# The Anti-Autocracy Handbook

*A Scholars' Guide to Navigating Democratic Backsliding*

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## The Context

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 paved the way for the democratization of many Eastern European countries and triumphantly ushered in the era of global liberal democracy that some scholars celebrated as "the end of history" (Fukuyama,1992). Unfortunately, events unfolded a little differently. The last 20 years offer little reason to celebrate a linear arc of progress, let alone the end of history.

Democracy is now under attack globally. The world is nearly evenly divided between 91 democracies and 88 autocracies. Since 2003, the share of the global population living under autocratic regimes has surged from 50% to 72%, encompassing 5.7 billion individuals.[1] Democratic erosion extends even to long-standing "stable" democracies, such as the United States, which has been added to a watchlist of countries with "faltering civic freedoms" by CIVICUS, a nonprofit organization that serves as an advocate for democracy. In addition, journalists have been facing increasing systemic economic pressures, which has led to the rapid decline of press freedom in the past ten years, as indicated by Reporters Without Borders.

## Democratic Backsliding

The causes of democratic backsliding are manifold, but recent scholarship has identified democratic norm violations by elites (i.e., elected officials, but also media tycoons and business leaders) as a critical variable.[2, 3, 4] Democratic norms are crucial, but often unspoken, safety layers that ensure the functioning of a democracy even though constitutions and laws leave gaps and ambiguities. One crucial norm is mutual toleration, which means that each political contestant accepts the others' right to compete for power and government.[5] When elites violate those norms, the door is opened to autocrats who want to grab more power for themselves and their cronies at the expense of democracy and the rule of law.

Elites are also crucial actors in restoring democracy before a tipping point into autocracy is reached[2], although public support for democracy is an important factor.[6] There is evidence that nonviolent opposition movements that encompass more than 3.5% of the population are nearly always successful in achieving their goals.[7]

Autocrats tend to follow a common playbook: they deploy populism by pretending to champion "the people" against "the elites", they seek to enhance polarization by dividing people, and they seek to prevent accountability by undermining the very notion of truth and sowing confusion about basic facts.[8, 6, 9]

**The 3Ps of Autocrats:**

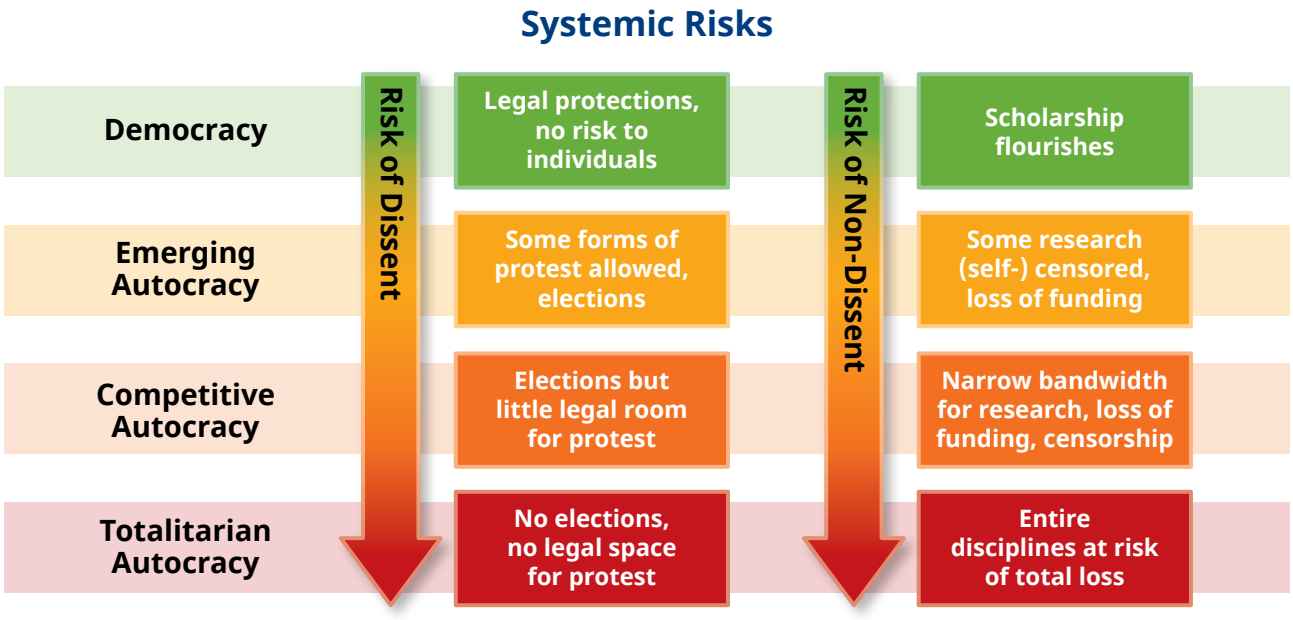
- Populism
- Polarization
- Post-truth

## Science and Scholarship in the Crosshairs

Although democratic backsliding affects all sectors of society, scholarship and science are inevitably among its first victims, together with the independent judiciary and critical media. As early as 1942, Robert Merton noted that science requires democracy to flourish and that under totalitarianism "anti-rationalism and the centralization of institutional control both serve to limit the scope provided for scientific activity" (p. 126).[10] Within a month of taking power, the Trump administration unleashed what a Nature editorial called an "unprecedented assault on science".[11]

Autocratization creates a cascade of systemic risks for science and scholarship. In the extreme case, under a totalitarian regime without dissent, entire disciplines may be at risk of loss and research is confined to a narrow space defined by the rulers. At the same time, as autocratization proceeds, the space for dissent shrinks. Autocratization also imperils health: life expectancy in former democracies that have reverted to autocracy (e.g., Honduras, Nicaragua, Turkey, and Venezuela) has declined by an average of 2 percent compared to countries that preserved their democracy.

It is helpful to understand repression as a multidimensional continuum of increasing or decreasing intensity, and also of contestation and norm change, rather than a categorical distinction.[12, 13, 14, 4] Some of the dimensions which affect scholars and which vary in repression include ideological taboos for particular research topics and 'thought police'; constraints on collaboration and publication; public loyalty displays and rituals of submission to authorities; enforced privileging of certain gender, ethnic, and religious groups; enforced marginalisation of others; criminalisation of speech affirming facts or findings; loss of employment and funding; and application of violence through informal actors (thugs, vigilantes) and formal actors (police and soldiers).

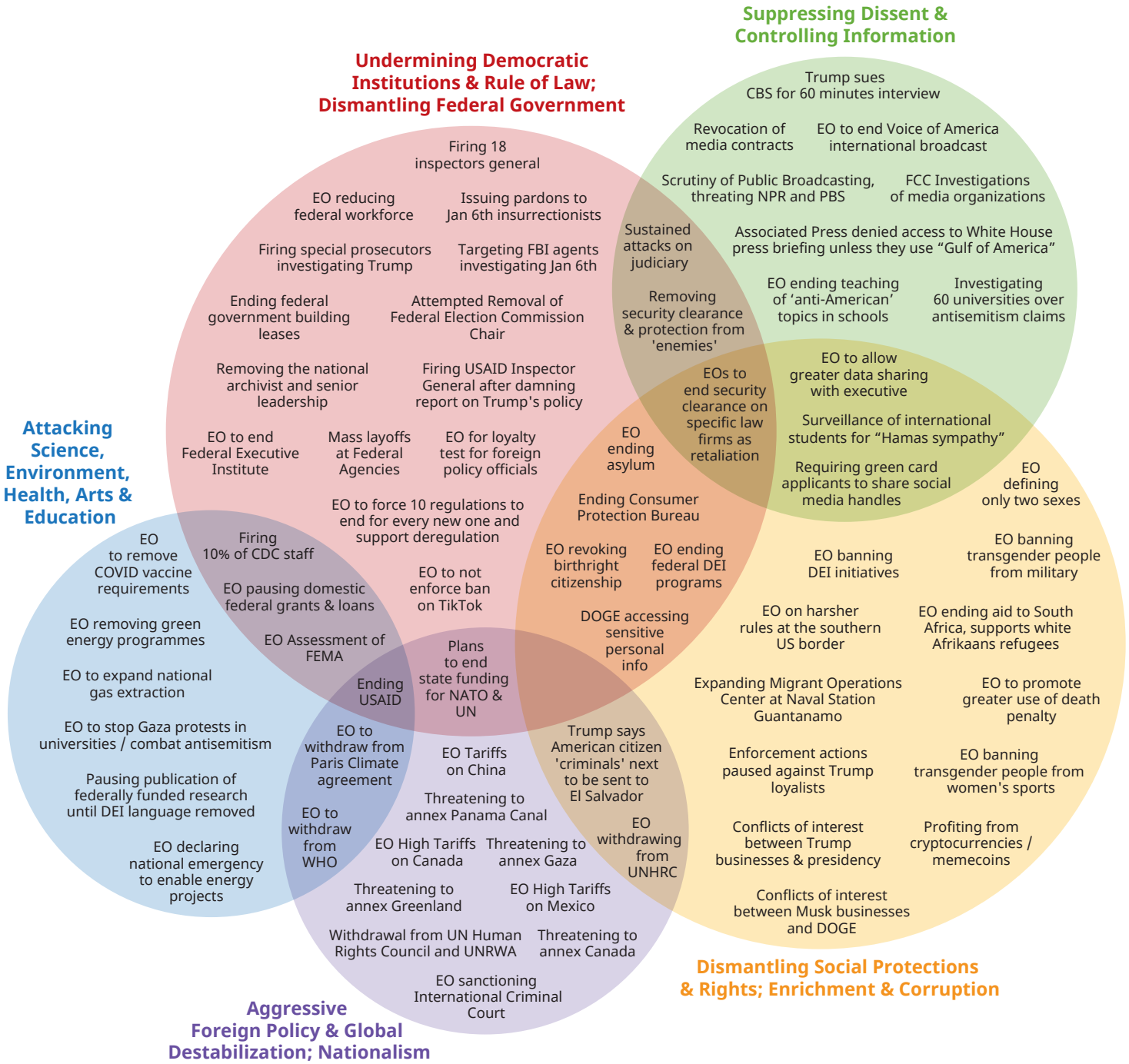



As of early 2025, the United States has moved markedly down the continuum towards autocracy, given the large number of government actions that are incompatible with democracy.

- Scientists working for the federal government have been barred from collaborating with international organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO). Scientists were instructed to withdraw papers that had already been accepted for publication if they did not comply with the administration's diktats concerning acceptable content.

- A large number of visas for foreign students have been revoked for no reason other than political speech or activism, with some legal residents being snatched off the street and transferred to facilities where they await deportation, sometimes in apparent defiance of court orders.
- By April 2025, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) had terminated nearly 800 research projects, including nearly half of all projects addressing vaccine hesitancy and more than half of all projects involving LGBTQ+ issues.[15]

This diagram shows the effects of executive orders (EO) on academic freedom and scholarship issued during Trump's first 3 months in office:




*This diagram is illustrative, showing a selection of the Trump administration's authoritarian actions. For a more comprehensive list and history, see [http://sks.to/trumpactiontracker](http://sks.to/trumpactiontracker).*

> ***The Trump administration may have compromised science to a greater extent in 6 weeks than the Hungarian strongman Viktor Orban was able to achieve in 15 years, despite major efforts in Hungary to politicize and 'domesticate' science.***[16]
>
> *Péter Kreko (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary)*

Steven Levitsky and colleagues, who study how democracies end, proposed a simple metric to tell whether a society has crossed the line into authoritarianism: the cost of opposing the government. In a democracy, citizens do not have to worry about consequences when they peacefully oppose the government—the idea of opposition is foundational to democracy. Under authoritarianism, by contrast, opposition incurs a cost. People or institutions may be investigated on specious charges or may be hit by frivolous lawsuits, or they may lose their jobs and livelihood.

## The Authoritarian Playbook

The current democratic backsliding is far from unique in American history. The 1940s and 1950s saw similar attempts to silence inconvenient voices under the guise of investigating "un-American activities". This came to be associated with the term McCarthyism. The term connotes the erosion of civil liberties, politicization of institutions, a culture of fear, and the chilling effect of repression that selective targeting, arbitrary investigations, and accusations untethered from evidence instilled among industries and communities.

### Process as Punishment

In a recent article, Renee DiResta highlighted how the House Un-American Activities (HUAC) Committee, which sought to identify communists and other subversive individuals and organizations, "focused exclusively on *exposing* its targets—and exposure was enough. Once artists, organizers, teachers, lawyers, and other Americans were smeared by the committee as subversives, their reputations disintegrated and their projects collapsed."

HUAC began its operations in the House in 1938. By the early 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy's rise in the Senate brought a new level of public spectacle to interrogations of purported subversives. As with HUAC, McCarthy rarely offered more than speculative allegations; nonetheless, compliant media transformed mere insinuation into evidence of guilt. Neither HUAC nor McCarthy needed formal enforcement power; their strength lay in what they cowed others into proactively doing. Afraid of attracting attention and hoping to appease the authoritarians by conforming to their demands, employers, universities, and entire industries blacklisted colleagues, fired employees, and policed speech all on their own. The voluntary capitulations, however, only emboldened the inquisitors.

It is this "process as punishment" that American institutions, academics, and media are now again facing. Accusations-as-gospel and hearings-as-punishment are quickly reemerging as a powerful force in U.S. politics. Often it is not the goal or outcome that matters, but the spectacle of accusation along the way.

## Manufacture a Bogeyman

Autocratization invariably involves exploitation of a real or—more likely—fabricated threat to justify suppression of dissent and other repressive measures.[17, 18] Those threats typically involve minority groups (e.g., LGBTQI+) and topics that are associated with marginalised and disadvantaged groups (e.g., critical race theory, critical feminism).

Ironically, real threats are neglected by autocratic governments if the responses would imperil profits and power. Trump in his first term severely underestimated the real risks posed by COVID and his stance on the climate change crisis is a prime example of the denial of real threats.[19]

The relative powerlessness and stigma of targeted groups often leads to a lack of solidarity with victims during democratic backsliding, but this is a critical and preventable error.[20] Privileged folks should stand up for the persecuted as authoritarianism rises, because it is a lot easier to stop persecution of minorities when it is still controversial than to defy it when repression has reached the mainstream and become accepted as conventional.[21]

## Selective Targeting: The Serengeti Strategy

Politically motivated operations against scholars and scientists have a long history and, just like autocratization, follow the same playbook.[22] As climate scientist Michael Mann put it, "much as lions on the Serengeti seek out vulnerable zebras at the edge of a herd, special interests faced with adverse scientific evidence often target individual scientists rather than take on an entire scientific field at once".[23] By focusing on single individuals, enormous pressure can be applied to one person from multiple directions.

There are many ways to respond to these strategies, all of which rest on a common important realization: **You are not alone.**

The attackers may focus on what they think is a single Zebra. But no scholar is isolated — we all have colleagues and friends, many of whom have had similar experiences and can provide advice and support.

Recent experience suggests that this strategy can also be applied to institutions that are not typically considered a single vulnerable zebra. The Trump administration's confrontational stance towards Harvard University is one example, although this does not alter the fact that solidarity and coordination among institutions seems to be key to responding to such pressure.

## Information Laundering as a Form of Mythmaking

Autocratic governmental forces often align with pseudo-independent, extragovernmental forces including journalists and activist groups, laundering false narratives across fringe media, government investigations, and lawsuits in order to lend them an air of legitimacy.

In the United States, attacks on disinformation researchers benefited from this cycle, as The American Sunlight Project detailed in a 2024 report. Substack bloggers and other fringe media personalities made false allegations that disinformation researchers colluded with government and social media companies to censor conservative voices. These allegations led to Congressional investigations that sought—often with the power of a Congressional subpoena—reams of documents and hours-long depositions from researchers. They would provide the framing for Congressional hearings, at which the Substack bloggers who made the initial false allegations would appear as witnesses.

Activist groups aligned with the Congressional investigators then used the gathered documents and hearings as the basis of legal action.

Similar information laundering has also been applied to public outcries over university responses to pro-Palestine protests and other hot-button "culture war" issues. In the case of disinformation researchers, the laundering of this narrative contributed to the widespread myth that disinformation research is tantamount to censorship, and has led to a climate of hostility, threats, and self-censorship against those working in the field.

## Common personal responses and obstacles

An ironic aspect of authoritarianism is that most of the power of the autocrat is freely given. The owners of the Washington Post and Los Angeles Times were not forced by Donald Trump to rescind endorsements of Kamala Harris that their editorial teams had wanted to publish before the 2024 presidential election. Those were acts of pre-emptive obedience to placate a presidential candidate who had threatened retribution against his opponents.

If powerful institutions and billionnaires choose pre-emptive obedience over insistence on their democratic rights, then it is unsurprising—and fully understandable—that individual citizens and scholars are also responding to autocratization by yielding and accommodating rather than resisting and dissenting.[13]

Although the actions by which researchers are targeted can have a legal sheen, such as Freedom of Information requests, for the target they are indistinguishable from plain intimidation and harassment.

Intimidation and harassment have emotional consequences that should not be underestimated. That is why we foreground self-care as an important defensive step. In addition to feeling stressed, you may also find that all of a sudden, your cognitive bandwidth is not what it used to be. Almost everyone who has been targeted reports periods of "brain fuzz"—if this happens to you, remember that the experience is widely shared, that it will be temporary, and that evidence-based coping strategies are available, as discussed below.

It is important to understand those natural responses so that scholars and citizens can decide whether this is the path they wish to take or whether they want to oppose, resist, and exercise defiance—and as we show below, steps to do so exist.

Gene Sharp, one of the foremost analysts of power and resistance, stated that any power structure relies upon the subjects' obedience—when people do not obey, rulers have no power.

## Hope That it Will Go Away

It is natural to think that an eruption of outrage on social media that is triggered by specious accusations against you may die down on its own. Perhaps the best response is to do nothing? Some institutions even counsel "strategic silence," based on the idea that responding to an allegation only adds to its amplification and credibility.

While there are some situations in which this may be the right response, it very often does not work, particularly in the internet era, where false claims can reach millions in a short period of time. Saying nothing leaves the field to the critics, and they can fill the void with fantasies or conspiracy theories. Dr. Kate Starbird, a professor at the University of Washington, noted that after her project researching misinformation was ruthlessly smeared and attacked, her institution's understanding of this maxim was key to the project's survival. She writes:

> "In addition to multiple lawsuits and public records requests, I've sat through two closed-door congressional interviews and have had to counter false claims published in a congressional report. (One lesson we've learned is around the limits of "strategic silence" and the value of getting factual information out into the world, quickly, to correct falsehoods.) It's been taxing, but I made it through because my team and I received unflinching support from the UW [University of Washington], where colleagues and leadership at multiple levels stepped up to assist and advocate for us."

If a narrative reaches a wide enough distribution (Ben Nimmo's "Breakout Scale" can be helpful in determining what level of amplification deserves a response), filling the information void with strong and clear statements is a good (if imperfect) measure. Put the facts out in as many mediums as possible: a fact-sheet or statement, a video, interviews with professional media outlets. Critically, this puts those spreading falsehoods on notice and preserves your legal recourse if you seek it in the future.

Freezing and hoping that it will all somehow go away is neither individually nor collectively effective.

## Self-Censorship

Self-censorship has been identified as "the bedrock of authoritarianism's behavioural architecture".[24] Why do people self-censor?

Recent studies have shown that self-censorship spreads through cautionary warnings from others and witnessing others who are self-censoring.[24] It is difficult to resist self-censoring when others are doing it and are warning you against speaking out, as well as when you see others succeed because they are self-censoring (e.g., by being promoted).

Self-censorship is also often practiced by people who are targets of online harassment, such as academics, media workers, or politicians. Support from colleagues and supervisors can counteract self-censorship in the face of online harassment.[25]

## Anticipatory Obedience

There have been reports that many American universities have advised academics not to speak out on "controversial" issues such as climate change, even when this is still technically possible.

This is an understandable and pervasive response to autocracy: people seek to avoid or minimize adverse consequences by anticipating what the regime expects of them, and complying in advance. This anticipatory obedience is unlikely to achieve the desired purpose, however. For example, the Trump administration dismantled core infrastructure for climate research early in 2025 (within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) irrespective of the silence of universities.

As Timothy Snyder put it in his writings on tyranny: Do not obey in advance. Wait for the memo.

## Reluctance to be Political

Under competitive authoritarianism, which is what the political system in the US may become, individual opposition to the government is harder and riskier, which makes many people withdraw from political life.[26] Yet, as Levitsky and Way point out, this lack of political opposition is even more costly, as it "could pave the way for authoritarian entrenchment—with grave and enduring consequences for global democracy".

Even in democracies, academics are often reluctant to be seen as political.[27] This reasoning reflects the ethos that science should be impartial. However, there are situations when scientists cannot help but become embroiled in political battles.[28] For example, it is difficult to see how scientists studying the origin of SARS-CoV-2 could have escaped political controversy once powerful actors entered the fray for political reasons.[29] Fortunately, there is evidence that scientists' credibility does not suffer when they engage in policy advocacy within their domain of expertise.[30]

There is another important aspect of "not being political": In crisis situations, such as when academic scholarship is being attacked by politicians and even governments, remaining apolitical is itself a highly political act.

> Not being political can mean providing political support for powerful actors who dominate the status quo.

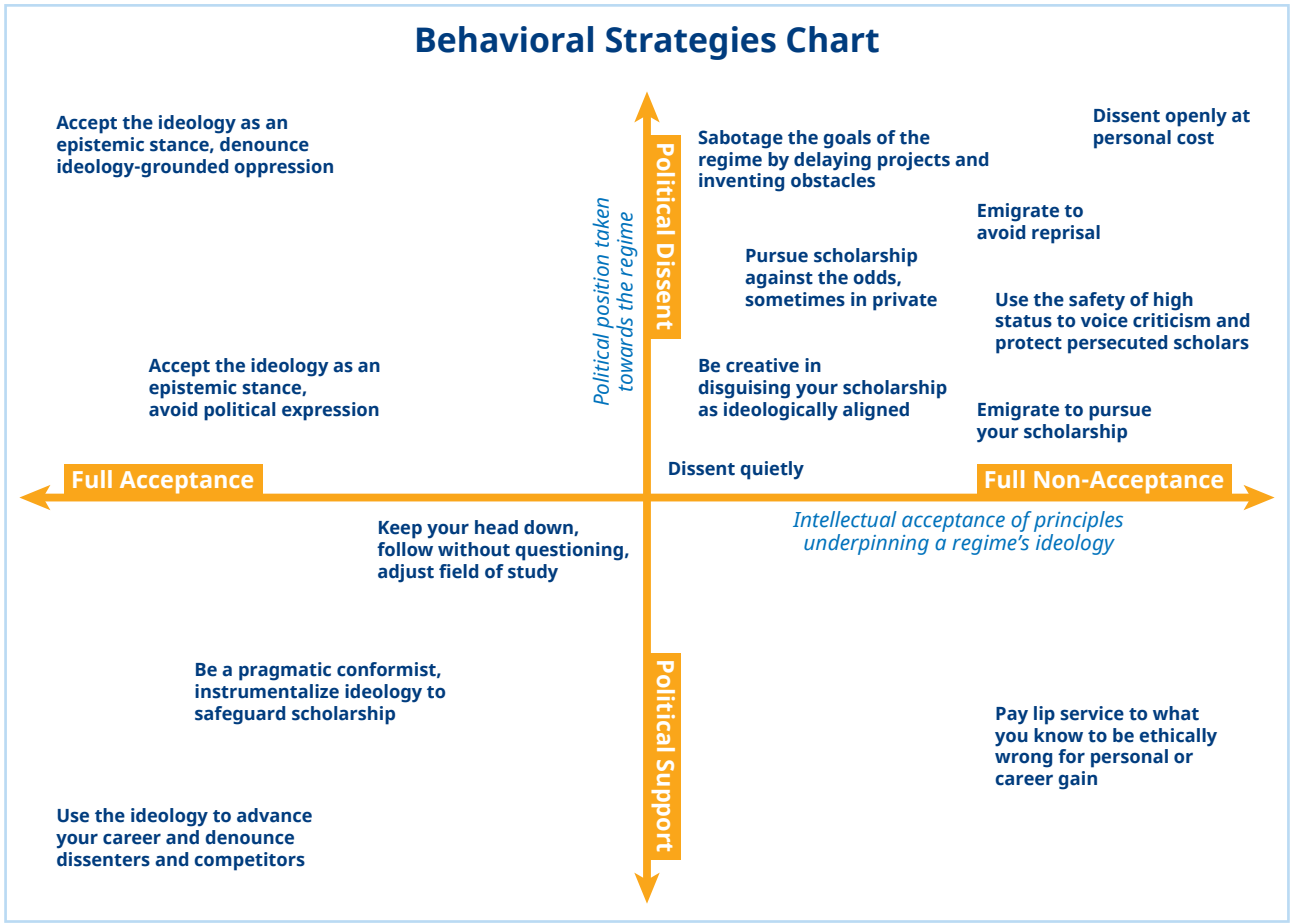
## Aligning with the New Regime and Accommodating it

Most people in autocracies are not actively resisting the regime. Instead, they seek to accommodate and avoid conflict by conforming to the new environment. There are nonetheless a variety of ways in which people can accommodate to an authoritarian environment.

Reflecting on historical accounts and lived experiences from behind the Iron Curtain we attempted to group the possible strategies that scholars in autocratic regimes tend to follow along two dimensions: to what extent they accepted or rejected the philosophical underpinnings of an ideology regardless of its instumentalisation in the name of oppression, and to what extent they engaged in political dissent (or support) of the regime. The latter dimension reflects not just a matter of personal choice but is dependent on the levels of oppression and personal risk in any given context.

The strategies in the chart below were inspired by historical figures. For example, the psychologist Lev Vygotsky adopted Marxist principles of dialectical materialism and of the primacy of social conditions to his understanding of human development without overtly endorsing Soviet ideology and politics. In contrast, the biologist Trofim Lysenko pursued a dogmatic approach that rejected Mendelian genetics as a 'bourgeois pseudoscience' in favour of Marxist-Leninist ideological principles and actively imposed this dogma onto Soviet biology and agriculture, setting them back by decades and leading to imprisonment, execution, or death of numerous scientists. At the other end of the acceptance spectrum, the nuclear physicist, dissident and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov became disillusioned with the perversion of socialist ideals under the Soviet regime which led him into outspoken opposition resulting in years of internal exile.

Even though this chart may not capture all possible strategies it can serve as an invitation for scholars to reflect on the philosophical principles underpinning ideologies of autocratic regimes and the political consequences—whether intended or not—their behavioural coping strategies may have.



## Possible Alternative Responses to Autocracy

People living in autocracies are, by definition, hampered in their freedom to act and they are taking risks if they dissent or defy or resist the regime. A person's level of risk depends on the degree of autocracy they live in as well as on personal and collective factors.

Such factors include citizenship (visa status), vulnerability of family members, gender, race, ethnicity, seniority of position and other attributes that render a person more or less vulnerable to arbitrary action. To illustrate, a senior white male scholar who is a citizen is less at risk than a female person of color on a temporary visa. This is the case even within functional democracies, and much more so in autocratic regimes.

*Autocracies do not last forever.*

An analysis of 323 nonviolent and violent mass movements from 1900-2006 that sought to topple a government or achieve self-determination revealed that most or all movements that recruited at least 3.5% popular participation ultimately succeeded.[7] Moreover, successful movements tended to be predominantly nonviolent.

Although there are exceptions to this "3.5% rule"[7], it provides an encouraging benchmark.

For the U.S., 3.5% of the population translates into nearly 12 million people.

When deciding how to act in an autocracy, you should first assess your personal risk: is it low, medium, high, or extreme? What appears to be the cost of opposing the government? In a democracy, citizens should not suffer any consequences for peaceful opposition to the government. If people or institutions are incurring a cost for opposition, then this should enter into the risk assessment.

You also need to consider the risk level of others around you, who might be affected by your actions. This is particularly important if you are in a senior position and lead a team with members who are at greater risk, and when your family and community are vulnerable. How might your actions affect them?

The schematic below illustrates the options open to you depending on your risk assessment. If your risk is extreme, there are fewer options open to you. If you assess your risk to be low, then there is far more you can do. Choose the entry point in the graph below based on your risk assessment, and all actions from then on are open to you. In all cases, we encourage scholars to think of collective responses aligned to the tactics of the authorities. For example, public attacks on a colleague call for expressions of social and material solidarity.

Importantly, there are some essential steps one can take irrespective of one's risk level.

## Navigating Personal Risk: Actions for Scholars

| | PERSONAL RISK | ENTRY POINT | ACTIONS |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Risk-Independent | → | Pursue your personal and collective well-being |
| | | | Minimize legal attack surfaces |
| | | | Understand digital attack vectors |
| | | | Enhance IT and physical security |
| | | | Use precise language |
| | | | Beware of pluralistic ignorance and false consensus effects |
| | | | Beware of culture change |
| | | | Beware of entrapment |
| | | | Be prepared |
| | | | Commit to facts and truth |
| Democracy | Low | → | Engage with media |
| | | | Engage with your representative |
| | | | Engage with the public |
| | | | Reach out to children and young people |
| | | | Work for the longer term |
| Autocracy | Medium | → | Help others cope with shock and fear |
| | | | Support imperilled research |
| | | | Protect imperiled research participants |
| | | | Safeguard data |
| | High | → | Introduce friction |
| | | | Engage with people around you |
| | | | Gauge administrators' resistance and seek to inoculate them |
| | | | Practice small acts of defiance |
| | Extreme | → | Tell your story (including anonymously) |
| | | | Seek support from colleagues |
| | | | Seek wiggle room |

## 1. Risk-Independent Steps: Self-care and awareness

Everyone, regardless of risk, can take some private actions that are less likely to expose you to discovery or attack.

### Pursue your personal and collective well-being

Authoritarians try to atomise individuals and introduce stress, hardship and uncertainty both by design and through incompetence and corruption.[31, 32, 33] When you experience "brain fuzz", stress, and anxiety, this is not just your personal response to a crisis—it is also a systemic consequence of autocracy and the crises and volatility it entails.[17]

In confronting the challenge of living in an autocracy, it is useful to think of pursuing problem-focused coping (i.e., seeking to change the system) as well as meaning-focused and emotion-focused coping.[34, 35, 36]

Evidence-based emotion-focused coping stragies include mood management through temporary escape, such as distraction or spending time in nature, stress-relief through exercise and sharing with friends and family, and journalling.

Meaning-focused coping involves attempts to make sense of what is happening and understand your place in the bewildering and dystopic circumstances that are being created.

The scholarship of oppression tells us that the psychological root of both meaning-making and problem-focused coping is identification with a community with distinct values and worldviews.[37, 38, 39] For scholars and educators, the values of truth, integrity and learning are core to their mission. And these values are always threatening to authoritarian lies, corruption and ignorance.

Affirming (individually and together) the strengths, values, history, and distinct identity of one's community is the heart of resistance and the foundation of well-being; Paolo Freire called this annunciation.[37, 38] An important complement to this, which Freire called denunciation, is to articulate and condemn the discrimination and injustices affecting your communities. Laying the blame for hardship and chaos at the feet of the regime provides clarity and a framework for understanding for self and others.

> When you want to support others who are under attack, do not ask them what you can do to help—tell them what you plan to do and let them object if they do not think it's a good idea. It takes cognitive energy to make decisions, and even well-meaning questions consume bandwidth that may not be available to a person who has to deal with a myriad of other decisions in a crisis.

In pursuing your own well-being, seek to connect with others (as you are doing through this handbook). Proactively develop a "circle of solidarity," a curated community of family, friends, and colleagues who you know will understand what you're going through if the going gets tough.[40] As you develop your suite of emotion-, meaning- and problem-focused coping strategies, be sure to share them with others in your research group as well as with your families and communities. Don't let others be isolated either—reach out to them for support and build inclusive networks.[41] Be an "active online bystander;" report abusive posts online and encourage those undergoing attacks to hold their digital ground.

## Minimize legal attack surfaces

The FBI scrutinized Martin Luther King's travel receipts to build a tax avoidance case against him. The case collapsed when he was acquitted.

Inconvenient citizens are often targeted indirectly, by charging them with often minor infractions that have nothing to do with their role as dissidents in order to undermine moral authority, minimize backlash and mobilization.[44]

It is therefore wise to avoid creating unnecessary opportunities for the state to target you: avoid speeding or recreational drug use, file taxes with the utmost care, and pay parking fines on time. Any infraction, however minor, gives your opponents an opportunity to turn a mole hill into a mountain.

*The role (and rule) of law.*

Democracies instill respect for the rule of law and promote norms of peaceful and law-abiding advocacy, but laws also are one way in which power is exercised.[42, 43]

Protest and dissent are often criminalised and repressed to protect the interests of the powerful. In an autocracy, "lawfare" can be deployed against political opponents. As a result, avenues for peaceful protest within the law can be closed and the political opportunities available narrow.

This in turn may spark civil disobedience, such as U.S. Representative John Lewis' 2020 call to "Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and redeem the soul of America." Whether to engage in civil disobedience is a very personal and consequential decision.

## Understand digital attack vectors

"With the pervasive use of digital and social media, the control of information is now an indispensable component of any modern typology of repression".[45]

Digital technologies have changed the abilities of authoritarian regimes to track dissenter activities, sabotage coordination and mobilization against the regime. In addition, the participatory nature and incentive structures of modern information platforms also considerably increased the offensive capabilities of repressive regimes by empowering, deputizing, coordinating and mobilizing regime sympathizers to further regime goals and suppress or coerce democratic citizens into regime-desired behaviours. History might offer an analogy, with the complex political role the "Brownshirts" had played in intimidating political opponents. Today we find equivalent of digital repression tactics through doxxing, harassing, threats of violence, cyberstalking and fabricating false narratives about regime critics. Non-state regime sympathizers might include sponsored activists and pressure groups abusing Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to harass and intimidate critics; partisan media outlets that legitimize political attacks or smear critics, conspiratorial mobs directed by partisan influencers to target critics (and their relatives) with hateful actions (ridicule, stalking, doxxing, character assassination, death threats, deepfake image-based sexual abuse). These attacks are particularly serious against women and those of intersectional identities.

Reducing vulnerability to these attacks through digital best practises (digital hygiene, blocking tools, privacy measures), mental resilience training, social and legal support networks and community participation will mitigate personal exposure to harm and mental exhaustion.

## Enhance IT and physical security

Much of life today takes place online or through electronic communication. This is phenomenally convenient but it entails considerable privacy risks.

Most researchers and scholars work in an institutional context that governs use of IT (devices, email, cloud storage, and so on). It is important to know your institution's rules and regulations, in particular with respect to blending professional and personal uses.

Many academics use their work device as personal devices and vice versa. This works well in most settings but it may compromise privacy of your personal communications—most institutions can access all your files and emails (although in normal circumstances few will do so).

You may therefore consider acquiring devices that are entirely personal and independent of your institution and that can be used for personal activities.

There are a number of online resources that offer help with making your online life more secure. They range from concise summaries and humorous guides to an extensive and thorough 21-day treatment. There is also specific advice about how to cross the U.S. border and how to make your iPhone more secure.

We summarize some common steps towards greater internet and physical security:

- Use a secure email system that uses encryption, such as Proton. If using Google Mail, consider its Advanced Protection Program.
- Use two- or multi-factor authentication on all accounts that offer it. For the highest level of security, use a physical security key. Only use SMS as an authentication factor when no other option is given, as these messages can be somewhat trivially intercepted by bad actors.
- Use secure messaging apps, such as Signal (which is encrypted, just like WhatsApp, but unlike WhatsApp does not collect much meta data). Avail yourself of the facility to automatically delete messages after a chosen amount of time (available in Signal and WhatsApp). Be careful using the desktop clients of these apps on shared devices (e.g., laptops that others may have access to) because desktop clients of some messaging applications, even if encrypted, can be cloned without user awareness. If using WhatsApp, iMessage, or other messengers, ensure Cloud backup is turned off.
- Use a privacy-focused browser that prevents (or reduces) the ability of websites to track you. A summary of options can be found here.
- Use a VPN (virtual private network) to keep your browing history private. Many options exist at a modest cost. Some options are summarized here.
- Use software that stores data in the EU whenever possible because the EU has tough data protection laws. A complete suite of applications that rival American products such as Google docs is offered by Cryptpad.
- In general, be aware that the technology can evolve rapidly and that what is secure today may have been compromised (or taken over by another corporation with less privacy commitment) a year from now.

- If you are a U.S. Citizen or live in the U.S., your personal information, including your address and phone number, is usually available for a trivial cost to anyone who seeks it. While it is difficult to get this information expunged from all sources, particularly if you own a home, you can limit the number of data brokers that sell it by signing up for paid services like DeleteMe, Incogni, or Kanary. You can also submit individual opt-out requests to data brokers, though this is understandably more time consuming.

These steps provide some protection against surveillance or other violations of privacy. They cannot protect you against other forms of intrusions, such as FOIA requests. FOIA provides an invaluable tool for journalists to query government action, but it also provides an opportunity for political actors to target academics. Slapp law suits aim at overwhelming individuals (journalists, researchers) by dragging them into a lengthy and costly process of defending themselves in the court, thus making their work more difficult. Evidence abounds that FOIA requests have been used as a tool to harass scholars and scientists, for example in climate science.

FOIA laws differ between jurisdictions and you need to work with your institution to find out what to expect. The AAUP provides some guidance here. It is advisable to be prepared by discussing FOIA with colleagues and your institution so when requests do appear they are less disruptive.

## Use precise language

As scholars, we are aware of the importance of precise language. Autocrats frequently use language to obfuscate and mislead, and it is important to recognize this.

For example, when a prominent person makes a Hitler salute, this is … a Hitler salute. It is not at "awkward hand gesture" as some commentators have referred to Elon Musk's Hitler salute at an event celebrating Donald Trump's inauguration.

Similarly, populists and autocrats often engage in "double speak"—saying one thing but actually doing the opposite. For example, one of Donald Trump's early executive orders was framed around the need for accountability—noting that "The President … is regularly elected by and accountable to the American people … along with the separation of powers … regular elections for the Congress, and an independent judiciary … by which the Framers created a Government accountable to the American people." The order then went on, in the name of accountability, to place independent regulatory agencies under the direct control of the President and Attorney General. In consequence, agencies such as the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), which regulates financial markets, and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), responsible for enforcing antitrust laws, lost their independence and are now controlled by politicians, thereby politicizing regulatory oversight and enforcement.

It is important to remain on the lookout for "doublespeak" and other semantic tools that are wielded against academic scholarship and science. For example, people who deny or distort the basic physics of climate change like to be called "skeptics", even though they do not exhibit any of the hallmarks of actual skepticism.[22] Linguistic choices of that type are not without consequence, and it has been argued that they can unduly intrude into scientific activities through a process called "seepage".[46]

*Open science or Trojan horse?*

President Trump issued an executive order on 23 May 2025 for "Gold Standard Science" that is to be "transparent, rigorous, and impactful". The order echoes many concerns of the Open Science movement, such as replication issues, conflicts of interests, and the need for transparency.

It is far from clear, however, whether the order really supported scientific integrity, as a team of scientists, including two Nobel Laureates and a champion of Open Science, were quick to point out. They expressed concern that the 'gold standard' rule will destroy American science as we know it.

This concern appears to be well placed. When Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Marty Makary was asked about the decision to limit pregnant people's access to the COVID-19 vaccines, given that studies involving a total of over 1.8 million women had shown the vaccine was safe and effective, Makary dismissed the data because it wasn't "gold standard science".

Moreover, Trump's executive order calls for the "consideration of different or dissenting viewpoints". At first glance, it is difficult to find fault with this goal. But history shows that this phrase is frequently used to put scientifically informed opinions on an equal footing with politically-motivated pseudoscience.

A petition, spearheaded by the *Stand Up for Science* initiative, was soon signed by more than 5000 scientists, arguing that the executive order has hijacked scientific language, using Open Science as a trojan horse to "undermine scientific rigor and the transparent progress of science."

## Beware of pluralistic ignorance and false consensus effects

Autocrats will always vastly exaggerate their own power and popularity, and the self-censorship that often flows from regime intimidation play into this dynamic, in some cases causing people and groups to assume that they are alone in their alienation from the regime. This phenomenon, when an actual majority perceives itself to be in the minority, is known as pluralistic ignorance.[47] Pluralistic ignorance can be pernicious for two reasons. First, people tend to hold beliefs with less conviction if they perceive themselves to be in the minority, and conversely, those in the minority who falsely believe their opinion dominates (i.e., false consensus), are resistant to opinion change.[48] Second, if pluralistic ignorance persists over time, people may shift their opinions from the actual majority view to the minority position which is erroneously perceived to be in the majority.[49]

Projecting a false consensus therefore serves as a source of influence for authoritarian regimes that can increase popular support and its perceived legitimacy.

## Beware of culture change

A final long-term consequence of an (initially) false consensus can be a genuine shift in culture acting as a self-fulfiling prophecy.[50] In some circumstances, majority signals can lead to the rapid unraveling of social norms, for example those against public display of racism or xenophobia.[51]

It is important to be sensitive to such cultural shifts—and to differentiate them from pluralistic ignorance—because dissent may become more difficult or noticeable in a changed culture.

Another consequence of cultural shifts is that individuals who come of age after autocracy has taken hold will be attuned to the new culture, which is bound to limit their endorsement of democratic values. Recently, inter-generational differences in political values in the opposite direction have been reported from post-Soviet Eastern Europe.[52] Such generational rifts may undermine communal support, further eroding the potential of collective dissent. Try to maintain contact with young people and devote time to their education in democratic norms and institutions and in principles of scientific enquiry and free scholarship.

## Beware of entrapment

Is the email requesting an interview for a dissertation really from a PhD student? Who is the journalist who is so eager to talk to you? Most requests are genuine, but some right-wing campaign groups have been known to entrap academics by not revealing their true intentions until after your response is posted on YouTube.

Before you agree to be interviewed or engage in other interactions with unknown persons, take the time to check them out—it usually just takes minutes to make sure that you are dealing with a person who is acting in good faith.

## Be prepared

Who will you call in a crisis? Do you have a lawyer at your fingertips? A support network? Do you have institutional support? It is worth investing in contacts that you can rely on in an emergency and distributing a "break glass" plan to them so they are aware of their role in it. The risk of someone knocking at your door in the middle of the night, or targeting your lab's research in a press conference, may be very small, but the cost can be enormous. A little bit of preparation does not hurt.

> When crossing the U.S. border, advise a trusted contact that you have arrived, and contact them when you have cleared. It they don't hear from you for hours, they can contact someone (ideally an immigration attorney) who can start investigating what is holding you up.

Again, it is helpful to take a collective approach. Individuals can invest in precautionary research where necessary, but consider asking professional associations, institutions and city coucils to find (and disseminate to members and citizens) lists of whom to call in each region, or working with existing legal centres to disseminate their already-created resources.

## Commit to facts and truth

For scholars and scientists, a commitment to facts, evidence, and the possibility to pursue truth through inquiry should be self-evident. It is crucial to retain that commitment even when it is attacked by political actors and others.

It is a hallmark of autocracies that they deny truth except when it suits the regime. Autocrats flood the public sphere with a blizzard of incoherent disinformation. When a Russian-made Buk missile downed Malaysian Airlines MH17 in 2014, Kremlin-associated outlets first denied it was a Russian missile. Then they said it was an Ukrainian attack. Then they said the pilot had deliberately crashed and the plane had been full of dead bodies before impact, and finally they said it was all part of a vast conspiracy to turn the world against Russia. As a former United States Ambassador to Russia put it, the "cumulative effect of all these tactics is nihilistic debasement of the very concept of truth."

It is crucial to resist this systematic dismantling of the notion of truth. Become an expert at how to spot disinformation and see through the attempts of manipulation.

Some tips and techniques for spotting misinformation can be found here.

The people who benefit from epistemic chaos and the blizzard of questionable information are always those in power—when nothing is true then everything is a spectacle and accountability is no longer possible.

> ***If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer … And with such a people you can then do what you please.***
>
> *Hannah Arendt*

## 2. Actions you can take when you feel your personal risk is low

If your personal risk is low, either because you live in a democracy or because you feel secure due to your privileged position in society, you have more opportunities for action than people who are marginalized or vulnerable.

Working with others, seek to challenge the authoritarians' silences, lies, and claims, and to raise up the values of the communities that are being pushed aside by the regime.[53]

Public truth-telling is helpful both in terms of calling out the oppression (this is wrong, this is repression, this is disgusting; denunciation), and in affirming the values of the ingroup, annunciation (we stand for truth, freedom, inclusion).[37] Naming is beneficial in and of itself for well-being (as we have noted above). However, politically the aim is of becoming visible in this opinion and this truth, and creating space for others to signal agreement and find moral community.[54]

Past research on effective activism [55] has proposed that it is helpful to identify means of raising awareness, building sympathy, generating intentions to act, turning intentions into action, sustaining motivation over time and in the face of failure, scaling up to build coalitions, managing or avoiding counter-mobilisation, and to think of these in the shorter, medium and longer terms. Public signalling on social media, via petitions, or in meetings, raises awareness and builds sympathy. It makes opinion groups or communities of resisters known to each other.

In communication to others, seek to associate yourself and the truth you are sharing with broader communities that include the listeners, such as towns, regions, faiths, and the nation. Drawing attention to these shared social identities motivates others' attention and trust. As a general rule, when seeking influence, avoid stigmatising and shaming or rejecting others, and claim a consensus position based on the truth and values that are shared between you and the listeners.

### Engage with media

In the shorter term, write a letter to the editor or an opinion piece for a local paper. Local papers are very keen to attract (free) content because they operate on a shoestring budget. Here is a resource with specific tips. Volunteer for an interview with local print, radio, TV or social media journalist. Some may be an alum of your institution; invite them on campus for a conversation about academic scholarship and how it is impacted by autocratization.

### Engage with your representative

In the American context, send a copy/link to your story to your Senators (The Honorable [Name], United States Senate, Washington, DC 20510). Here is how you can find your Senator and here is your Representative.

### Engage with the public

Post a video about your support of scholarship and science. Attend public meetings or ask your local community organizations whether they are interested in putting on a talk about academic scholarship. Create a "science in the pub" event in your hometown or organize a Science Slam.

Mere participation in community organizations and shaping them to be more democratic can also be a fruitful effort; how does your sport club or local school board make decisions? Democracies are made resistent by living it at all layers of society. Historically, labour unions and community groups have been valuable allies to channel and direct these local democratic laboratories.

### Reach out to children and young people

The young generation is easily captured by new ideologies and most susceptible to cultural shifts. Autocratic regimes tend to exert influence through organised youth movements in educational settings. Maintain contact with young people, engage in education, talk to your children about what is happening.

### Work for the longer term

In the longer term, scholars and community members need to think ahead and work together to protect their means of communication, and the locations and means of production of their work (laboratories, equipment, access to software, agreement with publishers, research funding, tenure, training programs etc.).

Academics can seek to control the means of production of their research publications, for example through the modern equivalents of "samizdat" in the Soviet Union, such as substacks and blogs, or independent societies and conferences. Collectively, scholars will need to pivot to valuing the independent publications where the 'real research' can be published, if repression continues to affect our fields. We return to this point below.

## 3. Actions you can take when you feel your personal risk is medium

Academic freedom and repression affect researchers, research, funders, and (for social scientists) research participants.[56] The comments here regarding medium risk apply more to contexts of democratic backsliding, rather than to entrenched dictatorships like China and Russia.

Repression may begin by targeting minority scholars and topics such as LGBTIQ+ scholars and DEI.[57, 33] Repression may also target individuals with particular vitriol—the Serengeti strategy described above.

> Democratic backsliding can turn into autocracy very quickly, and the transition may be very fast when a tipping point is reached.[58] So if you consider your risk level to be medium, bear in mind that it may need to be reassessed in the future.

On a practical level, individuals in medium risk contexts might seek to support organisations that are in the front lines (e.g., AAUP, ACLU, AAAS) through donations and memberships, as well as by amplifying news and calls to action on social media.

Consider cross-disciplinary support by sheltering endangered research within less targeted disciplines.

## Help others cope with shock and fear

As democratic backsliding intensifies, the unexpected nature of repressive measures in what should be a democracy can lead to shock and fear, amplifying the natural tendencies to hope for it all it to disappear, and to accommodate the new regime through self-censorship and other evasive action.

It is important to recognise in yourself and in others that fear and accommodating responses are natural and can be temporary.

To help overcome such fear and build resistance, there are steps you can take [55]:

- Individuals and institutions should be encouraged to make explicit the external reasons for their behaviour, i.e., illegitimate coercion.
- Institutions and people should be encouraged to reconnect with the values of their own group and their "real self". The reclaiming and rediscovery of this real, collective identity yields the psychological capacity for behaviour change, first to privately recognise their distance from the regime, second to denounce injustice and affirm common values and identities in safe spaces with safe people, and then to resist publicly where possible.

> Do not be ashamed and do not shame others for their fear. Stigmatisation increases the risk of dissonance-based self-justification, when people justify and rationalise their actions by intensifying and expressing allegiance to the regime.

Scholars should aim to help themselves and colleagues on this journey, by creating safe spaces for private dissent and affirming shared values and relationships.

## Support imperilled research

Some research topics may lose funding and become dangerous for researchers who investigate them.[56, 57, 59] These topics then languish. In the American context, as of April 2025, nearly 500 research grants have been canceled by the U.S. National Science Foundation. A list is being maintained here.

> The European Research Council has announced that researchers from overseas who have job offers in the EU (or associated countries: UK, Switzerland, Norway, and Israel) are eligible not only to apply for ERC grants, but may additionally draw on up to EUR 2 million for lab relocation expenses.

By creating spaces for research on "dangerous" topics in light of such government censorship, overseas colleagues can sometimes offer safe spaces.

Academic repression often has been hindered by the international reach of journals, and professional societies based in the 'free world' who offer safe spaces for discovery and truth telling. However, many journals and professional societies are based in the USA, and they are currently subject to the same autocratic actions as granting agencies, for example by threats of eliminating their tax exempt status.

In order to continue endangering research, academics can sometimes create mainstream careers (with safe topics and safe methodologies), with some research unpublished or published pseudonymously. In some cases, research may be published but not included on CVs or university websites. A recent guide to assist scholars who are conducting "dangerous" research is available here.

## Protect imperiled research participants

If you are working in the social sciences or humanities (e.g., psychology, anthropology, history) as well as in some fields of health sciences and medicine, your work may rely on cooperation from research participants. Some research participants may become increasingly endangered in their daily lives (e.g., transgender individuals), and this obviously affects their participation. Research concerning these vulnerable groups then risks exposing participants to danger, to the extent they can be identified through online surveillance of the researchers, and through researchers' data files.

Academics may seek to educate themselves about managing surveillance and repression of their participants.[60, 61] Again, it is important to see risk-management as a collective enterprise: once you are aware of risks and mitigating factors, be sure to share these with your research group, colleagues, and family and community members.

In some cases, academics will need to retreat from certain regions and topics to protect respondents. In other cases, methodological innovation can be employed, such as moving onto or away from offline data collection; or shifting to verbal instead of written consent.[57, 60, 61]

Often coded language and euphemisms can be helpful to scholars and audiences in an attempt to fly below the radar of authorities, or defuse sensitivities (e.g., asking about language instead of ethnicity or religion, or vice versa). However, in the longer term such strategies may not suffice to protect the researcher who is associated with the coded language from the state's repression, if the code is broken.

## Safeguard data

Henrik Schönemann, working at Humboldt University in Berlin, initiated an international effort to create a distributed cultural archive that preserves data and content from public websites that are being scrubbed by the Trump administration. For example, the team has archived content, including guidelines and other materials, from websites of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) that were taken down. Because of this archive, institutions like the International Association of Forensic Nurses were able to access their specific materials.

*Document everything:*

If documents disappear, record it. If local officials seem to violate the law, record it. Share information with credible journalists, legal experts, or watchdogs.

Authoritarianism thrives on silence and secrecy.

Their efforts resemble rescue missions from previous dark times in history, such as the seed bank established by the Russian biologist Nikolai Valivov which contained over 380,000 samples of seeds and tubers to preserve plant diversity and prevent future famines. In the present-day USA, large-scale archiving of data and scientific content on servers that are not under control of the Trump administration should be a prominent goal for scientists and their allies.

## 4. Actions you can take when you feel your personal risk is high

As a general rule in high risk contexts, oppressed individuals or groups must focus also on concealment and discretion, rather than valorising open defiance. Note that this risk may emerge even for privileged individuals if autocratization proceeds.

Discretion is particularly important because savvy authoritarian regimes typically encourage and demand peer reporting, tale-bearing, or snitching.[62] For example, within days of Trump's inauguration, federal government employees received an email directing them to report colleagues who were working on DEI initiatives. Similaly, attorneys who were involved with the prosecution of January 6th Capitol intruders are now being monitored and fired.

> Widespread informancy and the culture of fear that this creates is a hallmark of longstanding dictatorships like Russia and China. The effect of this may be to shatter the bonds of many large public groups and communities like professions and universities.

In highly repressive contexts that encourage informancy, great care must be taken to guard against inadvertently exposing others to attacks. Likewise, perhaps only a few friends and family can be trusted.

Public behaviour becomes increasingly ritualised and performative loyalty signalling is demanded. It is extremely difficult to function as an academic in this context except in teaching technical skills, or delivering improvements in areas (e.g., weapons innovation) that the regime values.

In such situations, coded language and signs may develop that can help to identify like-minded individuals—learn to read between the lines and the words.

### Introduce friction

A time-honoured strategy in such extreme circumstances is to seek clarity when receiving instructions, delaying action where possible, and revisiting issues to generally increase friction.[12, 57] This has been termed "Švejkism"[63], after the fictional character the Good Soldier Švejk who resisted the Austro-Hungarian war machine in World War I from within, through seemingly-benign simple-mindedness.

### Engage with people around you

You are not alone. Reach out to people around you, make new friends and understand your neighbours and colleagues. Listen carefully to them. There is no need to fully disclose your sincere feelings right from the outset. Build trust slowly.

Even if you disagree with people, or if you fear they might become adversaries, it is important to understand the psychological landscape of your daily life.

Having connections with colleagues also provides a reality check: is there anything you should do or could do? Have you lived up to your own expectations? Here is a powerful anonymous account by a current Department of Justice attorney who prosecuted violent insurgents who attacked the Capitol on January 6, 2021. In some cases, colleagues can point the way to safer resistance. Support from colleagues has been shown to increase resilience to self-censorship.[25]

## Gauge administrators' resistance and seek to inoculate them

If you are in academia, meet with your Chair or Dean and alert them ahead of time that you feel at risk of attack because of who you are or because of the research you are conducting. When complaints or hate mail start to arrive, this will enable your administration to put them into the right context. The local context is critical: mentors, chairs/heads of school, and administrators can open or close spaces for researchers in danger and for research that is considered dangerous.

If your local hierarchies have already signalled a desire for appeasement, and you are at risk, consider your personal options for mobility to other institutions. Try to find allies who are more secure, and seek their guidance on your prospects.

Relatively privileged people in situations of high risk should seek the opportunities to signal values of truth, integrity, and learning as well as denounce injustice, lies, and ignorance, so as to become fulcrum points for moral leverage with the administration. Public dissent allows moral communities to recognise each other and to identify with each other, as discussed above.

Warm, respectful, inclusive relationships provide the best foundation for changing the other; there is no evidence basis to support the use of stigmatising rejection as a persuasive tool.[64] Stigmatising rejection of outgroups delivers a warm glow to the rejector and can draw together communities who are like-minded in mutual smugness, but it may alienate those who have not taken sides and polarise opponents.

## Practice small acts of defiance

When personal risk is high, it is tempting to retreat into silence. Yet, defiance does not have to mean bold public gestures. It can begin with small, deliberate acts that protect your sense of agency. Defiance, as Sah[65] defines it, means "acting in accordance with your true values when there is pressure to do otherwise." Practicing defiance in small, thoughtful ways builds the confidence and resilience needed for moments when the stakes are higher.

Small acts might include pausing before agreeing to something that feels wrong, declining a request that crosses a boundary, or raising questions that reveal inconsistencies. You might highlight facts that are being overlooked or find ways to model integrity in your daily interactions. Even minor refusals—such as declining to endorse something you believe is wrong—can serve as powerful forms of resistance. For more examples of everyday resistance, see "Ten Ways to Defy Today".[66]

Defiance is a practice that can be developed over time. You can cultivate it quietly, deliberately, and in your own way. When you choose to live your values through small acts, you not only preserve your autonomy but also model possibilities for others. As Sah[65] notes, even witnessing small acts of resistance can spark a "defiance domino effect," inspiring others to reflect on their own values and choices. In environments where fear and compliance are pervasive, these small steps matter profoundly. They create space between silent obedience and visible rebellion—giving you options, strength, and a path forward.

As Sah[67] argues, resisting the automatic impulse to obey is essential not only for personal integrity but also for preserving broader liberties. Defiance, practiced in thoughtful, incremental steps, becomes a skill you can strengthen over time—protecting not only your autonomy, but also your ability to act when it matters most.

## 5. Actions you can take when you feel your personal risk is extreme

Being at extreme risk changes your options considerably lest you become a target for highly consequential attacks.[57] While the contextual differences between regimes are important, we will focus here on situations where scholars who are seen to transgress may face loss of job/income/housing, deportation, detention, physical harm, or even death.

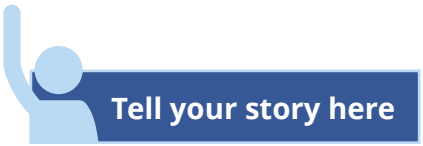
While we presume that those who are in extreme risk are familiar with their stark choices, there nonetheless exist options to *reduce* your risk or *reframe* your risk.

Reducing your risk is extremely context specific, but for example, you can choose to wait for authorities' changes (e.g., a period of detente), seek to reduce your vulnerabilities (e.g., waiting to advocate until your children are grown or your PhD students have found employment), seek to acquire protective colouring (e.g., by adopting a mainstream career and CV, or signalling loyalty in public), seek powerful or wealthy mentors or protectors, or seek to leave the context (e.g., by leaving the country). These strategies might change your context to one of medium risk, allowing the options previously discussed to become open to you.

### Tell your story

Tell your story. Describe a project from your lab. Explain how local businesses or farms or your community overall benefits from your scholarship. Explain how medical science has helped you or your family.

If it is too risky to publish the story under your name, you can publish it nonetheless in a blogpost run by our team that authenticates authors and vouches for their status and competence but then publishes their content anonymously.




Similarly, it is important to collect the stories of those who have suffered—and those who are still suffering. That may well include you.

It includes both those who have been harmed, and those who remain unharmed but are being censored and constantly feel threatened. As scholars we tend to think in terms of evidence and data, sometimes eschewing individual stories and anecdotes—yet personal stories are powerful communication devices on three levels. First, they raise awareness and this can help others cope under difficult circumstances and motivate others. In addition, personal stories provide an opportunity to affirm shared values, denounce injustice, and find community, and this is the foundation of resistance as we have written above. On a political level, alongside creating, collecting, and transmitting or amplifying the stories of repression and resistance, scholars may be able to contribute (anonymously if need be) to efforts to monitor academic freedom, such as the Academic Freedom Index.

### Seek support from colleagues

You are not alone. If you work in a team that has been targeted because of its research, others will be in a similar position. What are they doing about it? Learning from their experiences and participating in their collective actions is even more important when the stakes are at their highest.

> Most grants from the European Research Council are awarded with great financial flexibility. This permits grant holders in the EU to sponsor visits by foreign researchers without complicated approval processes.

Within the repressive context, resisters and allies who facilitate relocation and migration to a less repressive area are also important. Collective efforts are needed, for example through Scholars at Risk. To use a historical analogy, the Underground Railroad[68] included hundreds of African Americans and allies who helped enslaved people seeking to journey to freedom.

### Seek wiggle room

For administrators and leaders in extreme contexts, a sensitive and important task is to seek incremental spaces of safety, or wiggle room. Many authoritarian regimes are dominated by corruption and their opposition to universities arises because they pose a threat to the construction of lies that justify kleptocracy.[69] In these contexts, a Faustian bargain may be struck, whereby universities can function within certain parameters as long as they comply in others.[70]

For example, signalling loyalty and compliance by closing one deparment or firing some scholars (e.g., social scientists) may be deployed to leverage a behind-the-scenes attempt to keep another research group going (e.g., health scientists). Social scientists who 'know the rules' may be able to seek funding for safe topics and avoid others that are taboo. Public performative compliance with the regime (e.g., by firing too-visible academics) may provide cover for turning a blind eye to others who are more discreet or deniable. More broadly, intersectional privileges may allow some universities (e.g., those in capital cities, more resourced, teaching the children of the elite) a greater degree of leeway, and mitigate the extreme risks of their staff, particularly those from minoritized groups.

Most authoritarian regimes also seek to cloak themselves in an ideological figleaf to justify their repression, such as anti-communism, anti-DEI (under the banner of "meritocracy"), or ironically, support for "free speech". Within these ideological contexts, there may be a small margin for other advocates of the ideological cause to dispute the methods of the repression.

## The Story Does Not End Here

As developments unfold, we endeavour to maintain and update a crowd-sourced resource that is linked to this handbook, which can be accessed through the button below.

**Supporting Resources**

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