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Adjusting Democracy Assistance to the Age of Digital Dissidents

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Summary

Authoritarian regimes benefit from cheaper and more ubiquitous digital technologies. They use them to increase their control over society through surveillance, censorship, and persecution of citizens. However, these citizens also learn how to use technologies to their advantage. They rely on platforms such as social media and messengers to organize, inform, mobilize, and advocate for civic freedoms so to resist authoritarian resurgence.

This increased reliance on digital technologies, as well as the need to address surveillance and censorship, facilitates the emergence of the newer forms of civic organizing and leadership in autocracies. These forms are less hierarchical and centralized than the pro-democracy movements of the past. Recent examples from Eastern Europe illustrate three emerging types of digitally enabled organizing by comparison with the more traditional hierarchical movements: segmented in Belarus, connective in Ukraine, and hybrid in Russia. These show movements that developed high levels of potential to inspire democratic change.

These three forms of organizing are, to a large extent, digitally enabled groups that mobilized citizens for large-scale protests. They often facilitate rather than direct political activity, have many centers of influence, and can adapt to the changing circumstances quickly by shifting between forms of organizing.

Many international donors that focus on democracy promotion rely on approaches that do not fit this evolving context in digitized authoritarian regimes. They still favor larger, hierarchical civic or state-oriented organizations that fit their standard templates. However, hierarchical organizations appear to be less effective as explicit mobilizing agents and advocates for civic freedoms because it is easier to repress

and control them. At the same time, segmented and connective structures are perceived as fragmented and weak because their leaders often remain in shadows, while their organizational configurations look unfamiliar and obscure.

In order to counter digitized authoritarian resurgence and revitalize democratic assistance, international donors should recognize digitally enabled approaches to civic organizing under authoritarian regimes. They should consider the following measures to address changing authoritarian environments.

- The assumption that a civic organization is weak if it appears fragmented should not shape democracy-assistance programs.
- International donors should focus on supporting a wider array of groups rather than focusing on hierarchical organizations as their exclusive partners.
- Established hierarchical civic organizations should be encouraged to communicate and learn from digitally enabled segmented and connective groups. However, they should avoid building rigid coalition bureaucracies and focus on less formal links.
- Support should be directed toward building sustainable media ecologies and advancing media skills.
- Another high priority should be assisting those groups that help to develop local fundraising and donation infrastructure because the cells of segmented and connective groups often cannot accept foreign funding.
- Policymakers should understand the needs of the citizens under authoritarian regimes who require anonymous and uncensored communication channels.

Introduction

There is a widespread feeling today that authoritarian regimes are on the rise and that the prospects of democratization are in decline. Freedom House has documented 14 consecutive years of decline in political rights and civil liberties over the last 15 years.¹ In 2019, more than 2.4 billion people lived in a country that can be described as authoritarian. The rise of authoritarian regimes is a gradual process rather than a result of a single event.² It is argued to be linked to the increased use of digital technologies by ruling elites in countries that experience democratic decline.³ In particular many argue that authoritarian control and power increasingly shift to digital channels where governments use technologies for surveillance and propaganda.⁴ This can be labeled as digitized authoritarianism. At the same time, digital technologies open additional opportunities for pro-democracy actors to advocate for civic freedoms and resist authoritarian resurgence. It is especially important to consider how in this new context local actors can be empowered and how international donors can assist them in their pro-democracy aspirations.

This paper examines how democracy assistance should address the opportunities and threats posed by digitized authoritarianism from the perspective of local actors. Programs, such as those of the EU and U.S. agencies and institutions, have been promoting or defending democratic values—such as participation, fair elections, and respect for human rights—for decades.⁵ The United States, the EU, and “western states spend billions of dollars annually with these

aims.”⁶ Their programs play a pivotal role in helping local pro-democracy civic groups shed oppression and in improving democratic governance and quality of life.⁷ However, knowledge about effective mechanisms of democracy promotion remains ambiguous.⁸ As a consequence, not enough is known about the best approaches to empower local pro-democracy groups through foreign aid programs.⁹ This question remains increasingly complex as democracy-assistance institutions take a less confrontational approach to authoritarian states and increasingly build their programs around depoliticized, more technical cooperation that favors state actors.¹⁰ It is against this background that digitized authoritarianism rises.

The focus on digitized modes of civic and political organizing is part of the solution. This can make democracy assistance more effective.

This paper focuses on digitized authoritarianism from the angle of local digitally enabled pro-democracy groups, led by people that can be described as dissidents. Using examples from recent protest movements in Belarus, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine, it demonstrates how digital dissidents organize and resist authoritarian resurgence. The paper argues that democracy-assistance programs urgently need to understand how to respond to organizational and communication changes that are linked to increased reliance on new technologies by regimes and pro-de-

1 Freedom House, [Policy Recommendations: Strengthening Democracy](#), Freedom House, n.d.

2 Anna Lührmann, and Staffan I. Lindberg, [A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New about It?](#), *Democratization* 26, no. 7 (3 October 2019).

3 Seva Gunitzky, [Corrupting the Cyber-Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability](#), *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 01, March 2015.

4 Nils B. Weidmann and Espen Geelmuyden Rod, *The Internet and Political Protest in Autocracies*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

5 David Black, [Revitalizing Democracy Assistance To Counter Threats To Democratization](#), The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 7 November 2019.

6 Sarah Sunn Bush, [The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators](#), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

7 David Black, [Revitalizing Democracy Assistance To Counter Threats To Democratization](#).

8 Matthew Cebul, [Is Democracy Promotion Dead?](#), *Democracy and Autocracy*, The Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies, University of Michigan, February 2020.

9 Ellen Lust and David Waldner, [Democracy Promotion in an Age of Democratic Backsliding](#), *Democracy and Autocracy*, The Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies, University of Michigan, February 2020.

10 Sarah Sunn Bush, [The Taming of Democracy Assistance](#).

mocracy groups. The focus on digitized modes of civic and political organizing is part of the solution. This can make democracy assistance more effective.

Digitized Authoritarianism and the Fragmentation of Organizing

Authoritarian regimes benefit from digitization because internet technologies afford control through surveillance and censorship. Digital technologies such as social-media platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) expand surveillance practices. They help regimes to monitor the actions of their opponents and to collect evidence in order to persecute them.¹¹ Surveillance also allows monitoring of alternative online information that is critical of the regime. For instance, the Chinese government uses semi-automatic surveillance technologies to monitor expression on social media.¹² In addition, authoritarian regimes use such technologies as big-data-harvesting, AI, and facial-recognition software to oppress and repress opponents. For example, AI can be used to monitor how long someone looks at anti-government social-media posts.¹³ Authoritarian regimes also use technologies to prevent the spread of critical information on the internet, which enables censorship and self-censorship. This censorship often takes the form of digital disinformation directed at the opponents of authoritarian elites, which confuses citizens and prevents them from accessing trustworthy information.¹⁴ Though few governments have the capacity comparable to the Chinese one, surveillance and censorship are key challenges of digitized authoritarianism that civic groups face in many countries.

Civic groups and movements that oppose authoritarian regimes also benefit from digital technologies,

however, because they allow disseminating information and mobilizing quicker and at a larger scale. The main affordances of the internet—the actions that digital technologies facilitate or make possible—allow faster and often more secure communication that reaches larger audiences.¹⁵ In particular platforms have enabled much greater participation in politics. This happened because platforms help to diffuse alternative information and to organize and mobilize people for collective action such as protest.¹⁶ This means that digital technologies increase political turbulence by allowing outsiders to mobilize supporters more quickly than before.¹⁷ Ultimately, the outcome of the use of digital technologies depends to a large extent on which actor uses them.

Groups and movements that oppose authoritarian regimes also benefit from newer forms of organizing and leadership that are enabled by digital technologies. Newer forms of organizing and leadership, as well as the main affordances of the internet, help them to address the challenges of surveillance and censorship, along with physical persecution. However, organizing in civic groups is often overlooked by the public and observers.¹⁸ This might happen because the logistics and practical details of organizing “are generally undramatic and do not lend themselves to journalists’ narratives, which tend to be focused on the deeds of a few leaders.”¹⁹ However, a myriad of undramatic practical details is important for building sustainable organizational structures, which can then be a key to the success of such groups. The structures help to build up decision-making capacity, coordinate tasks,

11 Yuval Noah Harari, [Why Technology Favors Tyranny](#), The Atlantic, October 2018.

12 Seva Gunitsky, [Corrupting the Cyber-Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability](#).

13 David Black, [Revitalizing Democracy Assistance To Counter Threats To Democratization](#).

14 Philip N. Howard, *Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives*, Yale University Press, 2020.

15 Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, New Haven; Yale University Press, 2017.

16 Nils B. Weidmann and Espen Geelmuyden Rød, *The Internet and Political Protest in Autocracies*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

17 Hans Kundnani, [The Future of Democracy in Europe: Technology and the Evolution of Representation](#), Chatham House, March 2020.

18 Bruce A. Bimber, Andrew J. Flanagin, and Cynthia Stohl, *Collective Action in Organizations: Interaction and Engagement in an Era of Technological Change*, Communication, Society and Politics, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

19 Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*.

develop informal ties, negotiate with adversaries and the media, and shift tactic quickly if necessary.²⁰

One must distinguish anti-authoritarian movements in non-democracies from civil society organizations (CSOs) in democracies—different contexts propel different organizational forms. Civil society is an essentially concept that was developed in the context of Western democracies.²¹ Hence, when it is used to discuss civic groups in authoritarian countries, it can lead to confusion. For example, non-radical CSOs in democracies usually do not face persecution, censorship, and surveillance.²² This contrasts with the experience of groups that oppose authoritarian regimes. In particular the issue of surveillance makes apparent the difference between CSOs in democracies and dissident groups in authoritarian countries. While many CSOs generally seek engagement with the state and try to influence it, dissidents operate in a way that has been described as “a civil society in conspiracy” that create “networks of sympathy” and a “parallel polis.”²³ Authoritarian elites try to learn about these parallel networks and prevent them from developing, which increases the need for surveillance. At the same time, approaching civic organizations as social movements helps to understand the struggle of dissidents and examine their organizational structures.²⁴ To distinguish these organizations of dissidents that share an “anti-authoritarian ethos” and face persecution, censorship and surveillance from other forms of civic organizing, they are defined here as anti-authoritarian movements and groups.²⁵

Newer forms of organizing in anti-authoritarian movements rely on two mechanisms: the adjustment of organizational structures and visibility management. First, digitally enabled movements adjust their organizational structures. For example, they can try to decentralize their organization and build a network of many cells. The following section provides two examples of such movements that used digital platforms to build non-hierarchical organizations to challenge authoritarian elites.

Newer forms of organizing in anti-authoritarian movements rely on two mechanisms: the adjustment of organizational structures and visibility management.

Second, such movements actively manage their visibility, including that of their leaders. This allows activists to anonymize some of their social-media profiles or adopt pseudonyms and, consequently, conceal their real identities. This means that leaders can adopt at least two types of digital visibility: public or anonymous. Anonymous leaders can be especially active and important during critical events such as protests. Their obscure status helps to protect them from preemptive detention and allows them to coordinate collective action virtually using digital platforms. Thus, visibility management is one of the methods of activist survival under authoritarian regimes.

Organizational adaptation to the digitized environment can also foster the fragmentation of anti-authoritarian movements, however. The process of fragmentation—the emergence of networked groups loosely linked to each other—is facilitated by three factors in the digitized environment. First, society becomes increasingly individualized while politics becomes personalized, which affects how people participate in movements.²⁶ Citizens are ready to share

20 Ibid.

21 Marlies Glasius, David Lewis, and Hakan Seckinelgin, *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts*, Routledge, 2004.

22 Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013.

23 Samuel A. Greene, *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia*, Stanford University Press, 2014.

24 Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, Paradigm Publishers, 2007.

25 John Postill, *The Rise of Nerd Politics Digital Activism and Political Change*, Pluto Press, 2018.

26 Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*.

their personal views and agenda as part of civic activities rather than to join formal structures like trade unions or political parties. They try to disassociate themselves from traditional political organizations and their ideologies. In other words, they are still ready to join movements or a coalition of organizations but do it “on their own terms.”²⁷

Second, the logic of internet technologies reduces the need for centralized, hierarchical, and bureaucratic organizational structures. Citizens increasingly demand more horizontal organization as an element of their civic participation.²⁸ The main affordances of the internet also enables linking citizens and smaller groups as cells into larger networks that can be centralized or loosely connected with other many segments—structures that resemble the technical architecture of the internet. Such networks can proliferate and spread messages across the country with formidable speed.²⁹ Many recent digitally enabled protests across authoritarian countries have had formidable geographic reach compared to earlier ones.

Third, the fragmentation of movements in authoritarian countries might be a form of response to digital surveillance and censorship. Networked fragmentation can be a highly adaptive form of organizing in digitally enabled groups that help to prevent effective suppression and facilitate the growth of a movement in the long term.³⁰ An anti-authoritarian movement that may appear to suffer from a tendency to break up may in fact be going through a period of adaptation to its repressive environment. This is why fragmentation might not be a weakness but a strength of a movement in authoritarian circumstances.

Digitized Authoritarianism Meets Digital Resistance

Recent cases of anti-authoritarian movements exemplify key organizational adaptations facilitated by platforms and demonstrate how movements address repressive digital environments. Increased use of digital technologies results in a variety of organizational configurations that can be adopted by activists.³¹ These examples from Belarus, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine demonstrate four forms of organizing. They illustrate movements that were partly successful in their demands and developed high levels of potential to inspire democratic change. Three of these forms of organizing are, to a large extent, digitally enabled groups that mobilized citizens for large-scale protests and relied on the two mechanisms of organizational adaptation.

Hierarchical Movements

Hierarchical movements rely on traditional structures rather than on platforms to facilitate their organizing. This form of movement is a united collective with a hierarchical bureaucracy that runs the organization and, often, a strong, charismatic leader. Many believe that these movements require such leadership that controls almost every process within the organization. Many examples of hierarchical civic groups with charismatic leadership that were successful in advocating for change in their countries are either historical or are more relevant to democratic contexts. Figures like Martin Luther King led the 1960s civil rights movement in the United States. A coalition of students and civic groups led the Sunflower student movement in Taiwan in 2014. Extensive organizing work by traditional hierarchical entities—such as trade unions, political parties, and civic groups—preceded Chile’s “NO” Campaign that resulted in the collapse of the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in 1988.³² These and

27 Ibid.

28 Lance Bennett, Chris Wells, and Deen Freelon, [Communicating Civic Engagement: Contrasting Models of Citizenship in the Youth Web Sphere](#), *Journal of Communication* 61, no. 5, 2011.

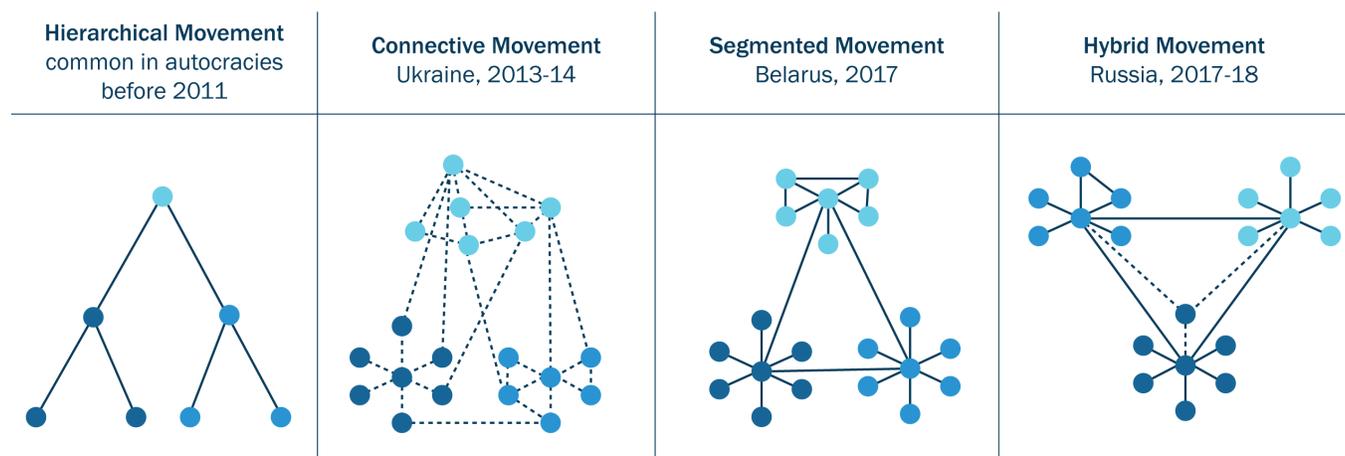
29 Luther P. Gerlach and Virginia Hine, *People, Power, Change: Movements of Social Transformation*, Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.

30 Aliaksandr Herasimenka, *Political organization, leadership and communication in authoritarian settings: Digital activism in Belarus and Russia*, [Doctoral dissertation], University of Westminster, 2019.

31 Ibid.

32 James Petras and Fernando Ignacio Leiva, *Chile: The Authoritarian Transition to Electoral Politics: A Critique*, *Latin American Perspectives*, 30 June 2016.

Figure 1. Four Types of Movements.



Note. Nodes represent members or groups within a movement. Lines represent ties between members or groups such as decision-making powers, information exchange, visits, and flow of resources. Full lines show stronger ties. Dashed lines represent weaker or less stable ties. The latter can help a hybrid organization to recentralize its structure.

similar hierarchical organizations have been one of the most common images of social movements.

A hierarchical organization has many benefits, but also disadvantages. In particular its structures might collapse once the regime isolates its leaders. Preemptive repression is applied to opposition political leaders in many authoritarian countries before elections or similar periods of political turbulence.³³ Belarus exemplifies this brutal approach toward political opponents of the regime. Many leaders of opposition organizations in Belarus who stood in the country's presidential elections were typically detained or exiled during or after the election in the past 15 years.³⁴ In 2005, Azerbaijan's authorities arrested the leaders of youth organizations that were preparing mass mobilization before the parliamentary elections that was based on the examples of similar youth movements in

Serbia and Ukraine.³⁵ This demonstrates that authoritarian regimes prefer to target hierarchies and central figures of the opposition.³⁶ Another crucial disadvantage of hierarchical organizations is that they are more susceptible to surveillance and censorship than more dispersed citizens as the capabilities of digitized authoritarianism grow. Targeted surveillance makes it easier to track and trace known movement leaders because it is much harder to manage the visibility of a public figure at the top of a hierarchy than that of an obscure administrator of one of the numerous opposition chats on WhatsApp and Telegram.

Connective Movements

Connective movements rely on peer-production mechanisms to form short-lived structures that are organized by digital media. Such movements look more like crowds that rely on self-motivated online sharing of information and offer participants agenda frames

33 Nathan Danneman and Emily Hencken Ritter, [Contagious Rebellion and Preemptive Repression](#), *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 2, 1 March 2014.

34 Konstantin Ash, [The Election Trap: The Cycle of Post-Electoral Repression and Opposition Fragmentation in Lukashenko's Belarus](#), *Democratization*, 29 April 2014.

35 Human Rights Watch, [Azerbaijan Parliamentary Elections 2005: Other Arrests, Beatings, Intimidation and Pressure to Stop Campaigning](#), n.d.

36 Vitali Silitski, [Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus](#), *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 4, 2005.

that can be easily personalized.³⁷ This form of movement satisfies citizens' preference for sharing personal agendas rather than joining formal structures. Hence, people are free to determine the degree of their participation at any given moment. These movements facilitate rather than direct political activity. They represent quite a radical case of organizational adaptation when it is often difficult to detect their structure, not least because they reject formal organizing and leadership. The key organizational disadvantages of connective movements are their less coherent political agenda and the risk of tactical freeze or paralysis, whereby a movement is unable to develop or agree on new paths to take.³⁸

The Euromaidan movement in Ukraine in 2013 is often viewed as a connective movement.³⁹ The protests were sparked by the government's decision to refuse the sign an Association Agreement with the European Union, instead choosing closer ties to Russia. During its initial stage, the Euromaidan movement rejected former hierarchical organizing and remained a network of civic, political, and cultural groups. These groups used digital infrastructures such as social media, crowdfunding networks, and streaming software to facilitate connective action between their activists and the broader public, including those who helped to crowdfund the movement.⁴⁰ Similar to other connective movements, the Euromaidan struggled to select representatives for talks with the authorities. It went on for five months without recognized leaders.⁴¹ A similar problem occurred by the end of the Gezi

protests in Turkey in 2013.⁴² It seems that many organizations that adhere to leaderless and non-hierarchical coordination principles might lack the capacity to struggle for political power and enter into negotiations when needed. This undermines the capacity of connective movements.

Segmented Movements

Segmented movements rely on a network of many cells that are loosely linked to each other. They are integrated networks of independent cells that can combine to form larger configurations or divide to form smaller units.⁴³ The proliferation of new cells takes place independently, unrelated to central decision-making. In contrast to connective movements, segmented movements often offer a coherent agenda and do not reject formal organization. They also have many centers of influence or leadership. Their leaders perform the roles of platform-page administrators and spokespeople for the campaign.⁴⁴ The leaders also help to reinforce links between cells. This organizational adaptation also means that it is easier to manage the visibility of the leaders who can remain anonymous for long periods needed for mobilization.

The social parasites/anti-tax campaign in Belarus in 2017 is an example of segmented organization. It emerged following the implementation of an absurd tax on unemployment. The campaigners used different methods to advocate for a change in the tax policy. This led to 32 rallies and turned into one of the largest pre-2020 protest movements in terms of its geographical spread. The campaign was not controlled and coordinated by any single bureaucratic structure during either its pre-protest or protest stage. In the minds of many journalists, commentators, and civil society experts, the anti-tax campaign started as spon-

37 Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*.

38 Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*.

39 Larisa Doroshenko et al. [Ukrainian Nationalist Parties and Connective Action: An Analysis of Electoral Campaigning and Social Media Sentiments](#), *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 10, 24 August 2019.

40 Olga Boichak, [Battlefront Volunteers: Mapping and Deconstructing Civilian Resilience Networks in Ukraine](#), *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Social Media & Society, Association for Computing Machinery*, 2017.

41 Tetyana Bohdanova, [Unexpected Revolution: The Role of Social Media in Ukraine's Euromaidan Uprising](#), *European View* 13, no. 1, June 2014.

42 Zeynep Tufekci, *Social Movements and Governments in the Digital Age: Evaluating a Complex Landscape*, *Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 1, 2014.

43 Luther P. Gerlach and Virginia Hine, *People, Power, Change*.

44 Aliaksandr Herasimenka, *Political organization, leadership and communication in authoritarian settings*.

taneous eruptions from the grassroots with no organization and few (if any) leaders. However, it had clear organizational structures.⁴⁵ Those who peopled these structures did not try to correct this misperception. This kept their real organizational structures in the shadows to protect its backstage leaders—administrators of social-media pages that helped to spread information and to mobilize people for rallies across the country. Few of those administrators were detained during the protest stage of the campaign. At the same time, the authorities detained many leading dissidents who did not hide their identities when disseminating information about the campaign. This included Anatol Liabedzka, the chairman of the United Civic Party, and Andrej Strizhak, the coordinator of the Radio and Electronic Industry Workers' Union. This year, many of the backstage leaders contributed to the coordination of the protest movement on messaging platforms like Telegram, which has been instrumental in organizing the largest streets protests since independence. The case of Belarus demonstrates that anti-authoritarian movements can be wrongly perceived as “leaderless” or “organizing without organizations.”⁴⁶ What is more, segmented movements and their leaders can benefit from this misperception.

Hybrid Movements

Hybrid movements are able to switch between hierarchical and segmented structures to mitigate the risks associated with digitized authoritarianism. Some anti-authoritarian movements learn how to switch organizational structures fairly quickly depending on circumstances. This can help to reduce risks from surveillance and persecution and, at the same time, to avoid tactical paralysis and challenge powerful elites when acting as a more hierarchical structure. This dynamic reconfiguration can be even more confusing to outside observers that other organizational configurations. Hybrid movements have both well-known,

often charismatic public leaders and segment leaders/administrators who can remain in shadow. This form of movement might promote horizontal organization but act at times in a much more centralized and top-down way than their claims suggest. This makes them similar to “new digital parties” that emerged in the EU countries in the second half of the 2010s.⁴⁷

The anti-corruption movement of Alexei Navalny in Russia in 2017–2018 is one example of hybrid organization. Navalny is a dissident and is often considered the main figure in the radical political opposition in Russia. In 2017, his anti-corruption organization launched a campaign demanding the ousting of the country's prime minister. Later the same year, the organization tried to register Navalny as a candidate in the 2018 presidential election. After the authorities refused to let him, Navalny's organization started its third campaign of that year, which sought to democratize the electoral process.

The movement rearranged its organizational structures based on current challenges.⁴⁸ A network of pages on social media that were linked to the anti-corruption campaign contained close to a hundred mobilization pages. Each page represented a local segment of the campaign in one of the Russian provinces. The segments were integrated into a network through content sharing. When the organization entered its second phase of campaigning, Navalny's presidential campaign, its network was transformed. The federal campaign office bureaucratized the administration of the campaign pages. At the same time, the local offices began receiving greater support, as well as additional resources and tools from the federal office. In exchange, they partly lost their autonomy and were unified under the brand of Navalny's presidential campaign. The last episode of the organization's campaigning in 2017–2018 saw its stream of resources dry out and persecution pressure increased. The network segmented

45 Ibid.

46 David Karpf, “Organizing without Organizations” and the Return of Apologetic Pluralism: A Critique, ICA, 2019.

47 Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy*, Pluto Press, 2018.

48 Aliaksandr Herasimenka, *Political organization, leadership and communication in authoritarian settings*

again, not least because its public leaders were often isolated and local segment administrators had to take control of coordination. After the presidential election in 2018, the network of the Navalny organization remained segmented, waiting for further political opportunities. Two platforms helped to transform its organizational structures quickly—VK, a local Facebook-like social media, and Telegram. They hosted the infrastructure of hundreds of campaign pages and groups that also performed the role of organizational cells. Navalny was a charismatic leader who played an important symbolic function. However, such leaders should be prepared for isolation or worse and, thus, to have other members of the organization ready to coordinate the movement's activities.

Anti-authoritarian Movements and Democracy Assistance

Many approaches of international donors do not fit the context of digitized autocracies for two reasons. First, democracy assistance favors familiar challenges and partners. Second, it often neglects smaller, non-hierarchical, and local stealth groups.

International democracy assistance often favors larger and better established hierarchical civic or state-oriented organizations because they fit into the standard templates of donors.⁴⁹ Some suggest the democracy promotion can and should lead to the collapse of a non-democratic government.⁵⁰ At the same time, many practitioners view democracy assistance as complementary to a more timid agenda such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.⁵¹ This latter type of assistance is often more technical and less politicized.⁵² For instance, in the 2010s, the EU shifted its assistance in the Eastern Part-

nership Countries, the Middle East and North Africa toward a less politicized and "functional" approach that puts forward economic and social issues.⁵³ This approach often requires engagement with state institutions. Activist groups can hardly influence the practical aspects of this engagement.⁵⁴ Other large international democracy-assistance schemes, such as European Neighborhood Instrument Funds, often favor partnerships with states or state-related actors as well.⁵⁵ Authoritarian regimes might view this type of assistance favorably because it is unlikely to engender profound democratic change. However, it can help to improve public-sector performance as well as enhance regime stability.⁵⁶

There are different explanations for the growing proportion of technical assistance in aid programs. Some argue that democracy assistance often focuses on challenges familiar to donors, such as the promotion of citizen participation through traditional civil society organizations or those that fit the domestic policy agenda.⁵⁷ Others suggest that donors tend to provide support to actors with whom they feel natural affinity such as civic-focused rather than culture- or religion-focused organizations.⁵⁸ For instance, when the EU engages with religiously oriented groups, it assumes that they represent a potential problem rather than possible partners to be empowered.⁵⁹ This tendency toward affinity also might be because donor organizations became more professionalized and less ideals-driven compared to in the 1980s. Illustrating

49 Richard Youngs, 'New Directions for EU Civil Society Support: Lessons from Turkey, the Western Balkans, and Eastern Europe', Working Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020.

50 Sarah Sunn Bush, [The Taming of Democracy Assistance](#).

51 David Black, [Revitalizing Democracy Assistance To Counter Threats To Democratization](#).

52 Elena Korosteleva, [The European Union and Belarus: Democracy Promotion by Technocratic Means?](#), *Democratization* 23, no. 4, 6 June 2016.

53 Giselle Bosse, [A Partnership with Dictatorship: Explaining the Paradigm Shift in European Union Policy towards Belarus](#), *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 50, no. 3, 2012; Elena Korosteleva, *The European Union and Belarus*.

54 Giselle Bosse, [A Partnership with Dictatorship](#).

55 Richard Youngs, [New Directions for EU Civil Society Support](#).

56 Vera van Hüllen, *EU Democracy Promotion and the Arab Spring: International Cooperation and Authoritarianism. Governance and Limited Statehood*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015.

57 David Black, [Revitalizing Democracy Assistance To Counter Threats To Democratization](#).

58 Richard Youngs, [New Directions for EU Civil Society Support](#).

59 Ibid.

this, support for dissidents—activists, intellectuals, and democratic pioneers who often contribute to the exchange of information about democracy—by the United States’ National Endowment for Democracy has declined since the 1980s while technical and regime-compatible assistance increased.⁶⁰ As a result, many recipients of democracy assistance often fit within one of two standard templates of an organization—either one that cooperates with the state or one that adheres to an agenda that is not too challenging for the regime.⁶¹

Many recipients of democracy assistance often fit within one of two standard templates of an organization

The emphasis on technical assistance and the Sustainable Development Goals often depoliticizes democracy promotion and makes it harder for anti-authoritarian movements to access aid. The development-assistance agenda emphasizes the role of the state and imposes bureaucratic barriers on empowering local pro-democracy actors.⁶² For instance, to receive funding through more accessible EU schemes, an organization can only apply for up to €60,000.⁶³ Some EU programs require co-funding at the level of 10 percent or higher to be secured before a grant is made.⁶⁴ It is often the case that organizations must have at least two years of experience in the field and be registered with the national authorities to be eligible, which disqualifies many smaller or newer organi-

zations.⁶⁵ Other bureaucratic mechanisms that are reported as problematic by pro-democracy groups in countries like Russia include time-consuming application and reporting procedures, overly long processes of project selection, and a requirement to fill forms in English.⁶⁶ These requirements also create a “burden of heavy reporting” and “the administration of grants” that complicates access to assistance programs for civic groups even in countries such as Ukraine or Moldova, which might prevent smaller and less experienced organizations from applying.⁶⁷

Authoritarian states impose their own bureaucratic barriers specifically aimed at domestic activist groups that make it harder for them to meet requirements for foreign assistance. For instance, Russia penalizes groups that receive external support officially as “foreign agents” and tries to drive out “undesirable” foreign entities that provide this support.⁶⁸ A more bureaucratized donor mechanism for engaging and supporting local pro-democracy groups in Russia inadvertently results in the state labeling them as “agents”—an image widely used by pro-government media to delegitimize regime opponents.⁶⁹ This delegitimization approach is common in other countries and thwarts democracy promoters and local organizations. But, while a democracy promoter can switch their focus to other countries, local organizations suffer most.

In addition, donors often promote the development of formal coalition structures among local actors. This might lead to the emergence of additional bureaucracies rather than more flexible networks. For instance,

60 Sarah Sunn Bush, [The Taming of Democracy Assistance](#).

61 Richard Youngs, [New Directions for EU Civil Society Support](#).

62 Steven Finkel, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, and Mitchell A. Seligson, ‘The Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building, 1990-2003’, *World Politics* 59, no. 3, 2007.

63 Pavel Havlíček, [The EU’s Lessons for Supporting Civil Society in Member States](#), The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2020.

64 Morgan Ross Courtney and Marie Ullmann, [Bridge to Democracy? The Role of EIDHR and EED Funded Democracy Projects in Armenia](#), [External Democracy Promotion Wire](#), 4 October 2017.

65 Pavel Havlíček, [The EU’s Lessons for Supporting Civil Society in Member States](#).

66 Richard Youngs, [New Directions for EU Civil Society Support](#).

67 Pavel Havlíček, [The EU’s Lessons for Supporting Civil Society in Member States](#).

68 Nicolas Bouchet, [The Difficult but Necessary Task of Supporting Democrats in Russia](#), The German Marshall Fund of the United States, January 2017.

69 Jonas Wolff, [The Delegitimization of Civil Society Organizations. Thoughts on Strategic Responses to the “Foreign Agent” Charge](#), *Dejusticia*, 2018.

the authors of *A New Playbook for Human Rights Actors* recommend responding to the resurgence of populism and authoritarianism by creating “coalitions and alliances” around the issues of “human rights and social justice.”⁷⁰ Thus, the linkage between democracy and development goals or technical assistance not only often emphasizes partnership with authoritarian actors but also favors larger groups that are ready to implement the depoliticized and technical agenda of donors and have enough resources to address bureaucratic grant requirements.

Current approaches to democracy assistance often neglect non-hierarchical types of organization because they are perceived as unfamiliar and fragmented. The support of international donors is crucial for newer and emerging groups, yet democracy assistance programs often favor more extensive and better-established hierarchical organizations. Emerging networked groups are commonly perceived as fragmented because they are digitally enabled and have segmented or connective organizational structures. The leadership of such groups is hardly identifiable while their organizational structures remain in shadow, which complicates communication with them.

There is a belief that the fragmentation of organized civic and opposition political groups is a weakness that reduces their chances to foster democratic changes.⁷¹ Civil society in many authoritarian countries like Belarus or Russia are traditionally viewed as fragmented, dispersed, and weak.⁷² In Belarus, the inefficacy of “marginalized” political opposition and its inability to challenge the regime is often attributed

to its fragmentation.⁷³ Specifically, the failure to organize a challenge to authoritarian regimes is attributed to the absence of centralized structures that can organize and mobilize. However, fragmentation does not preclude strategic cooperation between civic groups. In fact, digital media facilitate loose network building, which helps them to connect and coordinate their actions more easily at any given moment to pursue common aims. In addition, as discussed above, fragmentation might be a response to digital surveillance and censorship that does not fall prey to the efforts of digitized authoritarianism too easily.⁷⁴ However, these networked groups and coalitions might remain in the shadow of more familiar forms of organizations. This, along with the “fragmentation as weakness” assumption, might affect the perception of non-hierarchical organization by democracy promoters negatively. Thus, smaller, non-hierarchical, and local stealth groups might receive less support or simply be ignored by international donors.

How to Adjust Democracy Assistance

International donors need to reassess their perception of pro-democracy organizing in order to assist grassroots movements more effectively. Those that work with the same partners for years often lack “the organizational and mindset flexibility to transition to entirely new models and partners.”⁷⁵ Many of those traditional partners are larger hierarchical organizations—which might be more susceptible to the pressures of digitized authoritarianism. In addition, bureaucratic organizations lack the flexibility of segmented and connective organizations. It seems as though the majority of emerging anti-authoritarian groups are organizationally different from the familiar partners of democracy promoters. Rather than continuing to rely on hierar-

70 César Rodríguez-Garavito and Krizna Gomez, eds, [Rising To The Populist Challenge: A New Playbook For Human Rights Actors](#), Dejusticia, 2018.

71 Bart Cammaerts, “Media and Communication Strategies of Glocalized Activists: Beyond Media-Centric Thinking,” in Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier (eds), *Reclaiming the Media: Communication Rights and Democratic Media Roles*, Intellect Books, 2008; Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

72 Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

73 Konstantin Ash, [The Election Trap: The Cycle of Post-Electoral Repression and Opposition Fragmentation in Lukashenko’s Belarus](#), Democratization, 29 April 2014.

74 Bart Cammaerts, “Media and Communication Strategies of Glocalized Activists.”

75 Nicolas Bouchet, [The Difficult but Necessary Task of Supporting Democrats in Russia](#).

chical organizations as partners, promoters should try supporting a wider array of groups. This means doing a better job of understanding the nuances of each country and organizational model.⁷⁶ This also means that many democracy-assistance programs should reassess their perception of fragmentation in networked movements.

Democracy-assistance organizations should learn how to identify, communicate with, and provide support to networked anti-authoritarian groups. There are five areas to consider in this process.

First, communication with digitally enabled anti-authoritarian groups should be based on the recognition of the features of their organizational mechanisms and configurations. These features mean that leadership and other organizational arrangements in movements can be fluid and flexible. Hence, outsiders might have difficulties recognizing them. The leadership of such movements is sometimes hardly identifiable while their organizational structures remain in shadow, which complicates communication with them.

Many democracy-assistance programs should reassess their perception of fragmentation in networked movements.

Second, social media can be a key organizational mechanism used by such groups. It is the place where they often emerge. Monitoring countries' social-media ecosystem helps to identify emerging connective and segmented movements. The administrators of their platform accounts are often key people within these movements. It would be a good idea to reach out to them.

Third, the "fragmentation as weakness" assumption should not shape democracy-assistance programs. Many networked groups can look dispersed and fragmented, but this does not mean that they are not

effective in terms of organizing and managing leaders' visibility. These groups might be thinking about and trying new things that would be valuable in the future rather than seeking how to return the glory of a former coalition or a nationwide movement. Moreover, donors should not expect them to be registered with the state.

Fourth, donors should encourage building only informal civic coalitions so as to avoid rigid coalition bureaucracies. Centralized bureaucracies are easier to surveil, control and damage through repression of leaders. However, informal, weak ties between civic groups should be developed actively.

Fifth, democracy-assistance programs should also encourage traditional hierarchical organizations to learn from segmented and connective groups. This can help to build better links between more traditional organizations and newer groups. To encourage developing this type of links and support for newer groups, democracy promoters can introduce a benchmarking mechanism to track the level of engagement of hierarchical organizations with segmented and connective groups.

Once these five areas are addressed, democracy-assistance programs in digitized authoritarian context should prioritize building sustainable media ecologies. This includes developing media skills and supporting donation infrastructure.

Digitized politics requires media skills, so activists could use digital platforms for organizing and visibility management effectively. The spread of digitized authoritarianism means that media literacy training should also include elements that address the challenges of surveillance and censorship.⁷⁷ Public and anonymous activist leaders need to develop these skills. In particular those who curate and administer activist social-media pages should advance their media skills because they can potentially coordinate collective action and disseminate information. Democracy-assistance programs can require most of the supported

⁷⁶ David Black, [Revitalizing Democracy Assistance To Counter Threats To Democratization](#).

⁷⁷ David Black, [Revitalizing Democracy Assistance To Counter Threats To Democratization](#).

initiatives to develop benchmarks of achievement for media literacy skills.

Another high priority should be assisting groups that help to develop local fundraising and donation infrastructure because the cells of networked groups often cannot accept foreign funding. Investing in donation infrastructure, such as crowdfunding platforms, increases the chances that citizens will have more tools to support networked groups. The most recent example from Belarus illustrates why crowdfunding is important for organizing. During and after this year's presidential election campaign, most prominent crowdfunding groups such as the Ulej platform and the BY_help group contributed to organizing and mobilizing citizens around a pro-democracy cause. The chief-of-staff of Viktor Babaryka's presidential campaign, one of the key opposition candidates, was the founder of Ulej and a leading specialist in civic fundraising in Belarus. He helped to fund many civic projects and used approaches borrowed from crowdfunding to organize Babaryka's campaigning and election observation. BY_help assisted in funding the health system during the most difficult moments of the coronavirus pandemic in Belarus when the government refused to recognize the scale of the problem and to impose a lockdown. One of the group's leaders later became a key organizer within the pro-democracy movement that emerged after the election, focusing on crowdfunding for victims of police brutality and torture, as well as other important components of the movement.

On a more global level, policymakers should take into account the interests of the citizens of authoritarian countries who rely on the anonymity affordances of platforms. The public in mature democracies is alarmed by the loopholes that led to the use of platforms for disinformation campaigns, propagating violence, and uncivil behavior.⁷⁸ Various fixes ranging from censorship to stronger gatekeeping that aligns

with traditional news practices.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, such fixes would also ultimately conflict with the practices of digital dissidents and compromise their security. The regulation of digital platforms should target specific areas such as disruptions in political campaigning and advertising. However, this targeted regulation should aim at preserving anonymity as a norm on the internet and people's ownership of their own data.⁸⁰ This approach would address the needs and interests of citizens in dictatorships when addressing the disruptions of national media systems in democracies.

The challenge for democracy assistance is to understand how to identify, to communicate with, and to provide support to less familiar types of pro-democracy groups in authoritarian countries.

Democracy assistance in digitized authoritarian countries should, therefore, be based on three principles. First, it should encourage organizational diversity in groups calling for democracy. Second, it should focus on those pro-democracy groups that can address the challenges of surveillance and self-censorship most effectively. Third, it should support media-skills training and digital infrastructures.

Conclusion

The challenge for democracy assistance is to understand how to identify, to communicate with, and to provide support to less familiar types of pro-democracy groups in authoritarian countries. The first step is to recognize the potential of these less-familiar groups. Digital technologies afford newer organizational forms such as networked civil groups that can have a higher potential to inspire democratic change than more traditional hierarchical organizations. This

78 Young Mie Kim et al., [The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook](#), *Political Communication* 35, no. 4, 2 October 2018.

79 Farhad Manjoo and Kevin Roose, [How to Fix Facebook? We Asked 9 Experts](#), *The New York Times*, 31 October 2017.

80 Philip N. Howard, *Lie Machines*.

is because networked structures that consist of many cells can potentially address authoritarian repression more effectively than centralized structures in the digitized political environment. At the same time, their perceived fragmented and shadow organizational structures should not be seen as a disadvantage. Democracy assistance should focus on organizational diversity in supported groups, their media skills, and their ability to address surveillance and censorship. Most importantly, perhaps, digital technologies should be viewed not as the main driver of authoritarian resurgence but as part of the solution to this problem. This is because technology generates as many new problems as new solutions.

The segmentation and “shadowing” of digitized political organizing is a trend likely to last long in many countries. In democracies, networked stealth groups use techniques such as microtargeting, deep fakes, and networks of bots to manipulate the political opinion of citizens. Policymakers and researchers are struggling to figure out how to address these challenges of digitized politics. But in autocracies digitization has also facilitated the emergence of shadowed networked structures that use technologies to resist authoritarianism. By adapting to this trend and recognizing the growing importance of networked anti-authoritarian organizing, democracy assistance can be revitalized and help to respond to the digitization of autocracy.

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