Autocratisation and Social Protection

Working Paper

October 2025

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RAISE
Research & Action for Income Security

Contents

Introduction 2

Method 2

Authoritarian regimes and institutions 3

- Formal institutions 3
- Informal institutions 3
  - State-society relationships 4
  - Clientelism, Neopatrimonailism, and Redistribution 5
  - Political Settlement Analysis (PSA) 7
  - PSA and Social Protection 7

Authoritarian regimes and electoral competition 9

- Electoral Authoritarianism and Inequality 9
- Small and Large Electoral Base 9

Ideology and Social Exclusion 10

- Illiberal Democracy 10
- Welfare Chauvinism 10
- Authoritarian Neoliberalism 11

Civil society and social protection 11

- NGOs in Authoritarian Regimes 11
- Lobbying Authoritarian Regimes 12
- Transnational Networks 13

Conclusion 14

References 16

Introduction

There are currently more countries that are undergoing autocratisation than democratisation, and this trend has intensified during the past 25 years (Nord et al. 2025, 19). According to the most recent V-Dem report, 2024 marked the first time since 2002 in which autocracies outnumber democracies globally (Nord et al. 2025, 12).

The current trend of democratic decline has, in contrast to previous time periods, been characterised by incremental change of political institutions often led by populist political leaders. Globalisation and the neoliberal turn have increased income inequality, which has reinforced societal divides and thus paved the way for illiberal leaders seeking to concentrate power in the hands of the executive, gradually fostering the development of authoritarian regimes (Diamond 2021). When incumbents become less dependent on the electorate to stay in power, one can expect to see changes in how social policy is distributed and formed, which in turn has profound consequences for inequality and social justice. In authoritarian regimes, the space for civil society is often constrained, making it increasingly difficult to voice dissatisfaction and claim social as well as economic rights.

The aim of this literature review is to provide an overview of the relationship between authoritarian regimes and social policy, focusing on the role of formal and informal institutions, the electoral competitiveness in authoritarian regimes, ideology, and lastly, the space for civil society and potential advocacy strategies, focusing primarily on cases from Eastern Europe and Asia. The paper was developed as part of our Social Justice School project in Georgia, therefore focusing on cases from this particular region.

Method

This literature review was conducted through an open literature search on the relationship between authoritarian regimes and social policy. The search partly reflects a snowballing technique, since literature has also been identified and selected by looking at references in relevant articles. We focused primarily on competitive authoritarian regimes located in Eastern Europe and Asia. We did not follow a stringent time period, but it broadly corresponds to the last part of the so-called third reverse wave of democratisation from the beginning of 2000 and onwards.

When using the term social policy, we refer to redistributive policies, often referred to as social protection. ILO (2017) defines social protection as policies or programmes aimed at reducing and preventing poverty and vulnerability across the life cycle, which are either contributory, or non-contributory tax financed such as social assistance. Our focus is on the latter type of social protection.

Autocratisation is to be understood in line with the conceptualisation by Lürhmann and Lindberg (2019, 1098), as a matter of degree, that can occur in both democracies and autocracies. It can also be understood as the opposite of democratisation, as a process away from democracy, be it gradual or sudden (Lürhmann and Lindberg 2019, 1099). This definition is particularly useful in our paper, as we cover regimes that to varying degree have experienced dismantling of democratic institutions or traits, but without necessarily having the same starting point for autocratisation.

Authoritarian regimes and institutions

Formal institutions

According to Mares and Carnes (2009) democracies have generally adopted more extensive social policies compared to autocracies for two reasons. First, in democracies, political candidates must reach a broad electoral base, and social policies can be used as a way of catering to new voter groups. Secondly, the environment in which civil society actors operate is more open in democracies than in autocracies, making it possible for civil society groups to demand increased social policy or welfare. However, a binary distinction between democracies and authoritarian regimes risks blurring the internal political dynamics that have also shown to be predictive of social policy in developing countries (Mares and Carnes 2009). Many welfare programmes were initially adopted in authoritarian settings (Table 1 in Mares and Carnes 2009, 97), but the objectives and mechanisms driving this development seem to differ depending on the relationship between the state and the population, which to varying extent also happens outside formal institutions.

Informal institutions

Helmke and Levitsky (2004) argue that good institutional analysis should focus on both formal and informal institutions, as informal rules can have a big impact on political institutional outcomes. The authors present a two-fold typology, where the first dimension relates to the extent to which outcomes of informal and formal institutions are either convergent or divergent; convergent outcomes cover situations in which following the informal rules does not lead to substantially different outcomes from the formal institution, whereas divergent outcomes describe a scenario where the informal institutions lead to a substantially different outcome than formal institutions. The second dimension refers to the effectiveness of formal institutions, understood as the extent to which rules are enforced and complied with (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 728). This creates four types of informal institutions: complementary (effective formal institutions and convergent outcomes), substitutive (ineffective formal institutions and convergent outcomes),

accommodating (effective formal institutions but divergent outcomes), and competing (ineffective formal institutions and divergent outcomes).

The article also addresses why actors create informal institutions. First, informal rules are created when formal institutions are incomplete. Second, informal institutions can serve as a second-best strategy when formal institutions do not function properly. Third, informal institutions can serve as means for goals that are not publicly acceptable. Lastly, informal institutions might also be created to achieve a goal that is not internationally acceptable (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 730–31). Another important aspect of informal institutions relates to how they are created. One important informal institution is clientelism or patrimonial bonds, which Helmke and Levitsky (2004) term a competing institution. They argue that competing informal institutions are often more prevalent in post-colonial contexts, in which formal institutions have been either dictated externally or built upon already existing institutions. Further, the development of informal institutions in general can be either top-down (elite design or interaction) or emerge through a more decentralised process with more actors involved, the latter often being the case with clientelism (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 731). Both top-down and decentralised processes of institutional change evolve around focal points, repeated interactions, and bargaining (p. 731).

The shift in which formal institutions compete alongside an informal institution, for instance clientelism, often happens outside public channels, which can complicate the identification of the exact origin. Therefore, Helmke and Levitsky (2004, 731) argue that it is important for scholars, which might also include activists, to consider what actors or possible coalitions and interests a given informal institution serves. The relationship between formal and informal institutions is of great relevance for social policy, as informal rules created in an already unequal power and resource configuration might either withhold or establish winners and losers (Knight 1992, cited in Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 731).

State-society relationships

Mares and Carnes (2009, 98-100) outline three scenarios of social policy in different authoritarian state-society configurations, based on the assumption that the autocratic leader's main motivation is to stay in power.

In the first scenario, the autocratic leader seeks to limit the power of the launching organisation, which is the organisation of voters putting the incumbent to power in the first place. The aim is to obtain unconstrained power by breaking up the selectorate, thus eliminate accountability and commitments, and retain revenues that could otherwise be spent on economic activities, which would then result in tax revenue and in turn social policy. To stay in power, repressive means are used

for as long as possible. Thus, little or no social policy is expected in this state–society configuration.

In the second scenario, the autocrat adopts a strategy of collusion. The logic behind this strategy is to provide rents for the leaders of the launching organisation to keep their support and limit the competitiveness of oppositional organisations. In order to be effective, the rents provided must increase the cost of defection. In this configuration, narrow but generous social policies are expected. Clientelism can be considered an example of the collusion strategy.

The third scenario is one of organisational proliferation, in which the autocratic leader encourages the creation of competing organisations, though still aligned, to increase the cost of collective action by the launching organisation. The aim is to complicate the process of challenging the regime. For this strategy to be effective, authoritarian leaders often acknowledge economic rights and provide social policy to broader segments of the population. However, despite broader coverage, there is expected to be a high degree of institutional fragmentation, creating inequality in social policies.

Clientelism, Neopatrimonailism, and Redistribution

Cendales et al. (2025) argue that clientelism is not only a democratic problem but also a structural tool for elite parties in unequal societies. Clientelism undermines democracy and entrenches poverty by shifting party focus from universal goods to appeasing strategic groups. Elite parties, representing only a fraction of the population, rely on clientelism to secure office, and, once in power, avoid reforms that undermine the effectiveness of clientelist networks. If the party relies on votes from specific groups only, it is cheaper to rely on policies targeting these groups as opposed to broader reform. Their statistical analysis shows that 1) clientelism correlates with poverty and inequality, 2) declines with stronger non-elite party presence, and 3) is not reduced by electoral reforms unless poverty itself is addressed. The authors conclude that elite parties in unequal, lower-income countries prefer clientelism over public goods provision, as it is cheaper and maintains dependency, making clientelism structurally, rather than culturally, determined.

In the Georgian context, Jikia (2023) distinguishes between electoral and relational clientelism. Electoral clientelism operates as a quid pro quo during elections, while relational clientelism extends benefits beyond them. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream party legalised apartments for 900 families, raised pensions and salaries for selected groups, and issued one-time allowances. Prior to the same elections, they cancelled debts for up to 600,000 citizens, and, later in 2020, cancelled fines for violating coronavirus restrictions and hospital debts.

Reports also indicate vote buying, mass transport of citizens to polling stations, and attempts to monitor ballots through filming or public display.

Relational clientelism has targeted wealthier groups who provide campaign contributions or tacit support, granting them government contracts and procurement deals. Transparency International found that organisations and individuals winning state tenders worth 68 million GEL donated 1.6 million GEL (590,478 USD) to campaigns. Research further shows that vote buying is more common where parties have little ideological difference, allowing voters greater indifference. Georgian parties rarely present clear ideologies, relying instead on populist and broad promises. Jikia (2023) concludes that clientelism in Georgia stems from Soviet-era informal networks and remains deeply embedded in politics, with weak democratic institutions and poor social policy, reinforcing its persistence as a tool for securing support and political power.

Rana and Kamal (2018) argue that clientelism not only increases inequality between patron and client but also between clients and those excluded from patronage. Using panel data from 14 countries between 1997 and 2014, they find that a reduction in clientelist activities coincides with rising income equality at a significance level of 1 percent. Further, the study shows that an increase in government programmes aimed at redistribution, such as food security policies, reduces clientelism in these states.

While clientelism can explain how political elites can circumvent state institutions and cause particularistic social policy outcomes, *neopatrimonialism* provides a wider framework to understand how clientelist practices can become embedded *within* state institutions, a synthesis between clientelism and authoritarianism.

Patrimonialism, as described by Max Weber (Bektas 2025, 864), is a more traditional form of authority where the leader is legitimised by norms and customs and exercises power through personal relationships based on reciprocity, using informal institutions. Neopatrimonial regimes, by contrast, instrumentalise the formal institutions of state to retain support, sanction political opponents, and reshape social policy distribution along patron-client lines. This not only contributes to inequality through clientelism but also incentivises politicians and public servants to use their office for financial gain. Bektas (2025) argues that research on hybrid regimes has tended to overemphasise the erosion of liberal democratic institutions while overlooking the interplay between formal institutions, e.g. the judiciary or legislature, and the informal institutions of clientelism, favouritism, and corruption.

Neopatrimonialism combines personal (patrimonial) and legal-rational (formal) authority through three elements: 1) a strong executive, 2) the exercise of power

through patronage, and 3) public goods distribution at the executive's discretion in exchange for loyalty. In Türkiye, Bektas (2025) illustrates how Erdoğan strategically used formal institutions to allocate resources, formalising clientelism. Since the 1950s, before Erdoğan's inauguration, Turkish political elites used social grants, zoning permits, and infrastructure projects to ensure support. After the AKP came to power in 2003, this expanded to social protection cash transfers as well as material distribution of coal, roads, food, clothing, and housing through state institutions, municipalities, and NGOs (Bektas 2025). These practices produce particularistic (exclusionary) rather than programmatic (comprehensive) outcomes, undermining income equality and broader social protection. Consequently, neopatrimonial regimes are particularly fragile during economic downturns, when austerity weakens patronage bonds (Bektas 2025).

Power concentration in the executive is a common feature of hybrid regimes. For this reason, neopatrimonialism is expected to become increasingly common in hybrid regimes. The literature on neopatrimonialism can help us understand how developments in increasingly authoritarian states can influence social protection implementation by introducing patronage through the institutions of state.

Political Settlement Analysis (PSA)

To explain the connection between regime type and social policy, Kelsall et al. (2022) delve into political settlement analysis (PSA). They define a political settlement as:

> *"an ongoing agreement among a society's most powerful groups over a set of political and economic institutions expected to generate for them a minimally acceptable level of benefits, which thereby ends or prevents generalized civil war and/or political and economic disorder"* (Kelsall et al. 2022, 27).

They conceptualise settlements through social foundation, the breadth of insider groups, and power configuration, the concentration or dispersion of power within them. A settlement that is narrow and dispersed, for instance, results in a polity dominated by a limited demographic sharing power among themselves, linking PSA to wider debates on authoritarianism, clientelism, and neopatrimonial regimes.

PSA and Social Protection

Applying PSA to social protection in Africa, Lavers and Hickey (2015) suggest that social protection expansion is 1) a function of elite commitment, and 2) closely related to both the domestic political economy and transnational ideas. They argue that social protection shapes politics and vice versa, but there is little literature clarifying whether institutions, actors, global processes, or socioeconomic change matter the most in this regard. According to Lavers and Hickey, the PSA literature can add important perspectives on the politics of social protection.

Lavers and Hickey (2015) argue that institutions (formal and informal) represent both the mechanisms through which rents are distributed between elites and the 'rules of the game', influencing individual behaviour within society. In this perspective, social protection relates to a broader distributional regime, encompassing the national growth path, industrial policy and agrarian reforms, and spending on social services. Increasing social protection will, in this model, structurally incentivise budgeting the political settlement through formal means like taxes, as opposed to informal means like clientelism. Therefore, social protection creates incentive structures that decrease reliance on clientelism, while clientelism in and of itself disincentivise social protection expansion (Cendales et al. 2025).

Political settlements are often "unfavourable" towards effective implementation of social protection, as some rents must be redirected from elites to the less powerful and decrease the need for patronage networks, but there are ways in which it has happened historically, depending on which type of settlement is present. In more inclusive political settlements, often democracies, the disadvantaged have the ability to mobilise across class, ethnicity, and gender, forcing a renegotiation of the settlement (bottom-up). In less inclusive settlements, elites can pre-empt social issues and renegotiation by expanding social protection for more powerful lower-level factions (Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2019; Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa 2020) or to secure compliance in factions that might otherwise cause unrest. Determining the political settlement in a nation will help determine which way to achieve social protection. When implementing social policy, influence from transnational actors on a regime will have limited impact if the effort is not included in a renegotiation of their political settlement. Outside pressures will, at best, result in project-based implementation of social protection schemes without them becoming fully institutionalised, as they have to become part of both the formal institutional practice and informal institutional expectations – they have to be owned by the incumbents and their recipients.

Another important aspect of social protection implementation is the time perspective of the ruling coalition. More stable political settlements are more likely to want to invest the time and energy it takes to implement comprehensive social policies. By contrast, competitive clientelist settlements are more likely to prioritise fast implementation along patron-client loyalties (Lavers and Hickey 2015).

Authoritarian regimes and electoral competition

Electoral Authoritarianism and Inequality

Teo (2021) questions the assumption that income equality leads to political equality, arguing that there is no clear relationship between democracy and income inequality. Democracies are not necessarily better at redistributing wealth than autocracies. Instead, electoral competition, party ideology, and party institutionalisation have stronger effects on redistribution.

Even electoral authoritarian (EA) regimes devote significant resources to elections, using them to reward loyalists, punish opposition, reduce dissent, and gain legitimacy. Preventive measures such as welfare and social protection policies are often expanded in response to opposition pressure, making EA regimes more redistributive than closed authoritarian states. Party ideology also shapes redistribution. Right-wing parties tend to resist taxation and redistribution, while left-wing and labour-based parties support more generous welfare, often favouring their supporters. In Eastern Europe, authoritarian states have enacted broad welfare programmes. A final factor is party institutionalisation, defined as the stability and value of organisations and procedures. More institutionalised parties pursue long-term goals, while stronger opposition institutionalisation leads to greater redistribution, as ruling parties must treat them as viable competitors. Teo concludes that legitimacy drives redistribution in EA regimes, and elections, even controlled ones, are an important way to secure it.

Small and Large Electoral Base

Cassani and Natalizia (2023) argue that most of the literature on the relationship between democratic decline and welfare policies has focused on cases where democratisation has been successful. Instead, they focus on cases in which hybrid regimes developed in the post-communist era, using the term ‘partial democratisation’. This involves countries such as Georgia, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and Ukraine. In these hybrid regimes, there is still electoral uncertainty, and therefore political candidates must win some degree of legitimacy among the voters. Social services can serve as a way of obtaining performance-based legitimacy, understood as the extent to which the regime manages to meet the demands of its citizens, for several reasons (Cassani and Natalizia 2023):

First, when the electoral base is large, social services are more feasible than clientelist networks. Second, to obtain performance-based legitimacy, the social services must focus on the segments of the population that make up a large part of society, which is typically less well-off in these countries. Lastly, social services create immediate input that can be ascribed to the specific government, thus increasing legitimacy.

The authors use Georgia as an example of how partial democratisation led incumbents to restructure the health sector to receive support by comparing three periods of government (1996–2003 under Shevardnadze, 2004–12 under Saakashvili, 2012–19 under Ivanishvili). The findings show that the health sector has become a central area of debate nationally, more prevalent close to elections, which has eventually led to more social spending on health services. These findings indicate that competitive authoritarian contexts do not necessarily imply less redistribution, if large parts of the electorate demand social services in a specific area, or if used as a tool for electoral victory. On the other hand, welfare expansion does not necessarily contribute to more social or economic equality, as the findings by Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton (2019) demonstrate, and as the organisational proliferation strategy described by Mares and Carnes (2009) posits. The findings of Cassani and Natalizia (2023) highlight the importance of electoral uncertainty, as further autocratisation could limit the incentive to strive for performance-based legitimacy and therein social policy spending.

Ideology and Social Exclusion

Illiberal Democracy

Another strand of literature focuses on how democratic backsliding has led to changes in welfare policies. Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton (2019) explore how democratic decline has made social policy a matter of deservingness in Hungary, Poland, and Croatia, eventually leading to social inequality along different lines such as ethnicity, race, and war veterans. For instance, in Croatia the percentage of GDP spent on veteran benefits is 2 percent, while the spending on social assistance for the poor amounts to 0.4 percent of GDP. Szikra and Autischer (2025) also find deservingness to be central in four countries (Hungary, Austria, Italy, and Poland), with illiberal leaders moving in an authoritarian direction, but they also find that the targeted or deserving groups often consist of people neglected in previous democratic politics. This serves as a way of differentiating the new policy direction from the previous ones, which in three of the cases resulted in breaking with path-dependent institutions.

Welfare Chauvinism

Szikra and Öktem (2023) examine how democratic decline led to rapid restructuring of the welfare state in Hungary, classified as a hybrid regime, and Türkiye, classified as an autocracy, which decreased and increased welfare spending respectively, with the exception of fiscal welfare (tax credits) in Hungary. They consider three dimensions of policy change: the content of the reform, the procedure, and the discourse. On the content dimension, they find different patterns. In Hungary, Fidesz social programmes were aimed at families and persons in stable employment,

whereas in Türkiye, the AKP focused social spending on the health sector and lower-income groups. On the discourse dimension, both cases emphasised family reforms in a pro-natalist narrative. Lastly, on the procedural dimension, policymaking has become more dominated by the executive in a top-down manner, also sidelining veto players, to a greater extent in Hungary than in Türkiye. What these cases show is that democratic backsliding does not necessarily lead to the same form of welfare restructuring. Despite similarities on discourse and procedural sidelining, the content differed, as Fidesz created more exclusionary flagship programmes in contrast to the AKP prioritising broader groups, particularly lower-income groups.

Authoritarian Neoliberalism

Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa (2020) argue that the combination of neoliberal policies and an increasingly illiberal democracy create a form of polity called authoritarian neoliberalism, with severe consequences for the institutional foundations of the welfare state and the "forms and practices of social citizenship" (p. 559). They describe how regimes in Hungary and Poland use authoritarian neoliberalism to disenfranchise workers and increase inequality, conceptualised through three overlapping dimensions: 1) a historically and geographically specific recombination of political authoritarianism and economic marketisation, 2) the intensification of state control with curtailment of rights and formal liberties, and 3) the rewriting of welfare systems along ethnic, religious, or gender lines. In their framework, "illiberal" denotes a critical stance toward rights-based approaches and welfare policy, combined with centralisation of power and the weakening of checks and balances. In both Poland and Hungary, authoritarian neoliberalism produced high insecurity for marginalised groups such as the poor, Roma, unemployed, immigrants, and disabled, while sparing in-groups.

Civil society and social protection

NGOs in Authoritarian Regimes

Heurlin (2009) provides a theoretical and empirical account of the relationship between NGOs and the state in authoritarian regimes, by looking at the strategies the regime uses towards NGOs, distinguishing between a corporatist and an exclusionary strategy.

The corporatist strategy encompasses 1) control over members and the purpose of NGOs, 2) establishment of government-led NGOs (GONGOs) to impede independent NGOs, 3) co-optation of NGOs, by placing active or former officials in NGO leadership positions or co-opting independent NGOs to the state, and 4) offering resources to NGOs, thereby physically co-opting them (Heurlin 2009, 222). The exclusionary strategy works through 1) constraints on the operating space for

NGOs, 2) repression of the work of NGOs, often on issues of welfare, 3) discretion in the registration process, and 4) restrictions on fundraising, both domestically and internationally (Heurlin 2009, 223).

What strategy the authoritarian regime adopts varies according to the extent of elite competition and development strategy. In single-party regimes, where elite conflicts are expected to be reduced, corporatist strategies tend to regulate NGOs (p. 223). On the contrary, in personal regimes, elites often have a narrower support base, increasing elite competition, and therefore arguably tending to adopt the exclusionary strategy. Second, the development strategy is expected to condition the strategy adopted, distinguishing between socialist and neoliberal development agendas.

Lobbying Authoritarian Regimes

Grömping and Teets (2023) adopt a theoretical framework on influence production and seek to adapt it to authoritarian settings. The framework posits four stages in the lobbying process: the first relates to mobilisation and maintenance, the second to interest communities, the third involves choosing adequate advocacy strategies, and the last concerns managing to influence a given outcome. They argue that advocacy in an authoritarian context differs from democratic regimes in three ways, namely fewer entry points to the policy-making process, fewer incentives to acquire information from advocacy groups, and stricter control. The book is both useful as a theoretical lens on how to influence the autocratic incumbent, and as an empirical source, as it provides several cases from Zimbabwe, Cambodia, Türkiye, China, Malaysia, Montenegro, Belarus, and Russia.

Rybiy (2024) argues that creating CSO coalitions can be helpful in promoting democratic change in environments that are complicated and difficult for civil society actors to navigate. Focusing on Ukraine, she discusses several examples of CSO coalitions and the RPR (Reanimation Package of Reforms), emphasising how coalition-building can lead to actual change in different areas, for instance social policy. Specifically, she argues that the RPR coalition led to 32 policy changes by 2019, including reforms in social services, anti-corruption, and health.

Ho et al. (2022) find that the introduction of social policy programmes can be triggered by social mobilisation in both political regime types, democracy and autocracy, focusing on India with the adoption of NREGA and China with dibao. Both programmes are social assistance schemes aimed at low-income groups and adopted in response to social mobilisation, but the two cases also differ regarding the objectives of decision-makers. In the Indian case, party politics played a large role in adoption and implementation, while in China dibao was introduced to pre-empt social unrest, which becomes even clearer when considering that the

majority of dibao beneficiaries did not qualify for the programme but had potential to create social unrest. Summing up, this study emphasises how social mobilisation can foster the adoption of social assistance programmes independent of political regime type, but at the same time the cases highlight how the underlying objectives differ between electoral support and preventive measures against unrest, ultimately pursuing the interests of the government rather than those of citizens.

Transnational Networks

As a result of the closing or limited space for civil society in authoritarian regimes, several studies point to transnational strategies of opposition as a way for actors to mobilise support or more effectively voice dissatisfaction.

Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi (2023) introduce the notion of *transnationalisation* as an opposition strategy in competitive authoritarian regimes. Focusing on two cases, the mayors from Istanbul and Budapest, the article examines how they used the strategy of transnationalisation to influence policy. They conclude that local actors can use transnationalisation as a strategy to build and reinforce oppositional forces to illiberal/authoritarian regimes on a political level. They note that there are risks associated with this strategy, such as accusation of violating national identity and sovereignty.

Young (2023) examines how transnational strategies can be used to influence an authoritarian regime, from the perspective of NGOs. He introduces the term 'transnational advocacy networks' (TANs), describing the situation in which local NGOs connect to international groups, which is possible through the increasing access to internet and social media platforms. One of the central arguments presented in the article is that the connection and cooperation with international actors can be considered a double-edged sword, as TANs can help groups survive in a challenging environment, but at the same time international actors or groups might also foster further repression. When advocacy groups in authoritarian contexts seek to influence policy, they often seek to balance strategies of antagonism and cooptation, as this is central for being able to maintain their international networks, but it also comes with the risk of diverging too far from their international donors.

While media can help spread awareness and create TANs, Young (2023) also points out three factors that might undermine its effectiveness. When local NGOs start to rely on international funding, it can create an identity problem if or when the authoritarian regime seeks to investigate their purposes. This is arguably similar to the risk of using the transnationalisation strategy, where the incumbent might see the oppositional forces as threatening national identity or interests (Musil and

Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2023). The effectiveness of Western aid is debatable considering aid opportunities from non-Western and/or more authoritarian donors. Lastly, transnational actors can be undermined on the grounds of both internal and external sovereignty claims from the regime.

The article provides an empirical example of TANs from Cambodia, where advocacy groups focusing on environmental protection of Areng Valley strategically used social media to mobilise mass participation and eventually influence decision-making. Further, the analysis provides insights on the relationship between the advocacy groups and the type of support they provided, distinguishing between direct and indirect, as well as a detailed description of the young activists' media strategy and its development and impact. After the NGOs' activities were challenged by the enforcement of LANGOs (law restricting the activities and freedom of NGOs), one of the NGOs decided to stop as a formal organisation and instead operate as citizen activists focusing on protecting the environment, by emphasising the government's lacking transparency on the issue of the Areng Valley, eventually leading to protection of the area. The change in the structure of advocacy groups should not be confused with less international support, but the local groups changed their focus from environmental matters to civil rights relating to government irregularities.

Conclusion

Because social policy depends on elite commitments, power configuration, and both formal and informal institutions, it can be difficult to generalise the consequences of authoritarianism for social protection (Lavers and Hickey 2015). There are, however, a few things we can expect to happen in regard to social policy when countries become increasingly authoritarian.

The interaction between formal and informal institutions has a clear effect on social policies. In Georgia and Türkiye, clientelism is used to reward people loyal to the regime (Jikia 2023; Bektas 2025). This can, in the long term, lead to the defunding of social protection programmes in exchange for increasingly exclusive ones along patron-client lines (Cendales et al. 2025). Over time, clientelism as an informal institution can be absorbed into formal institutions, making it even harder to reverse (Bektas 2025).

In Hungary, Poland, and Croatia, however, nativist ideology and a discourse on deservingness have reoriented social protection programmes along ideological lines instead of clientelist ones, appealing to an electorate by disenfranchising more marginalised communities, while in practice also decreasing social protection for the rest (Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2019). In some areas, though,

exclusionary social protection has been expanded for specific groups like families, pensioners, or low-income people (Szikra and Öktem 2022). Authoritarian states, either clientelist, chauvinist, or both, are expected to use social protection to obtain patronage or exclude out-groups. These out-groups vary, but often include immigrants, gender and sexual minorities, and religious or ethnic minorities (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa 2020).

For neoliberal authoritarian regimes such as Poland and Hungary, social protection schemes will see larger privatisation, a *"radical redistribution of public resources towards privileged social groups"* (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa 2020, 560), and a rejection of broad rights-based approaches to social protection. For this reason, social and economic inequality is expected to increase.

Whether these regimes choose to pursue a strategy of clientelism or chauvinism will depend on the power configuration of the state, and on how institutionalised the opposition is. Electoral competition has helped to expand some social policies in electoral authoritarian states as a means to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their electorate, though outcomes vary depending on the political settlement (Teo 2021; Szikra and Öktem 2022).

Social mobilisation and CSO and NGO coalitions have been shown to still be able to influence public policy in authoritarian regimes in some cases (Young 2023; Ho et al. 2022; Rybiy 2024). Comprehensive and inclusive social policy is not to be expected, though. NGOs in authoritarian states will also experience restrictions in registration, fundraising, and the creation of competing, state-funded organisations (GONGOs) (Heurlin 2009). Furthermore, interaction with transnational movements can be sanctioned to prevent foreign influence on state matters (Lavers and Hickey 2015; Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2023). Ultimately, authoritarianism tends to instrumentalise social protections in ways that deepen social and economic inequalities, through chauvinism, clientelism, or neoliberal restructuring.

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