

VOLUME 5

D-HUB

OPPOSITION COORDINATION



ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN

TOOLKIT

Greatest hits to defend
and renew democracies

D-HUB

VOLUME 5

OPPOSITION COORDINATION

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D-HUB THANKS THE MEMBERS OF ITS COMMUNITY FOR THEIR FEEDBACK AND COMMENTS, WHICH HELPED IMPROVE THIS VOLUME.

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Twenty-first-century authoritarian leaders follow a clear playbook. It's not a formula or a recipe but a dynamic set of strategies and tactics deployed across different contexts.

In response, we've started to crack open their playbook and crafted something of our own: an ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT. Developed with insight from hundreds of frontline democracy defenders, scholars, and strategists, this 10-volume series is packed with the most effective plays to counter elected authoritarianism and safeguard our democracies.

This Toolkit is not a silver bullet. It's a catalyst designed to ignite your vision and creativity as you confront the challenges ahead. Its plays are archetypal but open to innovation and adaptation to the local context of those who use them.

We hope you use it and share it. Maybe the next big play, we'll learn from you.

Ricken Patel

CO-CHAIR, D-HUB

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SENDING A WAKE-UP CALL
TO ENABLE COORDINATION

VOLUME 5

**OPPOSITION
COORDINATION**

DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM:

Lula's 2022 Coalition (Brazil) - New Popular Front (France) - United for Hungary (Hungary) - Democratic Unity Roundtable (Venezuela) - Polish Democratic Opposition (Poland) - Republican Front (France) - Ekrem İmamoğlu (Turkey) - Indian National Congress Party (India) - Donald Tusk's Coalition Government - Government of National Unity (South Africa)

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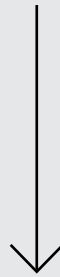
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INTRODUCTION



**WHAT DOES IT
TAKE TO WIN?**

by Nika Kovač

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, D-HUB

Elected authoritarians know how to win at the ballot box. Disinformation, intimidation, and playing dirty are often part of their strategy. But particularly in the early stages of these political forces, their major asset is simple - their appeal to voters.

This appeal is often related to alternatives, in fact increased by opposition weakness. When democrats are divided, reactive, or disorganized, authoritarian power consolidates almost by default. A disorganized alternative is a gift to the regime. A fragmented opposition, no matter how passionate, cannot compete against authoritarian discipline.

This volume of the Anti-Authoritarian Toolkit focuses on Opposition Coordination. It derives from a simple premise: coordination is not a single thing. There are different degrees, formats, and moments of coordination, ranging from minimal tactical alignment to broader strategic cooperation.

A full electoral coalition can be powerful, but it is not always possible, desirable, or effective. This volume explores plays that can transform a fractured opposition into a credible, broad-based alternative focusing on flexible, context-specific coordination mechanisms that allow opposition

forces to confront authoritarianism with structure and collaboration, sometimes temporary, sometimes partial, always intentional.

Of course, this is not easy terrain. Effective coordination under authoritarian rule is hard, usually messy, and filled with contradictions. Political rivals and their constituencies may have spent years attacking one another, and their ideologies may seem irreconcilable on paper to most.

Experience shows that the most effective forms of coordination do not erase differences. They build basic agreements around shared values as they remain broad and inclusive enough to integrate civil society, grassroots groups, and community leaders. India, France, Brazil, Hungary, Poland, and South Africa offer clear examples of what strategic cooperation can look like, even in hostile environments.

This volume is for those who are done with mere resistance or pure outrage and understand that the only way to defeat authoritarianism is to offer something better in its place. That this starts not with slogans, but with structure. Not with purity, but with planning. Not with ego, but with collective strength.

With love,
Nika Kovač

HOW THIS PUBLICATION WORKS

Democracy defenders are busy and practical people. That is why we designed this publication to be concise and engaging.

This volume includes **ONE GRAND STRATEGY** and **FIVE PLAYS**.

GRAND STRATEGY

A Grand Strategy is a guiding framework that aligns all actions and tactics with the long-term goals of safeguarding democracy. The foundation of the grand strategy provides coherence and effectiveness to individual plays.

PLAY

An action that can be adapted to different moments and contexts. It may be a strategy, tactic, or tool. The key criteria for its inclusion are its deployment, effectiveness, and relevance in the fight for democracy.

FOR EACH, YOU WILL FIND THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION



THE PLAY

Describes the strategy, tactic or move



WHY IT WORKS

Explains the core reasons the tactic is effective and impactful



HOW IT WORKS

A more detailed depiction of the play, with basic steps of implementation



TIPS

Recommendations and aspects to avoid



WHO'S DONE IT WELL

Examples of how the play has been deployed in real life



LEARN MORE

Links to resources

The concluding section, **"WE CAN HELP YOU,"** provides contact details for those needing help confronting elected authoritarian politics.

FEATURED GRAND STRATEGY

PULL THE DEMOCRACY FIRE ALARM

**SENDING A WAKE-UP CALL
TO ENABLE COORDINATION**

Authoritarians thrive on division. They rely on a fragmented democratic opposition: political parties attacking each other, civil society staying sidelined, and short-term alliances lacking a shared purpose or political objectives in common.

Democratic actors often fall into this trap, fighting yesterday's battles while the threat quietly consolidates. This is how democracy slowly dies, through exhaustion rather than defeat. But when someone sounds the alarm, credibly, at the right moment, everything can change.

The democratic fire alarm cannot sound too often though. If you're going to use it, make it count. If you cry wolf, it may backfire, undermining trust and triggering apathy. Used too frequently and with no positive agenda on sight, it loses power. Yet, if you're on target, it can reshape the field.

The alarm is just the beginning, an opening act. Not a solution. Fear alone does not defeat authoritarianism. What comes next, strategic action that turns fear into force, is

what defines whether democracy survives: What follows the siren is political and social forces turning public concern into structured coordination.

Opposition coordination doesn't always mean achieving unity under a single structure. In fact, more often than not a pile of logos doesn't scare authoritarian incumbents. On the contrary, fragile or performative unity is exactly the kind of opposition they expect... and exploit.

Cooperation can take many forms: shared messaging, agreeing on leadership without rupture, settling disputes without collapse; competing where useful, aligning where necessary. Cooperation is most effective when deployed in combination with other plays: public primaries, tactical alliances, local campaigns, credible transition plans.

Pulling the fire alarm isn't just about a behind-the-scenes move. It's also a public act that can demand visible rules and empowered leadership across parties, movements, and civil society. Only these efforts will build an opposition that, whatever form of coordination takes, offers a credible alternative.

However, what ultimately seals the possibility of victory is a vision that projects not only what we're losing, but also what we can win: a positive agenda.

Make it visible. Because that glimpse of hope is what can move people to act.

1

BIG TENT COALITION

Turning a divided opposition
into a single winning force

THE PLAY

Authoritarian regimes thrive on a divided opposition. Every conceptual inconsistency, every competing ego, every split ballot gives them power to remain in control. In these contexts, democratic forces, or a significant part of them, can build a broader political alternative capable of confronting the main authoritarian threat.

This play is about the hard, often fragile work of building a big tent coalition that aligns opposition parties, movements, and civic actors behind a shared electoral front. This may not require bringing all democratic forces under the same roof, but aligning those for whom unity strengthens their ability to compete, while avoiding vote-splitting.

This is not simply a matter of adding up votes, but of redefining the lines of conflict (“us” vs. “them”) so civil society and voters can align behind a common political alternative. Running together under a shared banner can turn unity into a credible path to political victory.

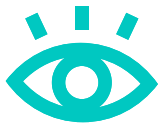
Even in this format, coalition-building does not require total ideological agreement or the removal of political identities. When a big tent coalition runs under a single electoral label, this unity is never about sameness. It is about constructing a framework for difference that can stand under pressure.

In practice, a big tent coalition means reaching a minimum consensus: translating shared democratic values into a clear, enforceable commitment to protect what is fundamentally at stake.



WHY IT WORKS

- **UNITY PREVENTS VOTE-SPLITTING.** Particularly in winner-takes-all systems, coordination is often the difference between winning votes and winning seats.
- **SHARED VALUES AND PURPOSE BUILD LEGITIMACY.** Unity among former rivals based on principles and objectives can invite voters beyond “politics as usual”.
- **A COHESIVE FRONT CAN SHOW STRENGTH.** When political unity is assertive and threatens the position of the authoritarian, it can appear decisive.
- **BIG TENT COALITIONS CAN EXPAND REACH.** When unity makes sense, the combination of forces attracts more voters than it repels, especially when civic actors help soften partisan boundaries.



HOW IT WORKS

1 SCENARIO POLLING POINTS THE WAY

Particularly for political parties, any big tent effort needs to be based on a guess about how voters will react to the coalition, and to the inclusion of each member. Scenario polling where voters are asked directly about their level of support for different combinations of actors is an imperfect but valuable indicator as to which combination maximizes your public support. All evidence showing that unity increases the size of the pie, rather than shrinking it, can also help persuade leaders and party elites for the case for unity.

2 TRANSLATE ELECTORAL VIABILITY INTO POLITICAL WILLINGNESS

Once scenario polling clarifies which combinations make electoral sense, the next step is political exploration. A big tent coalition is not built by forcing full ideological alignment, but by identifying who is willing to cooperate and around what minimum grounds. Start by mapping actors, big and small, whose participation strengthens the coalition according to the electoral math. Then test the basis for alignment around shared democratic values, principles for collaboration, and acceptable rules for working together. A viable big tent coalition brings together those prepared to prioritize a shared objective over partisan differences, even when they come from distinct ideological camps.

3 **WORK THROUGH THE HUMAN EQUATION**

Opposition unity is both an art and a science. It requires a journey undertaken by individuals and groups who often deeply distrust each other, sometimes even more than they distrust authoritarians. A crucial step in this process is to identify trusted mediators, people respected by all sides who can act as intermediaries. Be mindful: When mediators are perceived as closer to one side than another, unity efforts can often fail.

To grasp the benefits of unity, tolerance is not enough. Working through the human equation requires building personal connections among leaders and moving beyond mere co-existence toward a front that enables active coordination and political creativity.

4 **FRAME THE THREAT AND STAGE A POSITIVE ALTERNATIVE**

Naming the authoritarian threat in clear, concrete terms helps redefine the lines of conflict and align diverse actors behind a common goal. By linking democratic backsliding to tangible consequences, such as the loss of rights and everyday freedoms, the coalition clarifies what is at stake. But big tent unity can only become long-lasting when it is paired with a positive alternative. Besides identifying the risk, the coalition must agree on what it will do immediately after taking power. This does not require a full policy program, but a shared, limited agenda for the first phase of government. Agreeing in advance on a small set of early measures, decision rules, and priorities shows decisiveness, seriousness, and direction.

When voters and coalition partners can see both the danger ahead and the solid actions that will follow victory, unity stops being reactive and starts looking like a governing project.

5 BRING THE BASE ALONG AND MAKE UNITY VISIBLE

A big tent coalition only works if it is built and sustained beyond party headquarters. Unity cannot be imposed solely through elite agreements, but must also be rooted in party bases, civic actors, and social networks. Before going public, invest in broad internal and social legitimacy. Use consultations, internal votes, open letters, grassroots organizing, and engagement with unions, movements, and community leaders to explain the stakes and the logic of unity. This process does not just build cohesion, it also builds public credibility, signaling a real social demand.

Once this buy-in is secured, unity must be made visible with clarity and confidence. Joint announcements, shared events, coordinated messaging, and disciplined spokespeople help translate internal alignment into public trust. The objective is to show that a coalition is the real alternative: socially anchored, politically coherent, and able to govern together.

6 DESIGN FOR STRESS

Disagreements don't necessarily mean a risk to unity. Unmanaged disagreements do. Big tent coalitions must assume conflicts will arise and therefore should design structures to absorb them before they escalate. This starts with agreeing on how the coalition will function under stress: how decisions are made, how disputes are resolved, and how escalation is contained. These mechanisms do not need to be rigid or even public, yet they must be operational and trusted. Sometimes, quiet resolution preserves unity better than public confrontation.

Power-sharing is part of this equation, but it should not begin with dividing offices. Winning an election and taking power are not the same thing. Coalitions should always agree early on a basic transition plan: sequencing of decisions, interim arrangements, and priorities for the handover period. Winning an election without clarity about what comes next can lead to collapse in government. Even a minimal post-electoral roadmap can make the difference.



TIPS

A BUILD A BIG TENT THAT STANDS

Effective big tent politics starts by defining who meaningfully adds within the coalition, who coordinates from the outside, and how the overall front remains credible. Often, big tent coalitions cannot bring all democratic forces under the same roof. They work well when they align the values and purpose of actors whose unity strengthens electoral viability and political coherence. For political parties, this means being selective and adding partners only when this sought unity expands reach, reduces vote-splitting, and clarifies the main line of conflict, rather than blurring it or feeding the “establishment versus outsiders” narrative that authoritarians so effectively exploit. In their eyes, big tent unity should be as broad as possible while remaining consistent. For civic actors and movements, the logic is often different: coordination does not revolve around electoral branding or seat allocation, but around legitimacy, agenda-setting, and public alignment.

B START SMALL, STAY FLEXIBLE

Big tent unity works best when it is brokered by small, trusted circles. Early negotiations should be discreet, focused, and protected from premature exposure to build trust, test boundaries, and shape workable agreements away from the spotlight. These early brokers should resist the urge to overexpose fragile deals or overpromise unity before it is real. At the same time, they must design agreements that can later expand without reopening and reviewing from scratch already made deals.

Big tent coalitions are built in layers. Flexibility is what allows them to grow without uprooting what already holds.

C YOU WILL BE ATTACKED. PLAN ACCORDINGLY

Big tent coalitions, especially when they become competitive, should assume they will be targeted. Authoritarians will probe them, apply pressure, and try to fracture them. They will attempt to peel off key leaders and exploit the grievances that emerge during unity processes.

The strongest defense is preparation. Resilience must be built into the coalition from the start, not improvised after the first attack. This means anticipating authoritarian tactics, setting expectations early, and creating shared understandings about how pressure will be handled.

Confidence also matters. Coalitions that believe they represent the future are harder to break. This belief reduces the appeal of defection and increases tolerance for friction. Unity that expects to be attacked, and expects to prevail, is far more likely to hold.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL



LULA'S 2022 COALITION

Big Tent Strategy to Defeat Bolsonaro

BRAZIL

Ahead of Brazil's 2022 presidential elections, the Workers' Party (PT, *Partido dos Trabalhadores*) led by then-former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva faced the challenge of confronting incumbent Jair Bolsonaro—whose presidency had eroded democratic norms, fueled polarization, and tested the limits of institutional resilience. To defeat him, the PT adopted a deliberate big tent strategy that prioritized the defense of democracy over ideological purity.

Rather than relying solely on its own base, the party brought together a coalition of ten parties across the political spectrum, forming a united front. Lula made one of the coalition's most symbolic moves early on: choosing Geraldo Alckmin, a former presidential rival, historically right-wing politician, and long-time member of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), as his vice-presidential running mate. This left-right pairing signaled unity and helped build credibility with business

sectors, moderate voters, and political elites who were skeptical of the PT's past policies but reassured by Alckmin's pro-market and conservative-leaning stance.

Coalition management went far beyond the VP slot. Despite its dominant role, the PT was careful not to sideline its allies. Smaller parties and other high-level politicians, such as former presidential candidates Marina Silva and Simone Tebet, were offered meaningful influence in the campaign and guaranteed positions in the future government. When Lula won, the PT retained only 6 out of 31 cabinet posts. It also supported coalition partners in strategic races for governorships, state legislatures, and congressional leadership—ensuring a sense of shared ownership and reinforcing coalition discipline.

This broad alliance reframed the election not as right versus left, but as authoritarianism versus democracy, and, most notably for undecided voters, between a reckless president and seasoned statespeople coming together for the common good. Rather than campaigning on a unified ideology, coalition leaders rallied around a common threat. They highlighted Bolsonaro's assaults on the electoral system, his admiration for military dictatorship, and his violent behaviour, positioning the election as a referendum on democratic survival.

At the same time, the coalition also pointed to problems that directly harmed people such as Bolsonaro's decision not to buy vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic and high inflation rates, and worked to connect with tradi-

"We wanted to join democrats of all political positions, classes, races and religious beliefs to defeat the totalitarian threat, the hatred, violence and discrimination hanging over our country."

tionally conservative groups, such as evangelical Christians and small business owners, by translating democratic values into accessible narratives of stability, opportunity, and protection of the family. While this approach faced resistance and varied degrees of success, it marked a strategic shift: from ideological confrontation to value-based persuasion.

Ultimately, Lula’s campaign became more than a comeback. It became a coordinated, strategic effort to protect democratic institutions through unity. By offering real power-sharing, engaging diverse constituencies, and framing the moment as existential, the PT-led coalition succeeded in transforming unity into strength.



THE NEW POPULAR FRONT

Coalition-Building against the clock

FRANCE

In June 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron unexpectedly dissolved the National Assembly, triggering snap legislative elections with just four days to register candidates and three weeks to campaign.

Coming on the heels of a far-right surge in the European Parliament elections, the move shocked France’s fragmented progressive parties—many of whom had just spent months attacking each other. Yet in this moment of urgency, a rare window opened: either come together or risk handing power to Marine Le Pen’s *Rassemblement National* (RN).

Within 72 hours, key center-left and left-wing parties—*La France Insoumise*, the Socialist Party, the Greens, and the Communist Party—set aside their rivalries to create a pre-electoral alliance: the New Popular Front (NPF, *Nouveau Front Populaire*). The name deliberately evoked the original 1930s anti-fascist coalition, appealing to both history and hope.

The negotiations unfolded in two rapid-fire phases. The first was a seat-sharing process—quick, tense, and essential.

To prevent vote-splitting in France’s two-round electoral system, the parties agreed to present a single candidate per

district. Each party brought competing claims based on past results and regional strengths, yet within 48 hours they reached consensus on a unified slate.

The second phase focused on crafting a joint platform. Deep disagreements remained—on foreign policy, Europe, and fiscal priorities—but negotiators began with common ground: democracy, climate action, and social protection. Divisive topics were intentionally postponed to maintain momentum and avoid breakdowns.

This coalition-building effort wasn't confined to closed-door talks and party politics. Civil society played a decisive role, with activists, unions, and ordinary citizens demonstrating outside negotiation venues and launching online campaigns that pressured leaders to unite. Once the alliance was made, civil society organizers mapped 100 key battleground districts and trained over 5,000 volunteers in just three weeks, conducting an impactful get-out-the-vote campaign.

Internally, parties like the Greens conducted leadership votes and internal consultations to validate their participation, building legitimacy from the base up. The urgency of the moment became an unexpected asset, narrowing the window for over-negotiation and sharpening collective focus on what mattered most.

The coalition's messaging was simple and sharp: *"Yes, we don't always agree, but against hate we are stronger united than divided."*

"In just a few days, we managed to bridge our differences and present a united front. It's a testament to our commitment to democracy."

Cultural figures, pop stars, influencers, and artists, amplified the campaign's reach, turning the New Popular Front into a youth-driven political moment that felt urgent, democratic, and fresh.

The NPF was not a big tent unity effort of all democratic forces but of the left parties. When Macron called for

a broad “republican” rally against the far right, the left ran separately and campaigned on a clear break with Macron’s policies. This was only for the first round of the legislative election. In the second round, the NPF adopted the “smart coordination” play profiled below, and stood down its candidates in places where they would enable a win of the far right over Macron’s candidate.

As a result, the New Popular Front didn’t win an outright majority, but it won the most seats (182) and proved crucial in blocking the far right from forming a government. Macron’s centrist coalition also did better than it would have otherwise, and the RN finished third in seats—the far right’s march to power was stopped—at least for now.

YOU CAN ACCESS THE
"LEARN MORE" RESOURCES
BY CLICKING ON THEM



LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "Never Give Up." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 7.



D-Hub. 2024. "Defusing the far-right bomb." *The Fight For Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 9.



D-Hub. 2025. "Smart Opposition Coordination." *AATK Podcast Series*.



OTHER RESOURCES



BdF. 2022. "With seven parties, Lula has the broadest candidacy since 1989."



Durieux, Sarah. 2024. "From Struggle to Victory: The Role of Civil Society in the Last French Election."



Feldman, Benjamin & Jennifer McCoy. 2024. "Bet on Big-Tent Opposition Electoral Coalitions to Defeat Democratic Backsliding."



NDI. 2015. "Coalitions: A Guide for Political Parties."



Stuenkel, Oliver. "Lula's "Team of Rivals" Strategy Could Reduce Polarization."



Varma, Tara & Ted Reinert. 2024. "How France united, once more, to defeat the far right."

2

RUN AN OPEN PRIMARY

Using public choice
to legitimize coordination

THE PLAY

In certain contexts, especially in winner-takes-all systems, challenging an authoritarian at the ballot box requires rallying behind a single candidate. In these cases, the strongest way to achieve this is not only through negotiations, but also by placing the decision directly in the hands of voters through a participatory process.

This play often begins with one or more public entrepreneurs who decide that such a process needs to happen. They may come from inside a party, but often they do not. They can be new media figures, NGOs, or respected personalities. What distinguishes them is not formal authority, but vision, determination, and low ego.

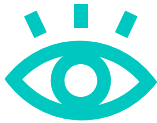
Running an open primary turns competition into cohesion. It is not just about selecting a candidate, but about legitimizing that choice through a democratic process that mobilizes support. A well-run primary does much more than produce a nominee: it builds momentum, it generates trust, and creates shared ownership of the outcome.

By relying on a credible and transparent mechanism to choose a candidate, democratic forces can counter the regime's narrative of chaos and division. When done well, a primary reintroduces democratic ritual into a polarized context and signals organizational capacity and readiness, not just to voters, but to the regime itself.



WHY IT WORKS

- **PARTICIPATION CREATES MOMENTUM.** Debates, voting, and grassroots mobilization can turn a selection process into a milestone of collective energy. Large turnout can be framed as an expression of opposition strength.
- **A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS EARNS TRUST.** When people see how the candidate is chosen, credibility rises and accusations of imposition lose traction.
- **CHANNELED DISSENT SIGNALS MATURITY.** A clear, open process proves the opposition is not chaotic, but a political force capable of prioritizing victory over ego.
- **SHARED COMPETITION BECOMES SHARED OWNERSHIP.** Rivals who compete fairly and accept the outcome become co-owners of the result, not opponents.
- **BETTER CANDIDATES CAN EMERGE.** Open processes tend to favour fresh faces with greater public appeal and fewer ties to past opposition failures.



HOW IT WORKS

1 BUILD POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONSENSUS

A primary does not start with logistics. It starts with purpose and a shared mandate. Before organizing ballots or booths, the narrative must be built. In many cases, this is first articulated by public entrepreneurs: individuals or groups who recognize the need for a primary and push for it before parties are ready to do so.

Early field engagement helps normalize the idea, build support, and create pressure for participation. Framed this way, the primary becomes a democratic ritual, not just a contest. Use trusted voices to explain why it matters and what it represents: a moment of public choice, not a closed or opaque process. Clarity can create momentum, build trust, and make it harder for the regime to dismiss the process as chaotic or opportunistic.

2 ASSEMBLE A BROAD ORGANIZATIONAL BACKBONE

Create a credible structure to run the primary. Form a committee with representatives from political parties and civil society, including unions, student groups, faith leaders, and community organizations. When civil society takes part, it can strengthen neutrality, increase public trust, and provide essential logistical and outreach capacity.

In independently organized primaries, this committee should also include electoral experts, technology teams, and logistics coordinators. Volunteers matter, so train them well. A plural and well-prepared committee gives the process both organizational muscle and legitimacy.

3 ESTABLISH RULES AND AGREEMENTS

Credibility comes from clarity, as rules vary depending on who is running the process. In independently organized primaries, the organizing committee must define key procedures, including candidate eligibility, voting methods, dispute resolution, and result certification. In official or institutionalized primaries, many of these rules are already fixed, but political agreements still matter.

All participants must commit to shared principles: respecting the process, avoiding attacks on each other, accepting the results, and defending the primary against authoritarian interference. These ground rules do not just protect the process, they also hold the coalition together.

4 CRAFT THE NARRATIVE, MOBILIZE PARTICIPATION

A good primary isn't quiet, it's energizing. Treat it as a major communication opportunity. Craft a bold communication strategy that explains, inspires, and mobilizes. Develop inspiring messages, assign spokespeople, and align social media campaigns across parties and platforms. Use videos, town halls, social media, and trusted messengers. Be transparent about what's happening and who's behind it. Anticipate attacks and be ready with facts, values, and voices.

Participation builds legitimacy, so make people want in. Besides, when done well, this mobilization also builds lasting campaign capacity, adding volunteers, expanding supporter networks, and creating organizational resources for the future.

5

LAND IT WELL, THEN LOCK ARMS

A primary officially ends when results are announced, but its political impact depends on what happens next. Ensure transparent counting, visible oversight, and real-time communication. Plan the moment of unity in advance. Have the winner and the losing candidates appear together, affirm the results, and commit publicly to working as a team.

This moment should be visually powerful and emotionally resonant. Since it will be widely watched and replayed, make it count as more than the end of a selection. It should mark the beginning of something bigger.



TIPS

A SECURE VOTING INFRASTRUCTURE TO SIGNAL STRENGTH

If you are organizing the primary independently, your voting system must be watertight. Combine online and offline options to ensure accessibility and credibility. If e-voting tools are used, make sure to choose the ones that have been already tested in other countries and follow international standards on verification, security, and anonymity. Every technical choice you make does not just enable voting, it also sends a message: This coalition is ready to govern with competence and transparency.

B DESIGN THE JOURNEY, NOT JUST THE ELECTION DAY

A primary is more than a single day. It is a public journey. Build a clear timeline of milestones, including launch announcements, debates, endorsements, town halls, results day, and unity moments. Each step should be visible and intentional. Treat the calendar as a narrative arc and design media content to match it, such as short videos, social media posts, behind-the-scenes clips, countdowns, and live events. Make it feel like a collective story unfolding in real time. People do not just vote. They follow, watch, and share.

C BE READY FOR FIRE

Authoritarian regimes will try to delegitimize the process through lawsuits, media attacks, online harassment, or divide-and-conquer tactics. Do not wait to respond. Prepare in advance. Set up legal teams, counter-narratives, and rapid response squads. Show immediate solidarity when one of you is attacked. Every coordinated defense is a signal: This coalition will not fracture under pressure. It will grow stronger.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL

LEGYEN
MAGYARORSZÁG
MINDANNYIUNKÉ!

UNITED FOR HUNGARY

Civic-tech enabled opposition primaries

HUNGARY

In the run-up to Hungary's 2022 parliamentary elections, six ideologically diverse opposition parties—from greens to conservatives—recognized that fragmentation would once again hand victory to Viktor Orbán's ruling Fidesz. To counter this structural disadvantage, they agreed to hold a jointly organized national primary to select unified candidates in all districts and a single challenger for prime minister.

The primaries were co-organized with *aHang* ("theVoice"), a civic-tech and advocacy platform that had already earned credibility by successfully managing Budapest's 2019 mayoral primaries. *aHang*, along with prominent new media personality Márton Gulyás, had played a quiet and early crucial public entrepreneurship role in making the case and winning support for opposition unity. The two-round primary took place between September and October 2021. Voters selected both

local parliamentary candidates and a joint prime ministerial nominee through a process designed to be transparent, inclusive, and credible beyond party structures.

Central to the effort was the creation of the National Primary Election Committee (OEVB), which brought together representatives from all six parties, with aHang acting as a permanent civil society partner. Negotiations were often tense, particularly around online voting, but the coalition ultimately adopted aHang's proposal to deploy ELEVE, a secure hybrid voting system enabling both online and offline participation. The platform combined paper ballots printed with QR codes, scanned at count to prevent fraud, with digital tools for voter identification, real-time reporting, and results aggregation.

The scale of the operation was unprecedented in Hungary's opposition politics. More than 10,000 volunteers staffed polling stations, verified voter identities, and oversaw ballot counting, while around 1,000 online operators conducted video-based voter verification after last-minute political decisions blocked access to the state's digital ID system. The process required rapid procurement of equipment, intensive training, and constant technical troubleshooting.

Despite having no access to state resources, the primaries became a national mobilization moment. aHang led a crowdfunding outreach campaign under the slogan "I Invite You to Live!", combining billboards, viral content, celebrity endorsements, and grassroots organizing. Independent civil society groups organized debates, monitored ballots, and reinforced the legitimacy of the process. A surprising 10% of the electorate turned out, in a major show of solidarity and defiance of a regime that was attempting to intimidate opposition supporters.

The second round produced Péter Márki-Zay as the joint prime ministerial candidate. While the opposition ultimately lost the general election, most observers attribute this to campaigning failures in the general election. One of those failures, however, was the failure of the oppo-

sition to campaign together in the election, showing that an opposition primary is just one part of an opposition cooperation process, and not a one shot deal.

This case does show how structured coordination can replace elite bargaining and internal competition, and more importantly, how civil society, paired with civic tech, can enable meaningful opposition coordination even under authoritarian pressure.

HUNGARY'S OPPOSITION PRIMARIES IN NUMBERS

- **First national primary in the country's history**
- **Two rounds**
- **800 polling stations nationwide**
- **online voting**
- **2 weeks to cast ballots**
- **10,000 volunteers and 1,000 online operators**
- **850,000 voters participated: around 10.4% of the whole electorate and 15% of actual voters in the 2022 parliamentary election**



DEMOCRATIC UNITY ROUNDTABLE

Mobilizing millions, falling short on follow-through

VENEZUELA

In 2012, Venezuela's opposition coalition, the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD, *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*), organized the country's first-ever presidential primary to select a unified challenger to face Hugo Chávez. Henrique Capriles Radonski, then governor of Miranda, won decisively with 64% of the vote and emerged as the consensus candidate.

The primary drew over 3 million voters—around 17% of the electorate—showcasing not only the opposition’s ability to mobilize but also the public’s hunger to engage directly in choosing a democratic alternative. Capriles led an energized yet moderate campaign, designed to appeal not only to traditional opposition voters but also to disillusioned Chavistas. His message emphasized unity and a promise to preserve and improve social programs, without the paternalism of Chávez’s model.

Capriles ultimately lost the October 2012 election, with Chávez securing 55% of the vote. Still, the primary process had galvanized the opposition and proved it could act collectively. When Chávez passed away in early 2013, a snap election followed. Thanks to the legitimacy gained through the 2012 primary, Capriles was already positioned to once again lead the opposition, this time against Chávez’s chosen successor, Nicolás Maduro.

The April 2013 vote was marred by irregularities. Maduro was declared the winner by just 1.5 points. Capriles rejected the results, citing countless documented violations, and demanded a full recount that never came.

The 2012 primary marked a milestone in opposition organizing. However, it also exposed structural weaknesses.

There was no post-primary unity plan, no defense against authoritarian backlash, and no crisis strategy. The process brought about energy and legitimacy, but lacked the infrastructure to sustain a breakthrough.

“A national primary election can electrify people and give them a larger stake in the outcome. Today, parties choose candidates hoping they’ll build popular support but a candidate chosen by voters already has it.”



LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2025. "Smart Opposition Coordination."
AATK Podcast Series

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3

SMART COORDINATION

Winning without forced unity

THE PLAY

Electoral systems shape what kinds of coordination are viable. Big tent unity is a powerful goal, but sometimes it can be strategically counterproductive and merging forces would actually weaken democratic performance. Still, coordination around specific actions is possible.

This play is not about unity through merger. It's about preserving strategic potential even when unity isn't possible, or when running separately produces better results. Unlike full-fledged coalitions, this approach is built for agility, not fusion. And it allows parties, movements, and civic leaders to remain autonomous while acting strategically.

Smart coordination means thinking tactically. Even when fragmented, opposition actors can still work together to block authoritarians and keep democratic options alive. In this scenario, alignment doesn't require a shared platform but a shared objective, clarity on the common threat, and the discipline to act where it matters most.

Whether through informal pacts, tactical withdrawals, non-aggression deals, or post-vote cooperation, this kind of coordination turns diversity into advantage. It reduces vote-splitting, avoids self-sabotage, and transforms a scattered field into a functional front capable of acting decisively in key matters.



WHY IT WORKS

- **COORDINATION SETS THE FRAME.** Acting in sync, even loosely, lets the opposition set the tempo and shape the battlefield on its own terms in the public debate.
- **ALIGNMENT SHARPENS ELECTORAL TOOLS.** When actors coordinate where and how to act together, for example, concentrating options and resources on winnable districts, they become more effective.
- **LESS NOISE FOCUSES THE PRESSURE.** Non-aggression and a clear target redirect energy from infighting toward a focused attack on authoritarian weak spots.
- **STRATEGY DISRUPTS AUTHORITARIAN EXPECTATIONS.** Authoritarians count on a chaotic democratic field, strategic coordination undermines and unsettles their playbook.
- **MAXIMIZING VOTE AND SEAT COUNT.** Coordination is sometimes the only way for an opposition to optimize electoral results from a seat-winning perspective. Even small gains can make the difference.



HOW IT WORKS

This play can follow a number of different recipes. Here are the most relevant.

1 INFORMAL PACTS

In fragmented political environments, informal pacts can prevent direct competition in key districts without requiring formal alliances. These quiet, negotiated understandings allow each party to keep its identity while reducing destructive vote-splitting where it matters most.

- **TRUST-BASED COORDINATION.** Build informal back-channels between party leaders to agree on where not to compete.
- **TARGETED AGREEMENTS.** Focus coordination on key swing districts rather than pursuing full national deals.
- **LOW VISIBILITY.** Keep agreements discreet and deniable to reduce backlash from internal factions and limit authoritarian disruption.

2 TACTICAL COORDINATED WITHDRAWALS

In critical races, when democratic votes risk being split, coordination may require some candidates to step down. This logic applies primarily in winner-takes-all and first-past-the-post systems, where dividing the democratic vote almost guarantees defeat.

In these contexts, withdrawals are not a sign of weakness. They are a strategic decision to concentrate support behind the strongest contender and avoid self-defeating competition.

- **MAP TO ACT.** Analyze each constituency to identify where coordination is necessary. Determine which pro-democracy candidates have lower chances of winning and whose continued presence would divide the democratic vote and increase the risk of defeat. A key challenge is knowing, with enough confidence, who is actually ahead. Constituency-level polling is the usual standard, but often too expensive or unavailable. In practice, coordination may rely on cheaper proxies: small online panels, rapid polling, past results combined with current trends, and local organizer intelligence. None are perfect, but together they can provide a usable signal when ideal data is out of reach.
- **PRESSURE FROM WITHIN.** Organize pressure from each candidate's own constituency to step aside in favor of the pro-democracy contender with stronger support. Mobilize supporters, civic leaders, and local influencers to encourage voluntary withdrawals.
- **MESSAGING.** Frame the withdrawal as a courageous, pro-democracy decision. Publicly recognize candidates who step down and encourage others to follow. Whenever possible, have withdrawing candidates endorse the stronger contender and call on their supporters to transfer their vote.

Tactical withdrawals should be used only when the electoral system and the math clearly demand it. In these systems, if divided, you lose. With coordination, democratic forces can win.

3 PARTIAL COORDINATION DEALS

Coordination doesn't have to be an all or nothing deal. Parties can coordinate in some districts and compete in others, or compete for seats in one house of government while cooperating in another. They might compete in the first round of an election and cooperate in the second.

One of the most common types of coordination simply involves spending decisions, based on mutual understanding. Typically, first-past-the-post or winner-take-all electoral systems benefit greatly from cooperation, while proportional representation systems tend to show fewer immediate incentives. But even while maintaining separate candidacies, the democratic field can still benefit from coordination by shaping narratives, avoiding mutually destructive competition, concentrating resources, or signaling unity to voters.

In proportional systems, the value of coordination often shifts from pure seat maximization to agenda-setting, coalition readiness, and long-term strategic positioning. The point is to look for areas of mutual benefit and seize upon them.

4 MUTUAL NON-AGGRESSION DEALS

Even without merging campaigns, democratic actors can agree not to attack each other during the campaign. These pacts redirect criticism toward the authoritarian opponent, reduce infighting, and protect relationships for future collaboration.

- **SET RED LINES.** Agree on boundaries: no personal attacks, no undermining other democratic candidates.
- **FOCUS THE FIRE.** Commit to centering all criticism and campaign energy on the authoritarian regime's failures and the urgent need for change. Avoid infighting, harsh cross-critiques, and rhetoric that weakens the democratic field.
- **KEEP DISCIPLINE.** Create informal monitoring to flag violations and resolve disputes quickly and quietly, preventing escalation.

5

POST-VOTE COOPERATION

Sometimes pre-election unity is impossible, but a post-election coalition is still viable. Each party campaigns independently, offering voters diverse democratic options, but commits to forming an alliance to block authoritarian rule once votes are counted.

- **INDEPENDENT CAMPAIGNS.** Allow each party to run its own campaign, leadership, and message.
- **A RANGE OF CHOICES HELPS REACH MORE PEOPLE.** Present a range of democratic alternatives to mobilize different voter segments.
- **CLEAR COMMITMENT (EVEN IF QUIETLY).** Publicly declare intent to form a coalition or governing pact after the election to reassure voters their vote contributes to the larger goal.

Post-vote cooperation works best in proportional systems, where multiple parties can enter government. It allows voters to choose freely without splintering democratic power.



TIPS

A BUILD THE COMMON ENEMY

Coordination isn't about liking each other, it's about stopping authoritarian consolidation. Keep the focus sharp: frame every action, message, and compromise around the shared goal. Naming the common enemy—clearly and repeatedly—reinforces alignment, strengthens resolve, and reminds everyone what's really at stake.

B REWARD COOPERATION

When coordination works, whether through a tactical withdrawal, a non-aggression pact, or a post-vote alliance, it should be acknowledged and reinforced. This recognition can be public or private, depending on the type of coordination.

Public recognition helps build trust, encourage imitation, and turn isolated moves into a broader narrative of democratic responsibility. Private rewards can include shared strategic access, coordination in planning spaces, reciprocal support in future cycles, or internal acknowledgment, reinforcing cooperation without public exposure or political backlash.

C SIGNAL POST-ELECTORAL READINESS

Coordination does not end on election day. Even when running separately, democratic actors should communicate clear readiness for post-electoral cooperation. This includes outlining a basic transition plan, shared commitments for the first 100 days, or agreed mechanisms for governing together. Signaling preparedness reassures voters that their vote translates into action, counters narratives of chaos, and shows that coordination is strategic, not improvised.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL



POLISH DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION

Smart coordination to defeat PiS

POLAND

In Poland's 2023 parliamentary elections, pro-democracy forces faced a deeply entrenched opponent: Law and Justice (PiS, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*), in power since 2015 and known for dominating state institutions, attacking judicial independence, and exerting control over public media.

Instead of forcing unity into a single electoral bloc, the democratic opposition chose a more flexible approach: coordinate where needed, stay distinct where useful, and align around the threat.

For the *Sejm* (lower house) election, three separate lists were presented: Civic Coalition (KO), Third Way (#TD), and the Left (*Lewica*). While running distinct campaigns, the parties committed to a mutual non-aggression pact, avoided attacking each other, and focused on mobilizing disillusioned voters and exposing PiS's weaknesses.

For the Senate, which uses a first-past-the-post system, the opposition formed a formal Senate Pact, agreeing to field just one candidate per district to prevent vote-splitting. This hybrid approach—strategic division in the Sejm, strict coordination in the Senate—proved crucial.

Civil society played a key role. Organizations like *WSCHÓD* and Polish Women’s Strike aligned their messaging without endorsing parties. They highlighted issues like abortion rights, climate justice, and cost of living, and coordinated get-out-the-vote efforts across demographics. Each group kept its own voice but shared a collective objective: change.

Rather than duplicating work, civil society and opposition parties divided labor, expanding reach and minimizing confusion. The message was clear: “vote your values, but vote for democracy.” It worked. Turnout reached 74.4%—the highest since 1989—and the opposition secured a combined majority in both houses of parliament. Campaigning separately helped broaden appeal while avoiding the regime’s caricature of a monolithic opposition.

Though they ran separately, the parties had signaled that, if given a majority, they would govern together. That kind of reassurance helped voters take a leap of faith and end PiS’s rule.

“We learned that building a coalition wasn’t about ownership—it was about trust. By sharing knowledge, resources, and visibility, we built a network where success was collective. Parties did their job, civil society did theirs. The shift from isolation to alignment made all the difference.”

ENSEMBLE



REPUBLICAN FRONT

A hero's call to avoid a far-right government

FRANCE

In France's 2024 legislative elections, the far-right *Rassemblement National* (RN), led by Marine Le Pen, surged to first place in the initial round, securing approximately 33% of the vote and leading in most districts. This unprecedented success raised the specter of a far-right government taking power for the first time in modern French history.

But what followed was a high-stakes masterclass in strategic withdrawal. With 311 of the 577 districts headed into three-way runoffs—a format that favored RN due to vote-splitting between the left, center, and moderate right—civil society and party leaders made a bold call: only one pro-democracy candidate should remain in each of those races. In response, under the call of a Republican Front (*Front Républicain*), 213 candidates withdrew: 131 from the New Popular Front and 82 from Macron's Ensemble coalition.

Civil society played a pivotal role in this coordination. Grassroots organizations, activists, and concerned citizens pressured political parties and candidates to act in the national interest. Through demonstrations, media campaigns, and direct appeals, they emphasized the urgency of uniting against the far-right threat.

This bottom-up mobilization proved instrumental in enabling the rapid and widespread adoption of the Front Républicain strategy.

The messaging surrounding these withdrawals was cru-

cial. Rather than being portrayed as political concessions, they were framed as acts of democratic responsibility and patriotism. Candidates who stepped aside publicly endorsed their former rivals, calling on supporters to unite against the RN. This narrative helped galvanize public support and reduce potential confusion or apathy among voters.

The Republican Front's impact was significant. The New Popular Front won the most seats, and Macron's Ensemble came second. Despite leading in the first round, the RN ultimately finished third in the National Assembly. Thanks to coordinated opposition and strategic withdrawals, the far-right was effectively blocked from forming a government.

THE IMPACT OF WITHDRAWALS

→ **HEAD-TO-HEAD CONTESTS:**

In districts with just two candidates, pro-democracy contenders flipped 40% of races from the first-round leader.

→ **WHEN VOTES STAYED SPLIT:**

In 89 districts without coordination, the first-round leader – usually the National Rally – won 92% of the time.



LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES



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4

IF YOU CAN'T GO NATIONAL, GO LOCAL

Starting from the margins
in order to shape the center

THE PLAY

Power isn't only built at the top. It's built where people live, organize, and vote. Democratic politics is treated like a national spectacle: presidential debates, televised scandals, and high-stakes battles far removed from local realities. Nevertheless, the media obsession with the national stage leaves other arenas untouched and underestimated.

Shifting focus to the local level gives democratic forces a way to destabilize the regime from the edges inwards. This play is about competing locally, where the regime may be weaker, it makes sense to reclaim ground, expand the democratic base, and develop new kinds of leadership.

Local democratic governance has strategic value. Even under authoritarian rule, cities offer space to build public recognition, test new ideas, and expand civic participation. Crucially, they make results visible, showing what an alternative way of governing can deliver in everyday life.

Local victories can build more than momentum. They can build structure. They create networks of trust, rooted legitimacy, and long-term mobilization.

They also offer a showcase for an alternative national leadership, and governance as proof, not promise. Going local isn't a retreat, but a way of building power from the ground up.

It's how you can grow power for a future push and open pathways to national renewal.



WHY IT WORKS

- **PROXIMITY DRIVES CONNECTION.** Local issues touch daily life, making politics tangible, urgent, and harder to ignore.
- **NEW FACES FIND A Foothold.** Local spaces allow fresh, disruptive leaders to emerge, more distanced from the control of national party machines.
- **STYLE BECOMES A SIGNAL.** Local campaigns allow for more disruptive, agile, informal, and relatable leadership styles, closer to how people actually live and speak.
- **IT IS PROOF THAT DEMOCRACY DELIVERS.** Local governance can become a living demo of national policies, a scale where democratic ideas get tested, refined, and proven.
- **IT BUILDS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE.** Each local victory adds not just votes, but people, networks, and legitimacy that endure.



HOW IT WORKS

1 SPOT THE CRACKS, THEN WIDEN THEM

The regime doesn't fear opposition. It fears exposure. Look for neglected districts, disillusioned voters, and local power vacuums. These aren't weak spots. They're entry points. Use them not just to show up, but to create contrast. Turn local failures, like water cuts, clinic closures, or garbage piles, into visible symbols of national decay. Make them the first crack in the regime's story of control.

2 BUILD COUNTERPOWER, NOT JUST SUPPORT

Going local isn't about adding local flavor. It's about shifting where legitimacy is produced. The local arena is where new, more disruptive leadership can emerge. Go beyond canvassing. Build micro-alliances with people who move others: community organizers, neighborhood figures, small entrepreneurs, teachers, influencers, even local media voices. Identify local mobilizers who can amplify reach and generate real voter engagement. Don't just ask them to endorse. Invite them to lead.

3 **TURN GRIEVANCES INTO POLITICAL FIREPOWER**

Talk about what the regime ignores: closed down clinics, empty schools, stolen budgets, everyday violence. These aren't isolated failures. They are systemic. But don't stop at pointing fingers. Propose concrete, local solutions. Ideas people can believe in, see in action, and talk about. Tie each issue to a bigger concept: dignity, justice, self-determination. Don't just explain the issue. Show that local power can solve it. That's how frustration becomes fuel.

4 **PROMISE AND DELIVER, DELIVER, DELIVER**

Local power allows democratic forces to govern and show results. Small, solid policies, when well executed, carry strong symbolic weight. Fixing services, reopening spaces, or making institutions work again shows what governing differently looks like.

Local delivery can cut through cynicism better than any national speech. People may doubt promises, but they recognize results. Governing well at the local level builds credibility and confidence, while also building capacity. It prepares teams and ideas to scale.

5 **MAKE IT LOUD, MAKE IT STICK**

A win no one sees is a win that never happened. Every local act, cleaning a park, fixing a light, exposing corruption, should become a story. If the national media ignores you, make it impossible for people not to notice. Use trusted voices and influencers to amplify, and supporters to repeat and spread. Don't just make noise. Create momentum that feels alive and contagious. When people see change nearby, they start believing it can happen everywhere.

6 LEAVE STRUCTURES, NOT JUST POSTERS

Victory is a start, not the goal. Use the campaign momentum to create permanent structures: community delegates, volunteer hubs, WhatsApp groups, and durable social capital. Train and retain local organizers ready to lead long after election day. Leave behind a presence that outlives the vote. That's your foundation, the place you'll govern from, organize from, and grow from, and a clear message to the regime: we're here to stay.

7 CONNECT THE DOTS FROM LOCAL TO NATIONAL

Show that local victories are not the endgame. They are pressure points. Connect them. Every seat taken, every new leader empowered, every failure exposed weakens the regime's grip. Turn those moments into a national narrative: the regime is losing control. What starts at the edges can flip the center, if people believe they're part of something bigger.

8 BE PRAGMATIC IN DEALINGS WITH OTHER LAYERS OF GOVERNMENT

Most local leaders cannot succeed in delivering when national and regional governments are dead set on their failure. Running for election on a "positive politics" of addressing people's needs helps to avoid an open warfare with other jurisdictions, and pragmatic engagement after election can help expand the possibility of success. When these other actors do prevent progress, however, it's important to let voters know it.



TIPS

A SHAPE A NARRATIVE BACKBONE

You're not just running for a seat. You're writing the next chapter. From day one, document everything: stories, faces, results, resistance. Capture what makes it real. Authenticity and credibility are your greatest assets. Show what you're building, not just show what you're saying. These stories will help you expand, replicate, and inspire. A single win won't shake the regime, but a movement that knows how to tell its story just might.

B KEEP THE ENGINE RUNNING

Play the long game. If you vanish after victory, you confirm people's worst fears. Winning locally must feel like the beginning of something real. To prove it, you need to stay embedded in the community between elections. Keep showing up. Keep building. Keep solving. Use your campaign to pilot real solutions and create enduring infrastructure. Don't just promise change. Be it. Visibility builds credibility and continuity builds power.

C CONNECT THE LOCAL WINS

One town or city alone can't change the country, but ten can start a wave. After a local victory, reach out to other pro-democracy governments. Amplify each other's wins. Share tactics. Exchange effective policies. Build cross-city alliances and shared infrastructure to support broader democratic renewal. Local success becomes stronger when it's part of something bigger, coordinated, visible, and growing.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL



EKREM İMAMOĞLU

Radical love in Istanbul, national shockwave

TURKEY

In an increasingly authoritarian landscape dominated by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), a rare democratic breakthrough occurred in 2019 when Ekrem İmamoğlu won the Istanbul mayoral race. İmamoğlu's campaign succeeded by treating local politics not as a consolation prize, but as a battleground for democratic renewal.

While Erdoğan's national apparatus pushed hyper-nationalist rhetoric and polarization, İmamoğlu's team took a different path. They listened. Through consultations, mapping, and community outreach, they built a platform centered on local priorities: public transport, green spaces, youth employment, and transparent budgeting. Rather than reacting to Erdoğan, they focused on the daily realities of Istanbul's 16 million residents: cost of living, corruption, failing services.

İmamoğlu made his campaign tangible. His pledges, like free milk for low-income families, expanded metro lines, and social service investment, were backed by pilot programs and direct engagement in underserved neighborhoods. His campaign bypassed Erdoğan-controlled national outlets, using social media and speaking directly to citizens with clarity and empathy.

One of the most important ingredients of this success was building local alliances beyond his own party, the CHP. İmamoğlu reached out to civil society, professional associations, neighborhood groups, and smaller parties like the pro-Kurdish HDP. Their passive support proved decisive. What emerged wasn't just a local campaign. It was a diverse coalition, held together not by ideology but by shared discontent and a hunger for responsive leadership.

The tone mattered, too. İmamoğlu's "Radical Love" strategy consciously avoided confrontation. It emphasized dignity, unity, and inclusiveness, resonating with secular voters, disillusioned conservatives, young people, and Kurds alike. His campaign became an invitation to something new, rather than a fight against something old.

After the March 2019 vote was annulled following heavy political pressure, the decision backfired. Instead of leading to despair, the overreach sparked public outrage, and İmamoğlu won in June with a far larger margin of victory.

İmamoğlu's win didn't just flip Istanbul. It showed what happens when local power is taken seriously, coalitions are broadened, and voters are treated as citizens, not spectators. What is more, that victory also turned him into a national-level threat. In response, the government moved to sideline him through politically motivated court cases, including a conviction that, if upheld, would bar him from future elections. The story, however, is far from over.

"You protected our century-old democratic tradition, thank you fellow citizens of Istanbul!"



INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

Reclaiming Karnataka: local wins, national lessons

INDIA

With national power out of reach after a decade of dominance by Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Indian National Congress (INC) increasingly treated state-level elections as a strategy of survival. Competing locally became a way to remain politically relevant, retain organizational capacity, and challenge the BJP's claim of inevitability, even while struggling on the national stage.

That logic was clearly visible in Congress's victory in the southern state of Karnataka in 2023. Rather than running a proxy national campaign, Congress focused tightly on local governance failures and everyday economic pressures. The party introduced a highly concrete "Guarantee Card" built around five deliverable welfare commitments: free electricity, free bus travel for women, monthly income support for women-headed households, unemployment benefits for graduates, and subsidies for low-income families. These proposals were designed not only to resonate emotionally, but to become effective at the state level, turning local power into visible proof of governing capacity.

At the same time, Congress went on the offensive locally. It tapped into widespread frustration over inflation, service delivery, and corruption, most notably through the widely circulated "40% commission" allegation, which accused BJP-aligned officials of demanding bribes of up to 40% from contractors in exchange for approvals

and payment of public works projects. The campaign also pushed back against BJP-backed state legislation targeting Muslim communities, positioning Congress as a defender of pluralism and constitutional norms in a context where national institutions felt increasingly distant.

Crucially, the party resisted over-centralization. Instead of foregrounding national figures, Congress elevated trusted regional leaders. Siddaramaiah, a former chief minister with strong backing among OBC and other historically marginalized communities, and D. K. Shivakumar, a Vokkaliga leader with deep grassroots networks, became the public face of the campaign. Their local credibility helped anchor the party's message across caste, rural, and working-class constituencies.

Congress also leaned heavily on hyperlocal organizing. Women's groups, youth volunteers, community influencers, and regional digital campaigns in Kannada bypassed national media ecosystems dominated by the BJP. The result was a campaign rooted in proximity, cultural fluency, and everyday concerns rather than national spectacle.

The Karnataka victory did not overturn the BJP's national dominance. But it kept Congress politically alive. The win restored confidence, hope, resources, leadership visibility, and a credible governance narrative at a moment of national marginalization. It also provided a template, focused on guarantees, local leadership, and deliverable policy, that Congress later attempted to scale into the 2024 general elections, where the party performed markedly better than in 2019.

Karnataka showed how local power can function as a life-line. When national victory is out of reach, governing locally can preserve relevance, rebuild credibility, and reopen pathways back to the center.

"We fought on the issues of the poor and to my utmost satisfaction, the best thing is that we did not fight this battle with hatred or by using inappropriate words. We fought this battle with congeniality, love and an open heart. And the people of Karnataka have shown us that this country has greater affinity for love."



LEARN MORE

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5

BE READY FOR WHAT COMES AFTER

Preparing to win (and govern) before
the votes are counted

THE PLAY

When facing an authoritarian regime, most of the energy goes into election day. But victory is not enough. Winning means little if what comes next is uncertainty or improvisation. You should not prepare to govern after the win. That delay is where many democratic projects collapse or are defeated by their own victory.

Besides, authoritarian incumbents rarely go quiet. Before the vote, they may discredit opponents, weaken institutions, or set traps to block succession. If they lose, they may contest results, encourage violence, or use the state apparatus to delay or sabotage the transition. For this reason, the moment of victory is often the moment of greatest risk.

This play is about readiness to govern. It focuses on how democratic forces should prepare to take power, and signal that readiness before the votes are counted. This includes defining early measures tied directly to the most visible campaign promises. It means anticipating disruption and demonstrating responsibility from day one.

A plan for “what comes after” sends a signal: This is real. Power will be transferred, decisions will be made, and early promises will be delivered swiftly and visibly. That signal can deter interference, hold fragile coalitions together, and build public confidence at the most vulnerable moment of the democratic cycle.

Readiness is what turns an electoral win into governing authority, and it is not achieved by waiting, but by being prepared.



WHY IT WORKS

- **READINESS PROJECTS CREDIBILITY.** When there is a visible plan, the opposition stops looking like a movement-against and starts looking like a government-in-waiting.
- **PREPAREDNESS PROTECTS AGAINST SABOTAGE.** Clear plans and disciplined execution raise the costs of authoritarian interference before, during, and after the vote.
- **EARLY RESULTS BUILD TRUST.** Delivering quick, visible changes after the election helps maintain momentum, prove capacity, and turn post-victory hope into confidence.
- **UNITY MAY HOLD UNDER STRESS.** Pre-agreed roles and protocols prevent chaos and infighting when power is within reach, keeping coalitions from breaking down.
- **NARRATIVE CLARITY REDUCES VULNERABILITY.** Defining a story early and using consistent language shields the transition from confusion, panic, and regime spin.



HOW IT WORKS

1

SET UP A PARALLEL TRANSITION TEAM

Don't wait for victory to start preparing. Build a discreet team focused on governance, not campaigning. Their key responsibility is to identify which core campaign promises must translate into immediate governing measures, including mapping out a governance timeline for the first 100 days, the first year, and the next election cycle.

While others chase votes, this team prepares to take power and make it work, spotting risks, identifying chokepoints, and planning the moves that turn high-visibility promises into tangible and solid early actions that can be defended politically and implemented quickly.

2

BUILD A CONCRETE PLAN FOR THE FIRST 100 DAYS

Hope is not a plan. Democratic forces need a clear transition roadmap. This means defining in advance what decisions will be taken, which measures will be prioritized, and how early promises will translate into action in the first days and weeks in power.

A credible first-100-days plan should focus on a limited set of visible actions that signal direction and capacity. Once defined, the plan must be pressure-tested against hostile scenarios to ensure it is not only appealing, but workable under stress. What if the regime refuses to concede? What if violence erupts? What if institutions block appointments or delay promised actions?

3

PREPARE TO DEFEND THE WIN

Election day is not the finish line. It is the next battlefield. Diplomatic backing and election defense must be built before election day. Quietly brief embassies, regional blocs, and key global actors on your transition roadmap and red lines. Make clear what is at stake and what kinds of interference would trigger a response.

At the same time, assemble rapid response protocols to defend the result in real time. Prepare legal teams, digital monitors, street mobilizers, and a disciplined communications unit well before votes are cast. If the regime tries to respond, distort, or delay the outcome, the response must be immediate, coordinated, and credible.

4

DEFINE POWER-SHARING BEFORE YOU NEED IT

Most coalitions do not collapse over ideology. They collapse over power. Don't let fights happen in public. Agree in advance on how decisions will be made, how roles will be shared and split, and how disputes will be resolved. What you settle now won't blow up later.

Use trusted facilitators and clear protocols. These agreements do not need to be perfect, but they must be understood and agreed upon before an eventual victory puts them under pressure.

5

SIGNAL YOU'RE READY TO GOVERN

When power feels possible, stability attracts support. Democratic forces must look and sound like a government-in-waiting before power formally changes hands. Share selected elements of the transition plan, priorities, leadership roles, decision-making structures, and governing protocols, to project control, coherence, and ability.

And if victory comes, move quickly on the first measures already defined. Early, visible actions reinforce credibility, reduce uncertainty, and shrink the window in which authoritarians can regain the initiative. Readiness becomes real when plans turn into decisions, and decisions into action.



TIPS

A SHOW CONTROL FROM DAY ONE

Transitions are judged first on order, not policy. How roles are assigned, decisions are announced, and authority is exercised in the first days shapes credibility. Clear command, visible coordination, and disciplined execution reduce uncertainty and signal that the new government is in control. Before results arrive, voters look for one thing: Does this feel governable?

B TURN PROMISES INTO DAY-ONE ACTIONS

A transition plan is only real when it becomes action. Draft a concrete roadmap for the first three months, centered on a small set of key campaign promises that can be quickly implemented. These early actions send a signal of competence and momentum, showing that democracy is not just a promise but a governing capacity. Prioritize measures that are fast to deploy, visible in the daily life of citizens, and politically defensible. When people see results immediately, the window for instability narrows.

C OWN THE STORY BEFORE THEY DO

Authoritarian regimes move fast to frame transitions as chaos or illegitimacy. Do not wait to respond. Go first. Communicate the transition plan early and clearly. Show who is in charge, what happens next, and how control will be maintained.

Rely on a small set of messages, disciplined spokespeople, and consistent language. In moments of uncertainty, clarity and timing shape reality.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL



DONALD TUSK'S COALITION GOVERNMENT

Preparing to govern before the win

POLAND

In Poland's October 2023 elections, the united opposition secured a majority in the Sejm, defeating the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) after eight years in power. But victory at the polls was only the beginning. The PiS still held the presidency, the Constitutional Tribunal, public media, and much of the bureaucracy. President Andrzej Duda, loyal to the PiS, tried to stall the handover by nominating Mateusz Morawiecki to form a government despite his lack of majority. In this precarious landscape, the opposition showed what it means to prepare for "what comes after."

The three main blocs—Civic Coalition (liberal-center), Third Way (agrarian and Christian-democratic), and the Left—moved quickly to prevent chaos. On November

10th, they signed a coalition agreement distributing ministries, setting decision rules, and committing to joint priorities. Alongside it, they unveiled the “100 konkretów na 100 dni” (“100 concrete actions in 100 days”), a roadmap of early deliverables. These moves projected discipline and credibility, reassuring voters, institutions, and allies that the opposition was ready to govern.

International preparation was equally crucial. Before taking office, Donald Tusk traveled to Brussels and Berlin to brief allies. His first major act as prime minister was attending the European Council. This pre-wiring paid off: by February 2024, the European Commission announced the unfreezing of up to €137 billion in EU funds, frozen under the PiS over rule-of-law disputes. For Poles, this was the clearest early proof that change had arrived.

The opposition also anticipated disruption at home. When Duda delayed the transfer of power, the coalition swiftly elected Szymon Hołownia as Speaker of the Sejm on November 13th, securing control of parliament even before Tusk took office. This enabled the launch of parliamentary inquiry commissions into the PiS-era scandals such as Pegasus surveillance and the “cash-for-visas” affair, turning the transition into a moment of accountability rather than drift.

Once in government, the coalition prioritized quick, visible wins. The restoration of state-funded IVF treatments—scrapped under the PiS—was among the earliest laws passed, signed by Duda in December. Education reforms, like limiting homework in early grades, further signaled change in everyday life. Combined with the EU thaw, these policies reassured voters that democracy could deliver results fast.

Not all efforts succeeded. Attempts to overhaul state media through shareholder resolutions and liquidation became mired in a legal war with PiS-aligned courts. Liberalization of abortion and access to emergency contraception stalled due to coalition divisions and presidential vetoes. And while the “100 konkretów” created

“Today, together with the leaders of the democratic parties, we confirmed our readiness to cooperate fully and create a majority in the next parliament.”

urgency, by March 2024 only about a dozen promises were fully met, providing ammunition for critics.

Still, the broader narrative held. By preparing a coalition pact, securing parliament, briefing allies abroad, and rolling out early policies, the new government stabilized a fragile transition.



GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY

Clearing House mechanism

SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's 2024 elections produced a historic rupture: for the first time since 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) lost its parliamentary majority, making single-party rule impossible. Faced with a fragmented legislature and a deep economic and social crisis, ANC leaders had to choose how to govern, and with whom.

Rather than aligning with authoritarian-leaning forces associated with Jacob Zuma and Julius Malema, the ANC opted to coordinate with ideologically distant but pro-democratic rivals, including the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), to form a Government of National Unity.

Anticipating that this unprecedented coalition, built across long-standing rivalries and deep ideological divides, could fracture once in power, coalition leaders agreed before governing crises emerged to establish a Clearing House mechanism. The forum was designed as

a discreet, pre-agreed space where party leaders could surface disagreements, negotiate tradeoffs, and resolve disputes privately, without triggering public confrontation or legislative gridlock. It created clear rules for how conflict would be handled once governing began.

The value of this preparation became clear within weeks. When early disagreements surfaced over core policy priorities, including education and healthcare, coalition partners resisted the temptation to fight in Parliament or through the media. Instead, they routed disputes through the Clearing House, producing joint positions before legislation was introduced. This prevented early public rupture and allowed the new government to move forward with a unified front at a moment when uncertainty could have easily spiraled.

The Clearing House has not eliminated tension, but it has contained it. In a highly volatile political, social, and economic environment, it has functioned as a stabilizing bridge for parties to support much-needed democratic governance, reinforce public confidence, and reduce the risk of democratic backsliding in South Africa.

“South Africa should not be scared of the noise that is created around disagreement. We are not a Kumbaya government. We are a government that has to contest ideas (...) some of these very complex issues where we have mandates from our parties and find out how we can work together.”



LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "Poland Beats Backsliding." *The Fight For Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 1.



D-Hub. 2024. "A New Era." *The Fight For Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 6.



D-Hub. 2025. "Smart Opposition Coordination." *AATK Podcast Series*.

OTHER RESOURCES



ANC. 2024. "Statement of Intent of the 2024 Government of National Unity."



Notes from Poland. 2023. "Polish opposition groups sign agreement setting out programme for future coalition government."

WE CAN HELP YOU.

At the Democracy Hub, we understand the emotional and strategic challenges of confronting modern authoritarianism—uncertainty, confusion, pressure, and relentless attacks on democratic values.

But you are not alone.

D-Hub is a vibrant community dedicated to defending and renewing democracy. We have the knowledge, tools, and experience to help you fight back effectively.

Our mission is to increase the effectiveness of those fighting authoritarianism. We emphasize collaborative peer-to-peer learning, comprehensive training, coaching, strategic support, and fostering networks of solidarity and exchange. We aim to ensure that democracy advocates worldwide are equipped with the vital relationships, deep knowledge, and essential skills they need to fulfill their mission.

→ IF YOU NEED SPECIFIC ASSISTANCE, PLEASE CONTACT US AT CONTACT@DHUB.ORG



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Reach out to us. Together, we can defend democracy.