

INEKO Strategy and Experience in Combating Populism

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Abstract

This policy paper is a best practice paper based on a three year project¹ designed and implemented in Slovakia by the think-tank INEKO to fight the recent surge of government populism. The first section offers a policy outline - a methodological generalization of the project. In it we explain our definition of populism, offer strategic options for fighting it and introduce our strategy. The second part presents a case study of the project undertaken in Slovakia in 2006-2009, providing examples, experience as well as main findings resulting from our fight against populism. In the annex we present a step-by-step guide which allows implementing a similar project by those who are interested.

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Keywords: populism, democracy, defining populism, fighting populism, analytical feedback

¹ Feedback on Populism: What Politicians Promised and What They Fulfilled (Sľuby a lamentácie: čo politici sľúbili a čo z toho splnili) designed by INEKO Institute for Economic and Social Reforms

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INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY

Populism is a natural outcome of politicians' efforts to attract voters that is why it is an ever-recurring phenomenon on the political scene. When populism comes to cover a complex spectrum of problems and reaches a level at which it threatens to cause stagnation in the society, it is necessary to provide the society with **complex analytical feedback**, on top of standard feedback provided by the media. It is up to think-tanks to step up and fight populism, when it threatens to get out of hand.

Seeing populism as a singular problem, we need to clearly define it. **We understand populism as deceptive marketing of electoral promises, populist promises being ones that are highly popular but have a negative overall impact on the society or those that are high in popularity but lack follow-through.**

In order to make our **analytical feedback** complex and comprehensive it is necessary to follow four steps:

- systematically monitor all promises made by a populist political party or government,
- assess the quality of the promises based on expert opinion and follow the progress of implementation of the promises,
- effectively communicate all findings to the public,
- establish continuity in the three above stated steps.

The **recipients** of our complex analytical feedback are:

- expert public and media – receive well-structured comprehensive information, which can serve as basis for their further work,
- general public – receive information via media and are presented with direct access to comprehensive analytical information.

The **benefits** of our complex approach are based on providing information

- with a high level of objectivity, guaranteed by the analytical process and objective data,
- available in a structured and comprehensible way,
- upheld by the impartiality of experts as opposed to often biased politicians.

Our project “Feedback on populism” has helped fight populism in Slovakia. We believe that this paper can help fight populism in other democracies as well. INEKO is prepared to communicate the results and implications of the project, or ultimately assist similar projects.

We are aware of the fact that once populism reaches government level, it is extremely difficult to eradicate, as populist governments have potentially unlimited resources to keep their populist rhetoric promising and compelling. Democratic powers become underdogs in this “David & Goliath” fight and external help and resources can be crucial for their success. Ideally, democratic leaders (e.g. EU, NGOs) would not only support individual anti-populism projects, but also stimulate establishing and financing of some continuous “populism watch” program.

FIGHTING POPULISM: POLICY OUTLINE

Current debate on populism often avoids defining this phenomenon. Rather it focuses on empirically describing particular cases. However, when populism is defined, it is in general viewed as a simplification of the complex political sphere to a strict dichotomy between ‘the people’ and ‘the others’, generally the elites. (Panizza 2005: 3, Laclau 2007: 18). Populism is either viewed as virtuous, when genuine interests of the people are being advocated against the corrupt elites (Kazin 1998: 1) or as harmful when the people are subject to demagoguery with often catastrophic results.² Populism is anti-status quo and often connected with radical economic or social changes in the society, where representatives of ‘the people’ advocate their newly assumed or realized needs against the current elites.

Seeing populism as a politicians’ shortcut to power, our definition comes closer to the negative reading. We observe that due to a lack of informed feedback people around the world repeatedly allow politicians to make bad choices. Politicians take advantage of their electorate’s shortcomings.

People elect representatives based on electoral promises they find desirable and reasonable: **they know what they want**. However people do not always possess the information or capacity necessary to understand the complex implications of all proposed policies. In other words, **people are not always aware of the best ways of achieving what they want**.³ Due to this gap, people allow politicians to make bad choices. Populist politicians:

- Implement low quality policies, which appeal to the people, but have a negative overall impact on the society.
- Shift focus to marginal, but easily understandable problems, going as far as “creating” new problems,⁴ while avoiding real (and hard-to-solve) challenges facing societies.
- Fail to deliver on their own overly ambitious promises. Unfulfilled electoral promises have a direct negative impact on the economy, as the discrepancy between expectations and reality makes the economy less predictable and adapting to its changing conditions more costly. More importantly, unfulfilled promises cause disillusionment among voters and may result in deteriorating democratic participation. Even if voters continue voting, they grow insensitive to failed agendas, creating a self-perpetuating mechanism: if voters don’t expect politicians to deliver on their promises, more politicians will behave irresponsibly and more inept representatives will enter politics.

² Nazism, communism or Latin American authoritarian regimes are often cited as examples.

³ People know they want more money to attain a higher living standard, therefore, they consider a higher minimum wage reasonable and desirable. However, evidence shows that in many economies a higher minimum wage would render low-qualified workers (i.e. the ones with lowest wages) unemployable and leave them job-less. Similarly, people know they want to enjoy retirement earned by years of work; therefore, they are against setting a higher retirement age than the current one. However, demographic data in developed economies show not enough people are being born to guarantee the living standards of the retired. If their living standards are not to deteriorate notably after retirement, people need to start working longer.

⁴ E.g. seeking external enemies.

Definition of terms

Based on these observations **we define populism as deceptive marketing of electoral promises**. We recognize two types of populist promises:

- **promises that propose attractive, but ineffective solutions to problems**: those promises that are highly popular but have a negative overall impact on the society,
- **promises, which are enticing, but unrealistic**: promises high in popularity with positive overall impact on the society but lacking follow-through.

Strategic options

We believe working to provide sufficient feedback to the electorate is a crucial task for the development of a stable democracy. Having established a **lack of informed feedback on proposed policies as a precondition of populism**, possible strategies of working against populism include:

1. Investing in educating the public to be better equipped to analyze complex implications of proposed policies.
2. Increasing ethics and expertise among politicians to prevent them from abusing the electorate's deficient knowledge. On the contrary, continuously working to provide the electorate with better information should be accepted as a common goal among politicians.
3. Providing expert feedback on the quality and fulfillment of promises in order to support good solutions, warn against inefficient ones and force the analyzed subject to face the truth and eventually to correct its behavior.

All of the above are valid means of combating populism. However, both improving education and increasing ethics and expertise among politicians require a long-term effort supported by a broad range of actors, including the media and the government, or more broadly the politicians themselves.

Providing expert feedback (option 3) directly supports both earlier goals. It is the role of institutions independent of political pressure such as state agencies (central banks, regulatory authorities, antimonopoly offices), journalists, non-governmental organizations, etc. However, when populism comes to cover a complex spectrum of problems outmatching these natural watchdogs, it is necessary to provide the society with formalized analytical feedback.

Providing expert feedback is also the approach selected for our project and covered in this paper. It (the project) presents a straightforward course of action, which can be executed within a foreseeable timeframe with visible results.⁵ Moreover, such a task may be effectively carried out by a small number of people. When the level of populism reaches a critical level, it is the role of think-tanks to address it as a singular problem and work directly against the information gap.

⁵ Evidence around the world shows populist governments eventually fall, even when faced with no more than time and reality. However, the costs of a passive approach to populism are to be considered. Hitler's national populist regime cost millions of lives; populist communist regimes around the world killed millions while implementing disruptive economic principles for decades.

Strategy implementation

Facing populism with systematic analytical feedback requires a formalized methodology as well as expert knowledge of discussed policies (expertise in given spheres is a major condition of the approach).

The benefits of systematic analytical approach are:

- high level of objectivity, guaranteed by the analytical process and objective data,
- availability in a structured and comprehensible way,
- impartiality of experts as opposed to often biased politicians.

To meet these standards we prepared a project aimed at providing up-to-date expert feedback on targeted policies. The project rests on four basic steps:

1. **Promises:** compiling a list of relevant policies, declarations and communication (originated from the policies and communication of the target subject), and assembling a list of promises for analysis.
2. **Criteria & findings:** establishing criteria which separate populist promises from non-populist ones and applying the criteria to the promises in scope.
3. **Findings communication:** devising means of transmission of findings to the public.
4. **Continuity:** establishing continuity in the three above referred activities.

Project methodology

Addressing the four steps in more detail:

1. **Promises:** Capturing populism in its complexity requires compiling a list of promises relevant to the government as well as the parties making up the ruling coalition. Promises are to be found in the parties' electoral programs in the government program declaration, as well as in the media, prior to and following an election. Following these sources assures accounting for:
 - most popular promises, that is promises most prominent in the media,
 - evolution of parties' agenda in connection with forming a coalition, i.e. promises parties made but are willing to compromise in order to form a coalition,
 - evolution of parties' agenda with time, i.e. promises they made and later reversed without an obvious interference of external factors.
2. **Criteria and findings:** Promises are sorted according to the following six criteria:
 - *Category* – structures promises into logical categories (e.g. privatization, taxes, healthcare),
 - *Popularity* – assesses the weight of an individual promise in the electoral campaign, i.e. judges how important a promise was for a party's electoral victory. A number of public opinion experts should be approached to grade the promises on a predefined scale. Promises will receive an average mark.
 - *Quality* – evaluates the overall impact of a promise on society, i.e. whether (and to what extent) would a promise be good or bad for the society, if fulfilled completely. Experts from various sectors (academia, media, NGOs, private enterprises) should be asked to assign a mark on a predefined scale. They should also be asked to provide verbal feedback explaining the grade. Promises will receive an average mark.

- *First Populism Index* – indicates whether a promise is or is not populist, in accordance with the first definition of populism (promises, which are popular, yet bad for the society). The value of the index is achieved by multiplying its popularity and its quality. Negative figures signify promises with a negative impact on the society and vice versa. Higher negative figures signify stronger populism.
- *Fulfillment* – denotes the level of fulfillment of individual promises. Each promise attains a percentage score based on hard data.
- *Second Populism Index* – indicates whether a promise is or is not populist, in accordance with the second definition of populism (promises, which are popular, but remain unfulfilled). The value of the index is achieved by multiplying its popularity with its fulfillment score reduced by 50% to achieve positive figures for (mostly) fulfilled promises and vice versa. Higher negative figures signify stronger populism.

3. **Findings communication:** The target groups of the project are:

- general public (electorate),
- expert public and media – as intermediaries while also being able to use structured analytical information for own work.

In order for the **information** to be effective, it is necessary to provide it **in simple, understandable terms**. This assures the information can be easily adapted by the media.

Secondly, the information needs to be **published where it is readily available**. A convenient method is either setting up a separate website or dedicating a section of a think-tank's existing website to the project.

Thirdly, **to ensure easy orientation**, the information should be **structured in several levels** of complexity:

- database of promises with comprehensive information on every promise including experts' comments,
- simple database interface with basic promise criteria for a quick glance,
- summarizing reports of progress structured as necessary: by criteria (category, quality), term (annual), etc.

Crucially, summarizing reports as well as information from database on (selected) individual promises should also be available in the form of press releases and pointed to the attention of media.

4. **Continuity:** It is necessary to establish continuity in the three above referred activities. New promises may be found and added, development in fulfillment of promises is likely to occur, new ways of communicating with public may be established. The strategy needs to be flexible enough to adapt to transformations of populism.

FIGHTING POPULISM: CASE STUDY SLOVAKIA 2006-2010

The following is an account of a project undertaken in Slovakia in 2006-2009 to fight government populism. **The goal of the project was to shift attention in parliamentary elections from populism to real solutions by providing the public with information on the quality and fulfillment of electoral promises.** This case study builds on the policy outline offered in the previous chapter, providing our experience and practical examples.

Brief history of populism in Slovakia

Slovakia has a long line of experiences with populism. The longest and most damaging spell of populism came in the form of communism following World War 2. 40 years of totalitarianism were partly facilitated by military power, but also by a sense of great need in the society coupled with people's inability to assess the viability of proposed solutions. In 1989, faced with time and reality, **communism** eventually caved in, along with other regimes in Central and Eastern European countries. However, communism has left Slovaks a legacy of deficient knowledge of the workings of the market economy, a high tolerance to politicians who fail to deliver on their promises and expectations of being taken care of by the state.

Less than five years later populism became prominent in Slovak politics again. The new form of social populism interlaced with nationalist motifs came to be known as **meciarism**, dubbed after the first Slovak prime minister Vladimir Meciar. The period, characterized by stalling reforms, came to an end in 1998 when the public's attention was shifted from the outgoing government's promises and focused on its too many scandals. We find meciarism revealed a divide in the society many failed to foresee in the euphoric post-1989 period: in 1998 only a slight majority voted for change, still a significant proportion of the society proved immune to the worsening economic situation and criminal allegations and voted for the populists' reelection.

Another form of populism has been continuously present in Slovak politics for almost two decades now. **National populism** of Jan Slota's Slovak National Party (SNS) directed against the Hungarian minority has received unflinching support since its formation in 1989. What is more, it twice managed to take part in government. The persistence of SNS supporters is noteworthy in the light of the party's meager agenda. For us it has been cautionary proof of the willingness of a steady proportion of Slovaks to substitute national minority issues for more complicated social and economic issues as the perceived source of their problems.

With the new party SMER (Direction) of Robert Fico yet another form of populism emerged. In the 2006 election SMER came first with an agenda of generous social electoral pledges. Despite chairman Robert Fico's endeavors, the party was only able to form a coalition with the compromised Vladimir Meciar and far right Jan Slota. The unlikely new government set a trend of social populism already coming to be known as **ficism**. Still clearly seeing the costs inflicted by the previous populist regimes, we realized it was necessary to take a new stance on populism and face it as a self standing major problem.

Situational assessment

Identifying populism

It was a proliferation of popular but questionable promises the SMER party made leading up to the 2006 election followed by the promises of SMER's government that caused alarm populism was on the rise again in Slovakia. We identified a large number of policies that seemingly responded to people's needs and desires, however, in our opinion they were likely to affect the society in a negative way.⁶

These included promises to:

- reverse 19% flat tax rate,
- raise tax rate for banks and monopolies,
- reintroduce dividend tax,
- recall minor health care payments,
- centralize and nationalize healthcare,
- prohibit profit of health insurance companies,
- discontinue privatization and renationalize selected companies,
- strengthen trade unions,
- index minimal wage at 60% of average wage,
- limit weekly working time,
- extend binding force of collective employment agreements,
- restrain from pushing back retirement age,
- compensate clients of failed investment funds,
- increase farming subsidies.

What added to our concern was the breadth and expensiveness of the agenda the government promised to cover. There was reason to believe the government would not be able to deliver on all its budgetary pledges⁷ including significantly increasing funding for healthcare, welfare, education, culture, sports, law enforcement or farming subsidies while for example promising to adopt the Euro in 2009, upholding all related responsibilities.⁸

Need of formalized approach

There was a growing concern over a new bout of government populism, supported by a broad consensus in the public discourse concerning its undesirability. One could say there was an informally agreed strategy among journalists and experts to fight populism by identifying populist policies and pushing them out of the public's favor by rational argumentation.

However, the growing popularity of the government coupled with the extent and nature of its agenda warned the standard ad hoc feedback provided by the media and the experts might not suffice. There was reason to believe the government would

⁶ From this observation later originated our first definition of populism: attractive, but ineffective solutions to problems, in other words, promises that are popular but have a negative overall impact on the society.

⁷ Our doubts about the government's ability to deliver on its promises later gave rise to our second definition of populism: enticing, but unrealistic promises, in other words promises that are high in popularity but lack follow-through.

⁸ The Euro is conditioned by macroeconomic requirements, e.g. public budget deficit below 3% of GDP and public debt below 60% of GDP.

- implement pledged policies of questionable quality,
- divert the public attention to marginal problems (supported by inclusion of far right nationalist SNS in the “social” coalition),
- fail to fulfill a significant proportion of its promises due to its excessive ambitiousness negatively affecting the economy as well as the electorate.

We believed it was necessary to step in and provide **structured analytical feedback** on government promises to help fight its populism.

Strategy implementation

We devised the methodology presented earlier and applied it to the new government’s promises.

List of promises

We compiled a list of 191 government promises focusing on economic and social agenda (this being our area of expertise). We followed the ruling coalition parties’ electoral programs, their statements in the media as well as the government’s program declaration, starting months before the election. We focused on the SMER party as the leader of the coalition. On several topics, we noted promises that had been diluted with time, at times we found directly contradictory statements.

Orientation and evaluation criteria

We sorted the promises according to our six defined criteria:

- *Categories* – for easier orientation, we divided the promises into policy categories (e.g. taxes, pensions, rule of law, privatization, welfare, education, transparency, job market)
- *Popularity* – we asked Slovak public opinion experts to assess the importance of individual promises for parties’ electoral results and the government’s popularity. Three leading experts⁹ rated the promises on a scale from 0 to 100. Promises were assigned an average grade.
- *Quality* – in order to assess the impact of the promises on our society we split them into two groups. We asked experts from the academia, media, NGOs and private enterprises to rate 50 promises chosen based on their popularity as well as the importance of their economic and political implications. We approached a total of 80 experts; the final values represent an average of the 26 replies we received.¹⁰ Due to experts’ time constraints, the remaining 141 promises were graded by consensus of INEKO analysts. Understanding we were provided with subjective assessments, we put emphasis on backing the grades with rational arguments.
- *First populism index* – assigned the promises a figure achieved by multiplying their popularity with their quality. **A negative figure signifies a populist promise and vice versa.**
- *Fulfillment* – to establish the level of fulfillment of promises, we conducted daily media research, recording all reported development on relevant policies. For promises that were not discussed in the media, we collected published and unpublished data from government agencies (e.g. ministries, statistics office, regulatory agencies, state-owned enterprises), Slovak NGOs, Eurostat, international rankings and reports (e.g. WB Doing Business,

⁹ Oľga Gyarfášová and Grigorij Mesežnikov of the Institute for Public Affairs IVO and Vladimír Krivý of the Sociology Department of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

¹⁰A list of 25 experts is available on the project website, one respondent asked to remain anonymous.

WEF Global Competitiveness Report, TI Corruption Perception Index). For easy orientation, the promises were assigned quarter fulfillment scores (0%, 1%-25%, 26%-50%, 51%-75%, 76%-99%, and 100%).

- **Second Populism Index** – assigned the promises a value achieved by multiplying their popularity and median fulfillment score reduced by 50%. **A negative figure signifies a populist promise and vice versa.**

Table 1 provides an example of four promises. Note that a promise is populist if either *populism index* yields a negative figure. The higher the figure (in absolute terms), the more populist the promise.

The table lists three populist promises:

- Reversing the flat tax and more money for farmers are populist promises as their overall impact on the society is negative.
- However, the promise to reverse the flat tax yields negative figures for both its *populism indexes*. This means that on top of being a bad promise, the government also failed at implementing it.
- The promise to increase education spending to 5% of GDP is populist even though its impact on the society is positive (shown by the positive figure of the *first populism index*). However, the government failed to implement the promise, which is mirrored in the negative figure of the *second populism index*.
- Reversing the flat tax is the most populist out of the three promises. The *first populism index* reaches a value of -177 due to the high *popularity* of the promise.
- The table also lists a promise to introduce Euro by 2009. This promise has a positive impact on the society and has been fulfilled completely. Therefore, it is not populist, as indicated by positive figures of both of its *populism indexes*.

Table 1: Selected promises from project database

Category	Promise	Popularity (0; 100)	Quality (-3; +3)	First index of populism (-300; +300)	Degree of fulfillment (0%; 100%)	Second index of populism (-50; +50)
Taxes	Reversing the flat tax	68	-2.6	-177	1% - 25%	-25
Education	Increase education spending to 5% GDP	19	1.5	28	0%	-10
Agriculture	More money for farmers	19	-2.1	-40	100%	10
Euro	Introduction of Euro by 2009	7	2.5	18	100%	4

Source: *INEKO*

Structuring and publishing the feedback

Despite communicating complex messages, we focused on providing all information in simple terms, understandable to non-economists. This way it could be easily adapted by the media.

In order for the feedback to be easily accessible, we reserved a section of our website to the project. On the website we placed:

- background information on the project, namely information on the phenomenon of populism and the methodology of the project,
- a simple database comprising the promises, one can navigate through the database with the help of the six criteria,
- comprehensive information on every promise including experts' comments, data supporting fulfillment scores, links to relevant sources (NGO websites, statistics, news articles),
- individual press releases with information on the quality and fulfillment of the 50 selected promises,
- annual analyses with average quality and fulfillment scores of promises in major policy sectors (transport, healthcare, education, economic policy, rule of law, welfare, fiscal policy) and most striking findings, the analyses included press releases.

Our website is accessible at: <http://www.ineko.sk/ostatne/sluby-a-lamenty-co-politici-slubili-a-co-z-toho-plnia>.

At the formal end of the project (in accordance with the outline agreed on with sponsors) we assembled a comprehensive print publication summarizing the development of the project as well as 90 most significant promises. The publication was intended as a handbook for current and further generations to better understand and avoid populist promises.

A crucial task was pointing the feedback to the attention of the media and the public. The project was cited by major Slovak media regularly, most prominently at the time of publication of yearly analyses.

Half a year before the end of the government's term **we reached an agreement with Slovakia's major daily SME allowing us to publish short feedback on promises (along with links to our website) directly with relevant articles on the SME website on a daily basis**, sme.sk being one of the most read news websites in Slovakia. This hugely adds to our effort to get the information out to people and also puts the government under constant pressure.

Along with the periodic press releases we also **published several surveys conducted among experts to help generate public discussion on important promises**. Examples include an expert opinion on the reasons behind the unprecedented economic growth in Slovakia in 2007 or monthly surveys on the likeliness Slovakia could adopt the Euro by 2009.

Continuity

Today we still monitor the political scene for promises we might have missed or ones newly made. On a daily basis we follow the progress of fulfilling promises. We post all

information on the website, including links to relevant news articles and other data that support final fulfillment scores (statistics, rankings or reports from government agencies, domestic and international NGOs, etc.).

Findings & impact

Evidence of populism

Our research brought overwhelming evidence of populism: three and a half years since the government assumed office only 30 out of total 191 promises were fulfilled completely. The majority of promises remain unfulfilled while experts judged that only about a half of the promises would have a positive impact on the society. The following table provides an overview.

Table 2: Research findings

	Fulfilled	Unfulfilled	Total
Positive	14% not populist	39% populist	53%
Negative	13% populist	15% populist	28%
Neutral	9%	10%	19%
Total	36%	64%	100%

Source: *INEKO*

Providing information to the public & warning against bad solutions

We believe the complex analytical feedback has helped people better evaluate the government's overall performance as well as warned them against inefficient solutions by explaining their effect on the society and basic economic principles.

Pressuring the government to face the truth and give up bad solutions

Easily accessible feedback on government promises in the form of database, press releases or surveys helps generate a public discussion which puts the government under pressure to either justify or abandon its promises. Under such pressure the current Slovak government has given up several popular but harmful promises: flat tax reform has mostly been left untouched, core features of job market and pension reforms have also remained in place, private health insurance companies have not been nationalized. It is good news the government gave up its plan to postpone the adoption of the Euro until 2011.

Fewer populist promises

Another positive fact associated with continuous pressure on populists is a decreasing number of populist promises: only a handful is currently being discussed in Slovak media. This does not mean that populist promises will not appear again with the election in 2010. However, there is reason to believe their number on the part of the current government's parties will be lower. To help achieve a less populist election we are also planning to analyze parties' electoral programs to draw attention to possible populist promises. Today we can also say that the current government has done less harm to the society than communism or meciarism.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

In Slovakia, we are still bearing costs inflicted by previous populist regimes. Noticing a new party making its way into the government in 2006 based on numerous populist promises, we realized it was necessary to face populism as a self standing major problem. We devised and implemented a project to fight populism, based on analyzing the complex bulk of government promises, distinguishing populist ones and communicating our findings to the public.

Having applied this methodology to government policy in Slovakia, we contributed to populism being recognized as a problem. Research based on our methodology confirmed a proliferation of populist promises. However, the unfailing popularity of the government proves fighting populism extremely difficult once it reaches government, as populist governments have potentially unlimited resources to keep their rhetoric compelling.

In spite of this, we believe this project has helped prevent implementing a significant number of harmful policies. We have also observed the number of populist promises in Slovak politics has decreased, we believe our project played a part in this development. That is why we find it is necessary to continue our effort, focusing on:

- working against populists to prevent them from reaching government, leaving fighting government populism as a last resort (in accordance we are planning to analyze parties' election programs focusing on populism before the upcoming election),
- providing feedback on the quality of currently discussed policies to try prevent implementing bad policies,
- basing the fight against populism mostly on facts, leaving expert feedback only with a supporting role, to minimize space for ad hominem¹¹ attacks on experts' integrity,
- monitoring new manifestations of populism and adapting the strategy accordingly.

As democratic forces are bound to become underdogs in the fight against populist governments, external help and resources can be crucial for their success. Our last suggestion lies with a thought of democratic leaders (EU, liberal governments, NGOs) not only supporting individual anti-populism projects, but also stimulating establishing and financing of some continuous "populism watch" program (similar to human-right watch, etc.).

¹¹ Ad hominem means attacking opponents' character and integrity rather than rationally countering their arguments.

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ANNEX - Step-by-step guide based on a project implemented in Slovakia

In this short annex we present a **step-by-step guide to fighting populism** according to our “best practice” based on a project the INEKO Institute implemented in Slovakia in 2006-09. We have put down the basic steps which allow drafting and implementing a similar project. We also provide a number of examples from our project.

Here are the basic steps to our approach to fighting populism:

1. SPECIFY THE SUBJECT OF YOUR PROJECT: GOVERNMENT OR POLITICAL PARTY (PARTIES) WHOSE POLICIES YOU WOULD LIKE TO ASSESS

Select a single political party, a group of parties or the government whose populism you would like to monitor and draw attention to.

Example: For our project we specified we would focus on the government as well as individual parties which constitute it.

2. SPECIFY THE FIELD(S) YOU WANT TO FOCUS ON (THE FIELD IN WHICH THE SUBJECT’S POPULISM IS MOST PROMINENT)

This is generally the field (or fields) which you find most problematic. This could be economic policy, social policy, policy toward minorities, etc. Specifying a field will help you keep your anti-populism project consistent. It also serves as a viability check: if you want to provide expert feedback to the public, the field you will be focusing on must be your area of expertise. Be aware that your work will become a subject of attacks by the assessed subject; therefore you need solid expertise from credible experts.

Example: We specified we would focus on economic and social policy, as our subject (the government) proposed a large number of social and economic policies whose effect on the economy and general welfare of the society was questionable. Social and economic policy is also our area of expertise.

3. COLLECT INFORMATION ON YOUR SUBJECT’S PROPOSED POLICIES AND DECIDE ON THE SCOPE OF YOUR PROJECT

Depending on your time, resources and the level of populism in your country, decide how many promises you want to include in your project. This could range from 5 or 10 major promises published in a blog to a complex project covering a large number of promises.

If you are only planning a small project with the most prominent promises, you should be able to collect material by following the media regularly.

However, since a major problem with populists is they make too many promises, which they can not possibly keep, the best way to face populists with reality is to make a complete list of their promises (or as close to complete as you can get). In this case it is best to collect as much material as possible. On top of subjects’ statements reported by the media, this could include parties’ election programs, governments’ program declarations, party or government leaflets distributed into your mailbox, paid advertisements, etc.

Example: Our project covered a total of 191 government and party promises.

4. COMPILE A LIST OF PARTICULAR PROMISES YOU WANT TO INCLUDE IN YOUR PROJECT

Choose specific promises you want to provide feedback on. If you are not making an exhausting list of promises, choose those that are most important in your opinion or most discussed.

To ensure credibility you should write the selected promises down in their original version and state your source (newspaper article, party election program, etc.). Make sure you save all original materials you are using (including leaflets, online articles or parties' online declarations which might be later taken off the web).

If you find promises evolved with time or varying promises given by different members of a party or government, you should write down all versions as making different promises is unaccountable and typical of populism. Similarly, you should take note if you find contradictory promises.

5. STRUCTURE YOUR SELECTED PROMISES

If you are dealing with a large number of promises, it is best to structure them in a logical way, e.g. split them into categories by sectors. This makes your feedback better accessible and understandable to the public.

Example: We split the promises into several policy groups such as education, energy, healthcare, taxes, welfare, etc.

6. ASSESS THE POPULARITY OF THE PROMISES

Populists promise people what they want, in other words make “popular promises.” The problem is that popular promises are not always viable or ultimately beneficial. In order to fight populism, it is helpful to find out which promises are most popular.

If you are planning a small scale project it should be sufficient to note which promises are most prominent in the media.

If you are planning a large scale project, you may approach public opinion experts and ask them to evaluate the popularity of individual promises (popularity meaning the importance of the promises in the electoral campaign or electoral victory).

Example: In our project we asked 9 sociologists and political scientists to rate the importance of our selected promises for the election on a scale from 0 to 100. We received replies from three leading experts. The promises were assigned an average grade.

7. ASSESS THE QUALITY OF THE PROMISES

It is necessary to provide feedback on the quality of promises – to separate good ones from those which are made merely because they are popular. In other words, to fight populism it is crucial to sort out promises which have a bad overall effect on the society from the good. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, it is important to point out bad promises and encourage public discussion about them to try to prevent them from being implemented. Secondly, if the subject is praised for fulfilling promises, it is necessary to point out if some of them were actually bad for the society.

7.1. Define a scale

To make a point of the relative quality of promises it is a good idea to have a predefined scale ready.

Example: For our project we chose a scale ranging from -3 to +3. Negative figures stood for bad promises, positive figures for good promises.

7.2. Get expert opinion

Expertise on the quality of promises is one of the key preconditions for identifying populist promises and thus for the success of the whole project.

If you are planning a small-scale project your own evaluation or a group evaluation by your team should suffice. However, a higher number of experts will guarantee higher credibility of your project. To avoid bias it is best to ask experts from various sectors (academia, NGOs, private enterprises, trade unions) as well as from various ideological spectrums.

Example: We approached 50 experts from various sectors and asked them to grade the quality of promises on our predefined scale. 26 experts responded (one of them asked to remain anonymous). The promises received an average grade.

7.3. Ask for rational arguments

To ensure objectiveness, all grades given by experts should be supported by data or rational arguments. This way you will distinguish your feedback from often unsubstantiated claims made by politicians in the eyes of the people. You will also make it harder for the populists to attack your findings. Make sure to remind experts all arguments should be given in simple, understandable terms.

8. ASSESS THE LEVEL OF FULFILLMENT OF THE PROMISES

Populists get elected by promising to do more than can be possibly done. They get reelected because their voters fail to keep track with what they were promised earlier. That is why it is necessary to provide feedback on the fulfillment of promises. This section, unlike previous steps, naturally only applies to whole governments or parties which form a government and thus are already in a position to act on their promises.

8.1. Define a scale

To be able to assess the overall progress at fulfilling promises it is necessary to define a scale.

Example: We chose a scale from 0% to 100%, for easier orientation we assigned promises fulfillment scores by quarter (0%, 1%-25%, 26%-50%, ..., 100%).

8.2. Collect data on fulfillment

You will find a lot of information in the media, however, it is always safest to cite primary sources. This can include legislative acts, government reports, government or international statistics, NGO analyses and rankings, etc. A lot of the time, it is necessary to directly demand information from the government. In this case, it is a good idea to write down the exact source for future enquiries (updates).

8.3. Assign promises a fulfillment score

To ensure objectivity, all fulfillment scores should be based on hard data. Promises start out with a 0% grade and may gradually acquire up to a 100%.

When assigning a fulfillment score, it is necessary to take external factors into consideration. The score itself doesn't change, however if the level of fulfillment has been significantly influenced by factors other than the subject, this should be pointed out. *Example: The Slovak government (of 2006-10) promised to lower unemployment at a time when unemployment had already been falling and the economy had been growing. Thus fulfilling the promises required little further effort – it was fulfilled automatically. On the other hand, when the economic crisis hit and unemployment started rising again, this was out of the government's reach as well. In both cases, external factors were decisive.*

9. COMMUNICATE FINDINGS TO THE PUBLIC

Getting the feedback to the public is the crucial part of the project. The higher visibility, the higher impact your work has. Concentrate on continuous presence in media (regular comments).

9.1. Provide feedback in terms understandable to laymen

The language and the form must be short, concise and highly structured (people do not understand and are not willing to absorb too complex information. Keep the form short and effective.

9.2. Publish all information where it is easily accessible at all times

Publishing your feedback on a blog should be sufficient if you are only dealing with a limited number of promises.

If you are planning a larger project, it is a good idea to create a separate website or dedicate a part of an existing website to the populism project.

Example: We dedicated a part of the existing website of our institute to the populism project. To get an idea, click [here](#) (in Slovak).

9.3. Structure information in a simple way

To ensure objectivity, it is best to publish all information (including experts' comments and data supporting fulfillment scores). This may mean a large amount of information. That is why it is important to make orientation within the promises easy.

Example: We created an interactive database which structured all feedback in two layers.

The first layer was an interface showing a list of promises along with the sector they belong to, their popularity, quality and fulfillment score. The list could be ranked according to any of these four characteristics.

The second layer consisted of comprehensive entries for all promises. A comprehensive entry included all information on a promise: its original wording, experts' comments, and all data supporting the fulfillment scores. To have a look at our database, click [here](#) (in Slovak).

9.4. Prepare information easy to adopt by the media

If you feel there is demand for information on populism, prepare press releases the media may adapt. This helps attract attention to your project as well as the phenomenon you are fighting.

Example: We published individual press releases with 50 promises we found most important. Each press release comprised essential information on a different promise in

simple terms and a link to the whole project. These press releases served as background information for news articles in major Slovak media.

9.5. Publish reports

To provide feedback on the subject's progress and attract attention to keep the public interested in the problem of populism as well as in your project, it is a good idea to publish regular reports. These may focus on groups of promises by category, popularity, quality, fulfillment, etc. Reports should bring average quality and fulfillment scores for the group.

With regular reports it is important to include the same group of promises every term, so the reports of particular terms are comparable.

It is a good idea to include your most striking findings to attract attention of the media & public.

Also note that if you are publishing more than one report, it is usually the first one that receives the most attention. That is why it is a good idea to start with the most important (or broadest) one.

Example: We published an annual report summarizing all promises, as well as annual sector reports on the budget, education, healthcare, rule of law, transportation and welfare. Our reports were regularly cited by most major Slovak media.

9.6. Focus on currently discussed topics: Work to prevent bad promises from being implemented

Along with providing the public with feedback on a subject's progress in general, it is crucial to focus attention on policies currently discussed. Providing expert feedback in the right moment supports public discussion and may help prevent bad solutions from being implemented.

Example: One year into our project, in 2007, we conducted a survey among leading Slovak experts on the reasons behind the unprecedented economic growth in Slovakia 2007. The survey suggested it was the reforms implemented in years 2002-06 (tax, labor market, etc.) that boosted economic growth. This was an important point in the public discussion as reversing these "bad" reforms was the government's most popular promise. We believe this survey helped preserve these reforms, which remain mostly unchanged today.

10. ESTABLISH CONTINUITY

10.1. Continuously update all promises and watch out for new promises

If the subject keeps making new potentially populist promises, consider adding these to the list of your promises.

10.2. Collect fulfillment data regularly & update fulfillment scores

10.3. Keep publishing your findings & search for new ways of communicating with the public

Example: Towards the end of our project we reached an agreement with Slovakia's major daily SME allowing us to publish short feedback on promises (along with links to our website) directly with relevant articles on the SME website on a daily basis, sme.sk

being one of the most read news websites in Slovakia. This hugely adds to our effort to get the information out to people and also puts the government under constant pressure.

We hope this short guide was instructive: we believe it can help fight populism in other democracies. INEKO is prepared to communicate the results and implications of the project, or ultimately assist similar projects.