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“Democracy Rebound”: A research agenda to counter contemporary autocratization and authoritarian rhetoric

„Democracy Rebound”: Program badawczy na temat przeciwdziałania autokratyzacji i autorytarnej retoryce

Abstract

This text outlines a rationale for a concerted, interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral research agenda, called “Democracy Rebound,” as a reaction against contemporary autocratization and the rise of authoritarianism. The agenda proposes research activities that explain the historical and political contexts and the social, discursive and psychological drivers of authoritarian tendencies in Europe today. It recommends four steps towards explaining how authoritarian projects mobilize identity and affect via digital discourse to normalize leader-centered power and illiberal, anti-rational ideologies, often disguised as tradition. The agenda is rooted in a comprehensive literature review and motivated by the need for Europe-wide actions and research-based recommendations that equip policymakers, journalists, educators, and civil society with actionable intelligence, tools, and early warnings to detect and reverse democratic backsliding.

Tekst przedstawia uzasadnienie dla skoordynowanego, interdyscyplinarnego i międzysektorowego programu badawczego pod nazwą „Democracy Rebound” (odrodzenie demokracji), będącego reakcją na współczesną autokratyzację i wzrost autorytaryzmu. Program proponuje działania badawcze wyjaśniające kontekst historyczny i polityczny oraz społeczne, dyskursywne i psychologiczne czynniki napędzające tendencje autorytarne we współczesnej Europie. Rekomenduje on cztery kroki w kierunku wyjaśnienia, w jaki sposób projekty autorytarne mobilizują tożsamość i emocje w dyskursach cyfrowych, aby normalizować władzę skoncentrowaną na przywódcach oraz nieliberalne, antyracjonalne ideologie, często podszywające się pod tradycję. Program badawczy oparty jest na kompleksowym przeglądzie literatury i wynika z potrzeby ogólnoeuropejskich działań i rekomendacji opartych na badaniach, które wyposażą decydentów, dziennikarzy, edukatorów i społeczeństwo obywatelskie w praktyczne informacje, narzędzia i systemy wczesnego ostrzegania, umożliwiające wykrywanie i odwracanie regresu demokracji.

Key words

democracy, autocracy, authoritarianism, resistance, appeals, digital public discourse
demokracja, autokracja, autorytaryzm, opór, przyciąganie, cyfrowy dyskurs publiczny

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“Democracy Rebound”: A research agenda to counter contemporary autocratization and authoritarian rhetoric

1. Introduction

No European country today is immune to the subtle appeal of autocracy, often expressed domestically through charismatic leaders and populist movements, and internationally through the covert malicious reach of foreign authoritarian powers through infiltration of digital media discourses. Eurobarometer surveys have shown dissatisfaction with the current state of the state of national democracies in EU member states. This dissatisfaction has been widening in Southern European countries since the financial crisis in 2008, and in Poland and Hungary since the COVID pandemic, while a declining trust in democratic institutions can also be

observed in Germany and France. Yet, Eurobarometer data also show a significant variance in citizen satisfaction with democracy, ranging from as low as 26% in Bulgaria and Italy to over 60% in Northern countries (European Commission and Ipsos European Public Affairs 2023). At the same time, a study from the Pew Research Center (2024) reveals that a median of nearly one-third of citizens across surveyed nations are open to authoritarian forms of government. While many citizens perceive European institutions as a safeguard against authoritarian tendencies and corruption in their own countries, especially in Southern and Eastern countries, a non-trivial minority of citizens are open to authoritarian forms of rule, including over 30% in Greece and Hungary, over 25% in Italy, Slovakia and Bulgaria, and rates reaching between 25% and 15% in Spain, Romania, Poland, Croatia, France, Czechia, Portugal, Austria, Belgium, a trend that is underscored by findings from International IDEA (2024) and the V-Dem Democracy Report (Nord et al. 2025).

This pattern of democratic erosion in Europe calls for a concerted interdisciplinary research and innovation action that would shed light on the underlying historical, social, discursive and psychological causes driving autocratic configurations and authoritarianism among EU citizens. Ultimately, the ambition is to produce knowledge and a network of empowered actors equipped with tools and organized into an early warning system capable of collectively safeguarding and strengthening democratic institutions and values. It is with the aim of addressing the evolving threat of authoritarian appeal that the initiators of "Democracy Rebound," a research and innovation project to be developed further, publicize this research agenda and call for new collaborations and extensions that would bring democratic institutional and individual actors, academics, activists, journalists, educators and concerned citizens together to help ensure a future where democratic principles flourish and human rights are upheld in a more resilient and informed democracy.

While the explanation, analysis, monitoring and countering of such a complex issue as democratic erosion, autocratic appeals and authoritarian rhetoric requires cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary collaboration to address, the core concerns of *Res Rhetorica* and "Democracy Rebound" overlap. Through this agenda, we particularly aim to attend to the lowering quality of democratic deliberation, the discursive normalization of populist and autocratic rhetorical appeals, the threats stemming from invasive disinformation and manipulation of news and scientific facts, the increased use of psychological influence in coercive authoritarian communication, and the possible pathways to countering these processes with research and monitoring (e.g., an early warning system), as well as evidence-based media literacy initiatives and participatory interventions.

2. A working definition of autocracy and authoritarianism from a discursive perspective

Autocracy denotes a governance system that is centered on an autocratic person, a family, oligarchic group or party and embedded in an unequal socioeconomic power structure. Modern autocracies build on asymmetrical relationships between the autocrat, followers and adversaries. Once they are developed, autocratic power constitutes a state-backed arrangement of political groups and their socioeconomic resources that works towards sidelining, undermining and discrediting opposition actors, which leads to diminished pluralism and democratic erosion (Mudde 2019). Such a system operates with the aid of autocratic rhetorical appeals, i.e., an ensemble of social, psychological and verbal mechanisms that project affective, often imaginary and sometimes irrational bonding between the leader and the "masses." In this view, autocratization is a process that mobilizes general support for increasingly hierarchical power relations; meanwhile, authoritarianism is a practical form of imposing and sustaining the resulting asymmetrical orders or exploitative arrangements. In this view, autocracy is a variety of authoritarianism in its practice of power enforcement that seeks to preserve political hierarchies and institutional control by delegitimizing and suppressing social dissent and eliminating democratic checks and balances of the system (Frantz 2024; Kailitz 2024).

Historically, there are two prototypical variants of the autocratic appeal, each of which can appear in a soft form (accepting some democratic values while favoring charismatic leaders over institutions and the rule of law) or a hard form (openly anti-pluralistic and tolerating violence to preserve hierarchies):

- soft right-wing libertarian form: anti-elite, individualistic, anti-immigration, emphasizing personal freedom, welfare-chauvinist;
- hard right-wing traditionalist form: order- and nation-oriented, paternalistic, echoing Italian fascist and Nazi models, welfare-chauvinist, opposing gender equality;
- soft left-wing personalistic form: centered on charismatic leaders, weak internal democracy, promising institutional rupture, prioritizing economic equality over other forms of equality, gender-inclusive;
- hard left-wing collectivist form: state-socialist, inspired by the Soviet Union.

As has been argued by many theorists, including J.S. Mill, H. Arendt or J. Habermas, free public discourse is key for a democratic Europe to succeed. Yet discourse and rhetoric also play a key role in the autocratization of political relationships – the Nazi propaganda machine of the 1930s is a historical example

whereas Trump's use of social media accounts is a contemporary one. These types of autocratic appeal are triggered, shaped, and amplified through political marketing and media discourses, particularly around cues such as perceived external threats, elite demonization, or the cult of personality (Kracauer 2004). The research agenda should then include diagnosing the prevalence of these dispositions across European populations and correlate their interplay with characteristics of public discourse as a means of attitude formation. To capture how such attitudes are articulated, negotiated, and practiced in everyday settings, researchers should also conduct interviews and examine case studies through qualitative analyses.

Authoritarian projects exploit psychological dispositions and rouse socio--affective desires which make followers succumb to illiberal ideology and force others into submission or indifference through a spiral of silence. It is through mainstream social media discourse in particular, its tropes, figures, styles and narratives, that autocrats mobilize their base today, extoll the virtues of the strong leader, erode the rule of law and undermine human rights. Both democratic and authoritarian appeals operate through discourse; yet what makes a discourse democratic or authoritarian is often hard to grasp. As a result, more research needs to be done on how various legitimizations of authoritarianism are articulated in the online discourses across European member states.

On the other hand, the autocratic appeal is also reflected in a range of radicalizing discourses—from political sectarianism to religious fundamentalism or re--traditionalization and group-centered hate speech that thrives in certain digital media spaces, which should be monitored and, if necessary, contained. Moreover, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) is increasingly resonating with some segments of the population, leading them to lose faith in the liberal democratic order. These narratives promote authoritarianism over the inclusive, consensus-based decision-making that is essential to a democratic Europe. By making these mechanisms more accessible, researchers could foster a more informed, empowered, and vigilant citizenry, more resilient to authoritarianism.

3. Preliminary overview of literature

The research on autocratic forms of government is highly influenced by the experiences of the first half of the twentieth century (e.g., Adorno 1973; Arendt 1956; Fromm 1997; Horkheimer 2005; Kracauer 2004; Löwenthal and Guterman 1949; Milgram 1974). At that time, the autocratic appeal was directly tied to authoritarian forms of social organization and normalized through unquestioned paternal authority in families, teacher dominance in education, or hierarchical command structures in workplaces. These forms cultivated personalities drawn

to leader governance, sustaining political systems that, in the extreme, manifested themselves in fascist (including national-socialist), colonial and racist, or leftist dictatorships. Until the mid-20th century, autocratic rule reinforced stable, state--centered hierarchies. However, since the advent of "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000), social relations have become more centered on the individual becoming more self-reliant, self-driven and hedonistic (e.g., Bröckling 2015; Sennett 1998), setting the stage for new attitudes towards authority. The current shifts toward the autocratic appeal should be seen through such a historical lens and inform proactive measures to detect early signs of re-traditionalization – such as the revival of rigid gender roles, cultural hierarchies or class-like social structures – and to counter them through civic education and media interventions that promote dialogic, inclusive public discourses, while tracing and containing movements and appeals echoing the rhetoric of the dictatorships of the past.

Contemporary forms of autocratic appeal demand updated explanations, particularly those focusing on the role of public and digital discourses. Approaches like "libertarian authoritarianism" (Amlinger and Nachtwey 2024) analyze how authoritarianism aligns with hedonistic, individualistic personalities where individuals self-govern under impersonal constraints, embracing voluntary submission masked as autonomy and (self) liberation (Herzog 2021; 2024). Today, it might manifest itself in anti-elite discourses structured as conspiracy theories against hidden agendas (Henkelmann et al. 2020), with some examples being anti--vaccination narratives or social media sites voicing opposition to "woke agendas" and "gender ideologies." "Regressive rebels" (Heumann and Nachtwey 2020) seek authority as protection from progressive impositions, viewing autocracies as useful safeguards for individuality, provided they align with their ideologies.

This often correlates with the populists' support for the regressive ideas, especially in the constructed dichotomy between the "fraudulent elites" and the "honest people" (Mudde 2019). Populist, pro-autocratic voices are often in favor of the minimal or procedural democracy, a popular sovereignty or majority rule, pitching these concepts against initiatives for democratic representation and minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers, especially when it comes to the judiciary system and independence of media (Kaltwasser 2018). Socio-psychological research shows this new authoritarianism comes from the radicalization of seemingly centrist or formerly "apolitical" citizens that have been induced to accept binary "in or out" imaginaries and rhetorical schemes marginalizing or polarizing social groups (Decker et al. 2022).

Research on discourses and performances of right-wing populism reveals that communicative practice and rhetorical style have become crucial in fostering authoritarian projects. This "populist far-right" formation typically combines

nativism (the appraisal of national values, traditions and native inhabitants), authoritarianism (an assertive endorsement of social order and discipline), and divisive populism (contrasting the "pure people" with "corrupt elites") (Mudde 2019). Authoritarians, followed by leaders from the democratic political spectrum, may use spirals of provocation that draw on fallacious argumentation and performative styles that stage a political leader or movement as connecting with audiences through disorderly or offensive behavior, thus shifting the perception of "shamelessness," or what constitutes acceptable political discourse (Moffitt 2016; Wodak 2021). To counter this, strategies must include fostering strong democratic ethos, immunization to fallacious rhetoric and other literacy initiatives that alert citizens to conspiracy-driven discourses that glorify strong leaders or nationalistic chauvinism.

The psychological factor of support for autocracy is another key to the understanding of its appeal, as some studies point to how close-minded individuals who struggle to deal with complexity and ambiguity may favor strong leaders who offer fast and effective solutions, without recognizing corruption or violence as threat to the society (Armendáriz Miranda and Cawvey 2021). While this framing implies a cognitive deficit and risks stigmatizing voters, Hochschild (2016) offers a counterpoint by highlighting the "deep story" of voters who feel marginalized by rapid cultural changes. More recently, the notion of "stolen pride" has been identified as a mythopoetic factor that populist authoritarian leaders use, not by exploiting cognitive limitations, but by acting as a shield against shame and restoring a sense of worth (Hochschild 2024). In other words, leader-focused and emotionally appealing political marketing can be seen as the "software" for the autocratic "hardware" that legitimizes antidemocratic ideologies. Resilience strategies, then, require a holistic approach. While civic education can address the cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities in the digital sphere, interventions must also target the structural and socio-political, institutional and technological conditions that foster this susceptibility.

The interaction between followers and leaders deserves more attention. Helms (2025) argues that modern autocrats rely on cultivating loyal supporters who actively defend the regime's ideology and suppress dissent, often under the guise of democratic procedures such as elections. Perceived legitimacy of autocratic regimes drives people to support these regimes more than objective metrics would show (Mauk 2024), with autocrats distorting perceptions via propaganda and algorithms (Brandt 2022). In democracies, media technologies enable a classical "spiral of silence" (Cappella and Jamieson 1997), where lack of literacy and social capital makes large segments of population largely depoliticized and disenfranchised (Dalisay et al. 2012). The blurring of the lines between the descent

of democracy and the ascent of autocracy requires more nuanced strategies to detect soft authoritarianism via digital and public discourse analysis, in-depth interviews and ethnographic case studies to capture actor-based perspectives on articulating and practicing these attitudes in everyday settings.

Recently, modern autocracies started leveraging information control via digital manipulation, using AI surveillance, censorship, and social media to repress free speech in less visible ways (Keremoğlu et al. 2025; Mendoza and Arugay 2024; Yuchtman et al. 2021). This tendency intersects with the populist undermining of democratic mechanisms, where electoral autocracies erode constraints via media capture and judicial politicization, amplified by algorithmic curation (Benedek 2024). Once in power, the authoritarian institutionalization involves not only overt vilification and repression of opposition, but also covert cooptation (Reny 2019), human capital investments for legitimacy (Chang and Wu 2022), or gender reforms which do not change any of the gender based problems (Donno 2024). Independent agencies and civic activism aimed at monitoring this and advancing genuine reforms to prevent the spread of authoritarianism should be supported.

Recent research also underscores that democratic norm erosion is dynamic, involving structural, psychological, and technological factors (Yabanci et al. 2025), and may be successfully countered, for example through elite fragmentation, bureaucratic defiance, legal mobilization, civic protest, and transnational solidarity potentially reversing autocratization. Comparative studies across regions (Africa, Asia, Latin America) highlight adaptive resistance to reduced civic space, which points to autocracies' vulnerabilities in the context of citizen mobilization (Diamond 2024). These insights inform action-oriented approaches, such as building transnational networks to expose and counter digital propaganda and public discourses promoting re-traditionalization, while examining how autocratic types spread and resonate across populations, which is also at the heart of "Democracy Rebound."

4. Motivation for a new research agenda

The aim of "Democracy Rebound" is to reshape the understanding of autocratic tendencies that have been emerging in public discourses and equip democratic societies with the knowledge and tools necessary for robust and resilient defense against their growth within EU member states. We make the case for an interdisciplinary approach to authoritarian tendencies in public political and institutional discourses in European countries today and how they resonate in society. Some schools of thought see autocracy as referring to any system where power is concentrated in a single individual, as seen in contexts like a military leader

or a corporate executive, whereas authoritarianism encompasses political regimes prioritizing enforced power and restricting democratic freedoms, civil liberties (i.e. illiberal democracy), and participatory decision-making at a state level. From the perspective of social psychology, on the other hand, the susceptibility to and support for autocratic governance is seen as a result of diverse contextual threats and the psychological disposition.

The central question now is to ask how democracies in Europe and beyond can better understand, detect, and counter the social, psychological, and political drivers and manifestations of the contemporary autocratic appeal across the public sphere, digital platforms, and traditional media. To address this, the research agenda could be organized around the following research questions:

- What are the main types of autocratic appeal among European citizens, and how do they spread?
- How is authoritarian politics constructed in contemporary discourses?
- How are autocratic dispositions activated by digitally mediated media discourse?
- How are they received by people with different personal characteristics?
- What role does individual disposition – such as attitudes toward authority – play in shaping this response?
- How are forms of autocratic appeal countered by civil society actors?
- What forms of resistance are most effective and have potential for replication or upscaling?
- How to rebound contemporary democracy to make it more resilient to the autocratic appeal and authoritarianism?

5. Themes, methodological approaches and exemplary actions

Methodologically speaking, a holistic and systematic approach will be needed to analyze historical, political, discursive, socio-psychological, and media-related factors behind autocratic appeals and attitudes. It can be organized around four central themes addressing the main issues highlighted above through a sequence of integrated research objectives and innovation-oriented actions.

5.1 Understanding contemporary autocratization

This theme explores the discursive drivers, mechanisms, motivations, structural conditions and underlying causes behind the recent and ongoing waves of authoritarian discourses, both within established democracies and in more fragile political systems. It unpacks how and why democratic backsliding is prepared and executed in different discourses, identifying key political, social, economic,

and technological factors that contribute to the erosion of democratic norms and institutions. Particular attention is given to the role of populist movements, disinformation campaigns, polarization and cleavage structures, the digital media and the manipulation of democratic processes by elected leaders. Exemplary actions:

- use comparative analyses across different regime types and contexts to investigate the evolving strategies and tactics of 21st-century autocratic and authoritarian actors, including digital authoritarianism (online influence, disinformation, censorship, surveillance), manipulation and abuse of legal frameworks to erode the rule of law, excessive use of force, and the demonization of political opposition;
- collect information on the social, political, and psychological drivers behind the growing appeal of authoritarian projects, declining trust in democratic institutions, the rise of populist ideologies, and hostility toward vulnerable groups; combine psychological studies on susceptibility to authoritarian narratives with sociological analyses of societal polarization;
- explore the philosophical, political, and historical dimensions of autocratic regimes and ideologies, drawing on past experiences to identify common patterns, critical junctures, and differences in the rise and consolidation of autocratic power to enable political and historical comparisons between past and ongoing autocratic transitions and their legacies;
- examine the gendered and racial dimensions of authoritarianism, including the use of pretend gender equality reforms for international image management, the weakening of DEI programs, and the broader impact of autocratic politics on diversity.

5.2 Countering the autocratic appeal in digital discourses

This theme tackles the rise of digital authoritarianism understood as the use of technologies to surveil, manipulate, repress, and control citizens. It examines state-sponsored disinformation, censorship, surveillance, AI misuse, and the weaponization of social media, as well as the transnational export of these tactics into democratic contexts. In response, it develops strategies to defend democracy through digital literacy, platform accountability, secure infrastructure, and policy frameworks protecting privacy, free expression, and participation. Collaboration with technology experts, civil society, policymakers, and international institutions is central. The goal is to build democratic resilience in the digital age by equipping societies to safeguard rights, values, and institutions against technological threats.

Exemplary objectives:

- map state and non-state actors engaged in digital autocratic and authoritarian practices, analyze their networks, technologies, and strategies, including online censorship, internet shutdowns, digital surveillance, disinformation, information suppression, and FIMI;
- analyze challenges and strategies for resisting digital discourse, including barriers to online protests, investigative research, advocacy, and identify tools devised to bypass censorship and surveillance;
- investigate good practices and strategies that were implemented to protect democracies from authoritarian digital discourse, considering the roles of public authorities, civil society, media, and citizens.

5.3 Development of an early warning system for detection of autocratic tendencies

This theme advances the development of a system designed to detect, analyze, and counter emerging authoritarian tendencies before democratic erosion becomes consolidated. This system could produce validated alerts through an integrated set of tools via data ingestion and curation, large-scale analytics (assisted with LLMs), and applications enabled by briefs, dashboards, good practice manuals and intervention scenarios.

Ideally the system can monitor data on cases of institutional weakening, examples of restrictions of civil liberties, reports of judicial backsliding, electoral susceptibility to autocratic appeals, and the digital spikes of disinformation and hate speech. It feeds on big data produced through quantitative tools (polls and surveys, network mapping, sentiment analysis), but can be supplanted by targeted qualitative research (interviews, ethnography). It is designed to conduct supervised LLM-supported textual analysis producing typologies and indicators for democratic backsliding identified as deviations from good democratic practices. In such situations the system generates risk alerts and recommends tailored counter-narrative templates that are shared via dashboards or briefs. Alongside diagnosis, the system recommends scenarios for resistance strategies or interventions including fact-checking, institutional safeguards, civic education, and coalition-building, equipping democratic actors with actionable resources to counter the autocratic appeal early. Exemplary objectives:

- develop early warning indicators to detect and characterize autocratic and authoritarian tendencies online and offline, identify groups most susceptible to the autocratic appeal;

- apply computational science and natural language processing to political discourse, and track (big) data on legal and institutional changes that signal democratic backsliding;
- explore the links between spirals of silence, science skepticism, distrust in democracy, and the appeal of authoritarian ideologies, examining how complex information ecosystems shape political attitudes;
- identify the actors, practices and patterns of resistance to the normalization of authoritarian projects, including strategies used by pro-democracy movements, civil society, media, and individual citizens, and identify effective actions and good practices;

5.4 Policy recommendations and new resistance strategies

This theme addresses reversing authoritarian tendencies by restoring democratic norms, trust, and the rule of law. It examines strategies for recovery: institutional reform for justice, constitutional safeguards, and mechanisms to revive media freedom, judicial independence, and civic space. Public participation, civic education, and inclusive dialogue are highlighted as foundations for rebuilding democratic culture and resilience. Case studies of successful transitions could identify enablers, challenges, and lessons learned. International cooperation, including with European-level pro-democracy bodies, is seen as vital to aid recovery. The theme ultimately seeks to generate policy recommendations and practical tools to help democracies in crisis not only rebound but also emerge stronger, more inclusive, and resistant to future threats. Exemplary objectives:

- examine the specific challenges faced by groups targeted by autocrats and populist leaders (such as LGBTQ+ people, religious, migrant, and ethnic minorities) particularly in the context of re-traditionalization, and explore how their agency can be strengthened in resisting autocracy;
- explore how culture, creativity, and the arts counter autocratic tendencies and promote democratic values, analyze the impact of cultural production and civic education on public attitudes towards democracy and authoritarianism;
- analyze strategies for reversing autocratic reforms and rule without undermining democracy or fueling polarization, drawing on comparative studies of democratic transitions, institution-building, social cohesion, and de-radicalization.

6. Concluding remarks: Expected impacts

The four themes and exemplary objectives of the proposed research agenda of "Democracy Rebound" support the overarching goal of reinvigorating democratic governance by enhancing institutional accountability, transparency, effectiveness, and trustworthiness, and promoting active, inclusive citizen participation while safeguarding fundamental rights. The agenda aims to build a robust evidence base to protect democratic governance and social systems from threats. It proposes to channel resources to investigate rising authoritarian tendencies and their drivers - including disinformation, erosion of the rule of law, and digital authoritarianism - and to develop tools to counter them. It is set to identify effective practices for resistance, civic mobilization, and transnational solidarity, recognizing that strategies must address psycho-social vulnerabilities, improve the quality of public discourse, install institutional safeguards, and eliminate digital manipulation together.

Integrating insights from political psychology, political science, discourse and rhetorical studies, sociology, information studies, and media ethics, the research agenda, if pursued, shall also aim to provide evidence-based solutions for countering democratic backsliding. Actionable recommendations can be developed for national and European policymakers on protecting civic spaces, countering disinformation where it spikes, and preventing misuse of emerging technologies. While the agenda, research design and intervention methodology of "Democracy Rebound" adopt a multidisciplinary, actor-based framework drawing on a wide range of sciences, it is also necessary to engage citizens and civil society in co-designing research strategies to ensure relevance and facilitate the uptake of findings. Needless to say, democratic actors and stakeholders from various institutions, academia, media, education, civil society, and administration need to co-create strategies for the implementation of the early warning systems at local, national, and European levels.

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