraging withdrawal from public discourse, these regimes face less organized opposition, reduced public scrutiny, and a diminished capacity for collective resistance. This indicates that the "post-truth" era is a deliberate and effective tool in the authoritarian playbook, aimed at dismantling the very cognitive and social foundations necessary for a functioning, vibrant democracy.

V. Interconnectedness and Feedback Loops

The cultural and cognitive shifts discussed are not isolated phenomena but are deeply interconnected, forming complex feedback loops that reinforce and accelerate the global authoritarian turn. These interactions create a self-perpetuating dynamic that entrenches authoritarian governance and makes it increasingly difficult for societies to reverse course.

The pervasive proliferation of state-controlled media, propaganda, and disinformation directly fuels the rise of nationalism and populism. By amplifying "us-them" narratives, demonizing minorities, and promoting a "cultural backlash" against liberal values [12], these controlled information environments shape public opinion. As individuals consume more biased and emotionally charged information, their pre-existing cognitive biases are reinforced, making them more receptive to populist rhetoric and less likely to critically question official narratives or seek diverse perspectives. This creates a populace more easily mobilized by nationalist appeals and less resistant to authoritarian agendas.

The deliberate erosion of public trust in independent institutions and expertise by authoritarian regimes [9] directly weakens civil society's ability to operate as a check on power. When citizens distrust independent media, scientific consensus, and democratic processes, they are less likely to engage in collective action, support human rights organizations, or demand accountability from their governments. This reduced civic participation and the resulting apathy [40] enable the further shrinking of civic space and the suppression of dissent [6], creating a vicious cycle where a less engaged populace allows for greater authoritarian control, which in turn further diminishes trust and engagement.

The "post-truth" environment, characterized by the acceptance of "alternative facts" and a general cynicism towards objective truth [43], provides fertile ground for authoritarian regimes to propagate false narratives about minority groups. This makes it easier to justify and implement the erosion of minority rights by dehumanizing targeted populations and legitimizing discriminatory policies through fabricated pretexts. The psychological toll of constant uncertainty and negative information [45] can also lead to widespread apathy and cognitive rigidity, further reducing public outcry and resistance against such abuses. These interconnected dynamics highlight

that the cultural and cognitive transformations are not merely symptoms of authoritarianism but active mechanisms that facilitate its entrenchment and expansion.

VI. Conclusion

The past five years have marked a significant and concerning trajectory for global democracy, with a pervasive shift towards authoritarian governance profoundly impacting both cultural landscapes and individual thought patterns. The statistical evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates a retreat of democratic freedoms, a rise in autocratic regimes, and a corresponding increase in their economic influence. This global reorientation is not a passive development but an active, strategic process.

Culturally, societies under the influence of rising authoritarianism experience a systematic erosion of fundamental freedoms and a severe constriction of civic space. This is achieved through sophisticated legal frameworks and advanced surveillance technologies designed to preempt and suppress dissent. Concurrently, nationalist and populist ideologies gain traction by exploiting societal divisions, redefining national identity in exclusionary terms, and actively demonizing minority groups. This deliberate fragmentation of social cohesion is further exacerbated by the state's increasing control over artistic expression, leading to widespread censorship and self-censorship, even as art continues to serve as a vital, albeit often underground, form of resistance.

Cognitively, these shifts are manifested in a transformed information environment. State control over media, coupled with the proliferation of sophisticated propaganda and disinformation, fundamentally alters how individuals access and interpret information. This manipulation contributes to a measurable decline in critical thinking skills and an increased susceptibility to cognitive biases, which are actively exploited by authoritarian actors. The systematic undermining of independent institutions, including media and scientific bodies, further erodes public trust, fostering a "post-truth" era where objective facts are challenged, and a pervasive cynicism about truth and democratic possibilities takes hold. This psychological toll leads to reduced civic engagement and a greater pliability to authoritarian narratives.

The cultural and cognitive transformations are deeply intertwined, forming reinforcing feedback loops. Information control fuels nationalist narratives, which in turn deepen

societal polarization. The erosion of trust in institutions weakens civil society's ability to act as a check on power, allowing for further restrictions on freedoms. The "post-truth" environment, with its manufactured cynicism, diminishes public will to resist abuses against minority rights. This complex interplay creates a resilient and self-perpetuating authoritarian ecosystem, where the way people think and the cultural norms they inhabit are continually reshaped to consolidate power and reduce accountability. Reversing these trends requires a multifaceted understanding of these interconnected dynamics and a concerted effort to rebuild trust, foster critical thought, and defend the spaces for free expression and civic engagement that are fundamental to democratic life.

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