

Call for Papers

Beyond Democratic Backsliding: Populist Strategies as Democratic Recovery in Central and Eastern Europe

Special Issue of *MedienJournal*

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Democratic backsliding has become a defining challenge for democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. Research has provided extensive insights into the erosion of democratic institutions, norms, political competition, media freedom, and public discourse. Yet a crucial question remains unanswered: How can democratic backsliding be prevented, resisted, or even reversed?

This Special Issue shifts the perspective from diagnosing democratic erosion toward the communicative practices through which democracy can be defended, reconstructed, and made publicly tangible. We are particularly interested in the role of political communication, public discourse, and citizen engagement and participation in processes of democratic resilience and recovery.

One starting point is the contested relationship between populism and democracy. Populist communication is frequently associated with democratic erosion, polarization, exclusion, and authoritarian politics. Yet practices often described as populist – direct appeals to citizens, political presence at the local level, the articulation of shared concerns, accessible political narratives, and the mobilization of “the people” – are not necessarily restricted to anti-democratic actors. They may also become resources for democratic politics and actors seeking to raise awareness on striking issues and foster participation.

This raises a deliberately open question: **Can populist strategies become a resource for democratic recovery?**

Rather than understanding democratic politics exclusively through institutions and formal procedures, the Special Issue invites contributions that examine democracy as an ongoing communicative process. Democratic publics need to be addressed, activated, and sustained. Political actors must make complex issues understandable, connect abstract democratic principles to citizens' everyday experiences, and create spaces in which collective concerns can become publicly visible. Local encounters, direct political communication, civic education, journalism, and issue-based mobilization may all contribute to these processes.

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Particular attention may be paid to situations in which democratic mobilization emerges around concrete problems associated with advanced processes of backsliding, such as corruption, restrictions on media freedom, attacks on the rule of law, or the weakening of political accountability. Such conflicts can become focal points for the reconstruction of democratic publics and alternative political narratives.

We invite contributions from communication studies, political science, and related disciplines addressing Central and Eastern Europe. Comparative perspectives within the region are particularly welcome.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- communication strategies for resisting or reversing democratic backsliding;
- democratic and pro-democratic forms of populist communication;
- political proximity, local campaigning, and face-to-face political communication;
- the construction and mobilization of democratic publics;
- political narratives and the communicative articulation of “the people”;
- journalism and media as actors in democratic resilience and recovery;
- civic and political education as forms of democratic communication;
- issue-based mobilization around corruption, media freedom, the rule of law, or other conflicts;
- local and regional publics in processes of democratic resistance;
- the relationship between political complexity, explanation, and democratic participation;
- communicative strategies of opposition parties, civil society actors, movements, and other democratic forces.

The Special Issue is theoretically and methodologically open. We welcome quantitative and qualitative empirical studies, comparative analyses, theoretical contributions, and essayistic interventions that advance the discussion about communication and democratic recovery.

Submission

Manuscripts of up to **7,000 words**, excluding references and related supplementary elements, should be submitted by **31 January 2027**. All submissions will subsequently undergo peer review. Manuscripts should be prepared following the guidelines of **APA 7th edition**.

Please submit your manuscripts **via email to the guest editors** below.

Publication of the Special Issue is planned for the **third quarter of 2027**.

Prospective authors are warmly invited to **contact the guest editors prior to submission**. We welcome short, informal exchanges about potential topics in order to discuss their fit with the Special Issue and to clarify the intended direction of a contribution.

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