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# Maintaining Civic Space in Backsliding Regimes

Research and Innovation Grants Working Papers Series

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University of Colorado **Boulder**



The Power  
of International  
Education

# Maintaining Civic Space in Backsliding Regimes

Research and Innovation Grants Working Papers Series

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## ACRONYM LIST

AKP	Justice and Development Party ( <i>Turkey</i> )
CNGO	Chinese NGOs
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DCHA	USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance
DRG Center	USAID's Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance
EU	European Union
FSB	Federal Security Service ( <i>Russia</i> )
IIE	Institute of International Education
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change ( <i>Zimbabwe</i> )
NGDO	Non-Governmental Development Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SIS	Sisters in Islam ( <i>Malaysia</i> )
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

## PREFACE

In 2016, USAID’s Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance launched its Learning Agenda—a set of research questions designed to address the issues that confront staff in USAID field offices working on the intersection of development and democracy, human rights, and governance. This literature review, commissioned by USAID and the Institute for International Education, addresses research questions focused on closing civic and political space:

- 1. How can citizens keep civic space from shrinking? What do we know about how civil society fights back when a previously open civic space begins to shrink due to restrictive legislation, repression of dissent, and/or political violence?**
- 2. What enables civic and political participation in countries where civil liberties have been lost?**
- 3. How do forms of civic and political engagement in such contexts differ from forms of engagement in contexts in which civil liberties are protected?**
- 4. Are some forms of civic and political engagement generally more tolerated in newly repressive contexts than others? How do civic actors adapt their engagement tactics to achieve their objectives?**

The resulting literature review, conducted by graduate students and faculty at the University of Colorado, Boulder, will help to inform USAID’s strategic planning, project design, and in-service training efforts in the democracy, human rights, and governance sector. For more information about USAID’s work in this sector and the role of academic research within it, please see <https://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/organization/bureaus/bureau-democracy-conflict-and-humanitarian-assistance/center>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project summarizes the interdisciplinary literature on civil society in regimes that are backsliding away from democracy. The goal is to answer the following questions:

1. What enables civic and political participation in countries where civil liberties have been lost?
2. How do forms of civic and political engagement in such contexts differ from forms of engagement in contexts in which civil liberties are protected?
3. Are some forms of civic and political engagement generally more tolerated in newly repressive contexts than others? How do civic actors adapt their engagement tactics to achieve their objectives?

The authors identify five strategies that have worked in at least some instances to pry open civic space under backsliding regimes:

1. Alliance- and coalition-building with other domestic civil society groups, since larger groups have greater resources and can reach a larger audience.
2. Indirect resistance and actions, such as charity provision, artistic expression, and local-level political involvement, since strategies that do not overtly confront the regime are less threatened and can still provide a space for community involvement, expression, and problem-solving.
3. Non-violent contentious action, especially protest, which is more likely to be successful and have domestic and international appeal than violent action.
4. Creative and careful use of digital technologies, since much of digital communication is beyond the reach of the state.
5. Maintaining organizational autonomy from the government and international actors, since co-optation by the regime and affiliation with international actors risk compromising a group's message and goals.

The authors wish to stress that these strategies and suggestions should be taken neither as a set of clear or rigorous findings nor as a prescription for safe and effective responses. Most importantly, the scope and quality of the current academic literature on the topic do not allow for generalizable theories and findings on these questions. There have been virtually no systematic, cross-national tests of the claims from this literature. Moreover, every one of these strategies carries downsides and risks that are unique to groups struggling under backsliding regimes. This report documents these caveats for each strategy, and concludes that the formation of domestic alliances carries the fewest downsides and risks.

Because of this ambivalence and ambiguity about each strategy, the primary conclusions consist of a set of questions that actors can ask of themselves and their groups as they seek to maintain civic space in increasingly authoritarian contexts:

1. Are there opportunities to form potentially valuable alliances or coalitions among groups within civil society? What are the barriers that need to be overcome to do this?
2. What sorts of indirect strategies seem to be working? What can we learn from innovations in indirect strategies of other groups?

3. If direct action is necessary, can we commit to pursuing non-violent strategies? Can we make commitment to non-violence a visible and widely understood principle of our movement to gain broader support and potential protection from government crackdowns?
4. How best can the tools of social media and other communication technologies be leveraged without risking a crackdown?
5. What are the threats to our organizational autonomy? How can we best maintain a balance of effectiveness and organizational autonomy?

## INTRODUCTION

Many developing countries are experiencing a growing crackdown on political opposition and civil society groups. Despite the proliferation of democratic governments across the developing world since the 1970s—Huntington’s so-called “third wave” of democratization<sup>1</sup>—there have been relatively few advances since the 1990s. With the failure of the Arab Spring, hopes of a continuing wave of democratization have largely been dashed. In fact, many countries have moved from fully democratic to illiberal<sup>2</sup> or semi-democracies (e.g., Turkey, Venezuela), while still others have reverted to full authoritarianism (e.g., Russia, Thailand).

Backsliding toward authoritarianism entails threats to the rights and physical security of members of the political opposition and some civil society groups. Newfound strictures on the freedom of assembly, organization, and speech often accompany efforts by an incumbent to strengthen the executive branch at the expense of the judiciary and legislature. Rather than acquiescing, some civil society actors attempt to fight back against this threatened closure of civic space and freedom. Civil society actors in these backsliding contexts walk a fine line between providing space for effective resistance and becoming a target of repression. Thus, they are threatened in several ways: being seen as too directly hostile to a regime, as too close to a regime, or as compromised by international support or agendas.

In this essay, we describe a series of strategies that civil society actors have used to fight back when a previously open civic space begins to shrink due to restrictive legislation, repression of dissent, and/or political violence. We also discuss the risks and downsides of each strategy. We draw these from the social science literature on civil society in the context of democratic backsliding, with a focus on literature from the last 15 years and on studies of civil society in countries that exemplify this trend of increasingly repressive governments. For the most part, we exclude the vast literature on civil society in established democracies and in full non-democracies, focusing instead on countries that have been democratic but are experiencing, or have recently experienced, marked decline in democratic freedoms.

For several reasons, our aims are necessarily more modest than providing a precise list of rules and actions that civil society organizations (CSOs) can safely and effectively enact to combat an increasingly autocratic regime. Most importantly, the scope and quality of the current academic literature on the topic does not allow for generalizable theories and findings on these questions. Most of our sources

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<sup>1</sup> Huntington, Samuel P. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

<sup>2</sup> Zakaria, Fareed. 2003. *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*. New York: W.W. Norton.

(more than 80 percent) are qualitative case studies of groups in one or two countries. When reviewed collectively, these are useful for identifying some commonalities and trends in the discussion around civil society in increasingly repressive states, but there have been virtually no systematic, cross-national tests of the claims from this literature. As a result, the provision of a precise catalog of actions that will work (and not work) in specific contexts is well beyond what the literature can authoritatively provide at this point.

Moreover, even if the literature did provide more specificity and certainty, we can never be completely certain of what will and will not succeed. Because of their precarious position, any action by civil society groups, including those we describe favorably below, can result in violent reprisal from the leadership of a backsliding regime. Finally, we seek to be somewhat careful with providing advice because there are perils to groups in backsliding contexts who receive counsel from foreigners. Examples abound, some documented below, of organizations that are discredited because of perceived ties to international actors. For these reasons, the strategies and suggestions that we provide for how civil society groups might resist attacks on civic space should be taken neither as a set of clear or rigorous findings nor as a prescription for safe and effective responses. Instead, these should be read as a set of questions that groups might ask of themselves in thinking about strategic action, and we accompany each recommendation with caveats culled from the literature.

In established liberal democracies, where the risks of repression are low and the maintenance of an open civic space is taken for granted, some of these strategies are effective for achieving a different goal: policy change. For example, alliance-building and non-violent protest were important tools of the civil rights movement in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Others, however, are clearly unique to contexts in which leaders are revoking civic and political rights. For example, indirect strategies are largely unnecessary in stable liberal democracies; quieting and masking political demands behind, say, charitable work would be counterproductive. By contrast, doing so where there is a newfound risk of repression could be a key to group survival and civic openness. Similarly, groups seeking policy reform in liberal democracies are often wise to forge linkages with political parties and ruling elites:<sup>4</sup> in backsliding regimes, this often spells co-optation and an end to organizational autonomy.

For strategies that also tend to work (for the different goal of policy change) in liberal democracies, we describe how these have also kept civic space open in backsliding contexts. However, we also stress differences by mentioning caveats about the risks of these strategies in more repressive contexts. As for the strategies that are not or should not be part of the toolkit of groups in stable democracies, we instead emphasize why they might be necessary under closing space.

We follow our presentation of strategies with a section about groups within civil society that face special challenges, specifically 1) women's and LGBT groups, 2) opposition political parties, and 3) non-governmental organizations (NGOs). We conclude with a discussion of the perils of foreign intervention in backsliding regimes and a list of questions that actors can ask of themselves as they choose strategies for fighting back against closing civil space, also presented in the Executive Summary.

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<sup>3</sup> Korstad, Robert, and Nelson Lichtenstein. 1988. "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement." *The Journal of American History* 75(3): 786-811.

<sup>4</sup> Goldstone, Jack A. 2003. *States, Parties, and Social Movements*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

## STRATEGIES

### A. Alliances and Coalition-Building

Coalition building and the forging of alliances among groups in civil society, both within and across borders, can be an important strategy for maintaining civic space in the face of democratic backsliding. Multiple studies confirm that where civil society groups form alliances, they are more likely to achieve success (Risley 2015, Kingstone *et al.* 2013, Fisher 2014, Schilling-Vacaflor 2011, Silva 2015). This is so for several reasons:

1. Alliances increase the pool of resources available to groups.
2. Because of their greater size, large alliances are more legitimate among domestic peers and harder for the regime to repress.
3. Alliances can often better articulate a clear and common message to multiple audiences (Risley 2006).
4. Redundancies can be avoided and time and resources better managed when groups with similar demands are able to coordinate.
5. Groups working in alliances may be more likely to experience and learn principles of democratic governance (Karatnycky and Ackerman 2005).

The literature provides examples of various kinds of alliances, and we discuss domestic and transnational alliances separately, as the latter tend to meet with more mixed success than the former.

#### i. Domestic Alliances

We found a rich set of examples of successful alliance building by women's groups in Muslim-majority countries. Al-Ali (2003) and Othman (2006) report that Islamist women's groups, which often engage in activities such as lobbying, research, advocacy, consciousness-raising, and charity and welfare provision, form linkages with other actors who share the goal of creating equality through a more progressive interpretation of Islam. For example, exclusion from state decisions brought together several disparate women's groups in Turkey. Islamist women's CSOs, once allies of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), have been at odds with the party over a ban that prevents Muslim women from wearing headscarves at public institutions and for the AKP's rhetoric on abortion as murder. To challenge their marginalization from state discussions, the Islamist women's groups have fought back through petitions, blogging, and alliances with sympathetic groups. Depending on the issue, these sympathetic groups are secular feminist organizations, academics, writers, journalists, and international organizations like the United Nations. In one instance, some factions of the Islamist women's movement even allied with some groups in the Turkish LGBT movement to stand up for basic civil liberties, even though the two movements tend to disagree on the legality of homosexuality (Aksoy 2015). All told, for women's groups in Muslim-majority countries, the approach of reinterpreting Islam with the help of broad coalitions is a more effective strategy than trying to advance rights by advocating for secularism (Moseley 2013).

As another example, Othman (2006) finds that Sisters in Islam (SIS), a Muslim women's rights group in Malaysia that is devoted to researching and publicizing progressive interpretations of the Koran, has formed close relationships with NGOs, other progressive and conservative women's groups, journalists, human rights lawyers, young political leaders, students, professionals, Islamic scholars, and even

government actors like the Ministry of Women. By doing this, SIS and its allies have begun to rival the traditional religious leaders as a source of knowledge about Islam in Malaysia, and have successfully challenged the state for expansion of women's rights.

We also found examples of successful cross-sectoral alliances in Latin America. Fisher (2014) and Veltmeyer (2004) suggest that rural-urban alliances promote a horizontal, multicultural view that legitimizes a group's demands. Veltmeyer particularly points to the ability of alliances to bring demands not only to the streets, but also to the government and the media. Silva (2015) and Almeida (2014) advocate for the formation of multi-sectoral alliances (labor unions, environmentalists, indigenous movements, political parties) of groups looking to successfully influence policy. Finally, Yashar (2005) shows that, for indigenous movements in Latin America, trans-community networks and other forms of linkages resulted in the success of Bolivian and Ecuadorian indigenous campaigns. By contrast, countries where these coalitions lacked movements did not achieve success.

Finally, recent protest movements in Africa have provided examples of movements that effectively build cross-sectional alliances. Traditional labor groups have allied with youth movements, women's rights groups, and even groups centered on musical personalities that identify with concepts of freedom and democracy. The removal of President Blaise Compaoré from power in Burkina Faso exemplifies how violence, non-violence, and various forms of alliances among civil society groups can play out over many years. Dwyer (2017) argues that the similarity in grievances between the centrist groups allied with elites and the peripheral groups, such as food prices and the perception that democracy was being co-opted, led to an overall strengthening of the resistance to Compaoré. Similarly, Engels (2015a) explains how alliances among centrists, the military, and more radical groups challenged Compaoré in Burkina Faso.

Nonetheless, domestic alliance-building attempts do not always meet with success. Although a common strategy of groups seeking policy change in liberal democracies, the primary downside of alliance-building in backsliding contexts is that these are often deeply divided societies with diverse and conflicting interests. Diversity and disagreement can complicate alliance-building efforts. For instance, García-Guadilla (2003) argues that civil society cannot become a mechanism for change of the repressive Venezuelan regime because civil society itself is fractionalized: pro- and anti-government organizations clash continuously. As the crisis has deepened in Venezuela over the last several years, this argument seems even more relevant: division saps the legitimacy of the demands of any particular group. Indeed, governments recognize the challenges that division creates, and in Venezuela the government has fashioned its own set of CSOs to counteract opposition. Similarly, Waisbord (2011) emphasizes that the heterogeneity of CSOs in Latin America is continued in media outlets, which represent differing interests, resulting in mixed messages being sent to the population and a constrained ability to create consensus. A diverse civil society is inherently problematic, but actors should anticipate whether conflict might arise that might complicate effective coalition-building. All told, however, domestic alliances and coalitions, once formed, are a particularly effective way of opening civic space in backsliding regimes.

## **ii. Transnational Alliances**

Another oft-discussed strategy is forging alliances internationally, with foreign and international NGOs and donors. The literature mentions a few successful instances, but transnational alliance formation can be a double-edged sword. In some cases, transnational alliances clearly boost the efficacy of local groups, but in others, they come at a steep cost to groups' autonomy and legitimacy.

On the positive side, Ozcurumex and Sayan Cengiz (2011) find that the feminist women’s movements that have remained stronger in Turkey did so because they maintained close relationships with international groups, especially in Europe, and prioritized their independence from the state. Similarly, Antlöv *et al.* (2010) argue that, despite problems and challenges of donor-funded democracy promotion in Indonesia, donor support has effectively contributed to CSOs, particularly with respect to decisions and capacities for engagement with government.

In China, Chen (2012) argues that transnational connections made by civil society actors are one of the few challenges to central governance. Transnational civil society directly affects grassroots and localized movements which, in turn, mobilize bottom-up and self-governing resistance movements to the central state (2012). Although transnational connections between NGOs in China and abroad have been severely restricted in recent years, particularly under the new leadership policies of Xi Jinping, China’s exceptional internet connectivity, combined with its civil society’s global reach, have enabled the virtual and digital continuation of transnational alliance-making, even when physical spaces are closed.

However, transnational efforts of NGO capacity building and democratic reform also carry unique risks for groups working under backsliding regimes. Leaders who orchestrate backsliding are often deeply suspicious of the international community, which tends to criticize their authoritarian tendencies or even engage in democracy promotion efforts within their borders. Groups that attempt to forge alliances across borders—and especially those that accept foreign funding and/or technical assistance—risk being labeled, discredited, and targeted as foreign agents in contexts where nationalist sentiment is being actively promoted. We return to this issue of the risks of international involvement in the concluding section.

## **B. Indirect Strategies**

Another approach that can work in maintaining civic space is a group of strategies that we collectively label as “indirect”. We consider three types: charitable activities and service provision, artistic expression, and local-level activity. These strategies are indirect because they are not necessarily anti-regime or even overtly political. Groups and individuals choosing indirect action do not need to disband or move entirely underground: they can still provide a space for community involvement, expression, and problem-solving. With time, if civic space improves with a regime opening or change, these activities could provide the learning and organization basis for more overt political activity.

To be sure, indirect approaches may carry sacrifices. They may not ignite state repression, but they may also be less effective in achieving political voice and change. Many of the stories that caught scholarly attention were about groups that engage in indirect approaches, but it is not clear whether these groups might have accomplished more if they had taken a more direct political stance. Indeed, it is telling that indirect strategies are not readily pursued in established, liberal democracies. After all, with little risk of repression, the need to avoid direct political participation is minimal and would only water down and weaken a movement’s message. The need to be indirect is a strategy borne of the desire to avoid repression in backsliding regimes.

### **i. Charitable Activities and Service Provision**

Civil society groups tend to be more long-lived, safe, and effective in backsliding regimes when they serve as providers instead of advocates. By focusing on apolitical agendas, organizations are less likely to

be repressed since they are seen as non-threatening. We found examples of many groups that adopted a service provision platform to try to avoid being perceived as threatening political actors (Pilati 2016, Allen and Reid 2015). This was evident in case studies of Russian and Kyrgyzstani civil society groups that deal with HIV/AIDS (Spicer *et al.* 2011), disabilities (Fröhlich 2012), and the environment (Henry 2010).

The constellation of civil society actors in Russia merits particular attention on this front, as most do act as service providers. Russian civil society is composed of three types of groups, each of which performs different civil society functions: “marionette NGOs” organized and supported by the state, grassroots NGOs, and traditional NGOs that receive foreign funding and operate on a Western model (Crotty, Hall, and Ljubownikow 2014; Gilbert 2016; Henry 2010; Fröhlich 2012). These three groups operate in both urban and provincial areas of Russia (Gilbert 2016, Henry 2010, Fröhlich 2012). A fuller description of each type of Russian NGO is below:

- Marionette NGOs receive funding from the state to fulfill services. Their goal is to implement government mandates, and they have the greatest ability to influence policy, but also lack autonomy from the regime (Crotty, Hall, and Ljubownikow 2014; Fröhlich 2012).
- Grassroots NGOs are self-organized and their goal is self-help for members. Many emerged from informal networks formed in the 1990s under a more liberal regime. They are largely apolitical and dependent on state grant competitions for funding. They focus on empowering members by providing education and information about their rights on topics like sexual and domestic violence (Salmenniemi 2010) or by encouraging local action, such as park clean-ups (Henry 2010) and wheelchair ramp construction (Salmenniemi 2010). These grassroots groups at times strategically use litigation to advocate on behalf of individuals or their platforms. One example is the 2007 “Nappy Affair,” where a Moscow-based disability NGO successfully took the federal government to court over a new regulation that reduced the number of free diapers that a family with a child with disabilities could receive. The successful litigation strategy appealed to the idea of a Russian state that could provide for its people, rather than a notion of universal human rights (Fröhlich 2012).
- NGOs that operate on a Western model use Western funds and are the most likely to pursue lawsuits to implement formal laws and challenge cultural norms (Skopin 2016). They are also the ones most targeted by Russia’s NGO reforms, which monitor Western funding. Russia’s NGO reform laws, coupled with a lack of funds due to the economic recession, mean that grassroots and Western-model NGOs are disappearing from this landscape, leaving service-provider marionette NGOs as the dominant form of Russian NGO (Buxton 2016).

The service provision function is crucial to the survival of all three types, since groups fill a social services gap that the state cannot. Disability rights are easier to advocate for in the Russian context because they operate under a model of weak state capacity. These NGOs provide services that the Russian welfare state can no longer cover, but in doing so create an arena where the disabled and their advocates can challenge policy. For example, 2010 was declared the “Year of the Disabled” by the Russian government, showing that the state and disability NGOs reinforce each other’s activities.

Groups that pursue this indirect strategy should not expect the state to overlook their activities if they also engage in oppositional behaviors. For example, Spicer *et al.* (2011) notes that HIV/AIDs groups in

Kyrgyzstan adopt a language of consensus-building in order to be seen as non-oppositional to the state, and, like successful grassroots or government-supported civil society groups in Russia, function more as service providers than as advocates (Ziegler 2014). In other words, their political messages and goals are sacrificed in the name of security and service provision. Evidence from elsewhere is reassuring, however, that even apolitical NGOs boost political participation, regardless of the actual services or interventions that they offer. Boulding (2014) shows a clear trend in developing countries that people who have contact with NGOs are more likely to participate in politics.

## ii. Artistic Protest

Another indirect strategy for reclaiming civic space is artistry (Uche 2017). We found evidence of subtle and relatively safe opposition being expressed in theater, music, and graffiti. Artists are sometimes given a longer leash by autocrats: some autocrats (like Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe) see tolerance of oppositional artistry as a false indication of their tolerance of an opposition, while others (like Bolivia's Evo Morales and Peru's Alberto Fujimori) do not want to be seen as overly repressive.

Theatrical performance was one tactic used by grassroots women's organizations in Peru to challenge the Fujimori dictatorship. In a performance in front of Fujimori's house, women hit actors posing as government officials in the head with soup ladles to protest the repressive actions of a national food agency (Moser 2003). This form of artistic protest can pressure the state to acknowledge democratic injustices without taking on an incredibly angry or dark tone. In fact, Moser notes that these theatrical protests were successful at undermining the state because they couched their dissident message in a carnival-like atmosphere.

Theater was also a venue of thinly veiled protest in Zimbabwe under Mugabe. "Reconciliatory protest theater" emerged as a form of expression and resistance to the Mugabe regime (Chikonzo 2016). Various theater groups saw as their mission to "create a just and equitable society" or to give "voice to the voiceless." Initially, this theater satirized the declining economy but did not call for regime change. Interestingly, many of the fictional characters "had the freedom to say what Zimbabweans were normally afraid to talk about openly" (p220), especially if they were mentally ill. This protest theater was initially allowed to flourish by the state, which saw this action as an indication of its tolerance.

Music was another form of expression against the media monopoly in Zimbabwe. After the pivotal election of 2002, Zimdancehall music became a countermovement that provided youth a platform to resist the dominant state discourse (Makwambeni 2017). This particular musical form opened an alternative space for communication outside of state control in which marginalized youth could protest their reality and express needs and grievances. This was a spontaneous emergence of civic space from a largely apolitical source. It was not top-down, as there was no civil society leadership to organize it (save the songwriters and singers themselves).

Grffiti is also a popular tool for dissent. In Bolivia, it is often used by women's and LGBT groups. For example, the radical lesbian feminist group *Mujeres Creando* often challenges "the patriarchal and heteronormative repression" of the Morales administration through graffiti. One such graffiti, seeking to expose Morales's pink-washing tactics, said, "Evo is not a feminist, he is a *machista* impostor" (Mullenax, Forthcoming). Similarly, in Russia, the subversive art group *Voina* painted a 60-foot penis on a drawbridge in front of the FSB (federal security service) to challenge the hypermasculinity that underpins Putin's power (Rourke and Wiget 2016).

All that said, the state's patience with these forms of expression can wear thin. The arrest of the feminist rock band Pussy Riot stands out as one example, although its art and performances had much darker undertones that made it easier for the state to frame the action in a way that turned public opinion against the group (Rourke and Wiget 2016). Similarly, Zimbabwe eventually banned protest theater, even detaining some of the playwrights and actors.<sup>5</sup>

### iii. Local-Level Strategies

Another important strategy that several studies underline as an effective way to counteract closing civic spaces is participation at the local level (Hawkins 2016, Foweraker 2001, McCoy 2005, Silva 2015, García-Guadilla 2004, Torre and Lemos 2016). Although it may be political, this activity is indirect in not overtly confronting the regime at the national level. Mobilizing at subnational levels of government provides a broader base for a movement, and can help with the diffusion of demands and information. Moreover, an important advantage for groups acting at the local level is that the use of violence by the state might be less of a threat than if groups were mobilizing in the capital in front of national government offices. Governments cannot extend their repressive arms to all subnational levels of government, which would provide some openings for CSOs and oppositional political parties to challenge the state. Finally, once they have a foothold, local protests can even be scaled up to challenge national governments (Radnitz 2012).

Several examples of this emerged in the literature. McCoy (2005) and García-Guadilla (2004) suggest that decentralization offers an opportunity for political renewal in the states and localities of Venezuela. Hawkins (2016) adds that organizations and political opposition at the local level have gained representation in Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro. In Russia, NGO workers believe that the strategy of fostering connections with local elites could improve the reach of their organizations (Salmenniemi 2010). Russia's thin institutional, and thick interpersonal, trust mean that the tactic of using and developing personal connections with individual officials to change state policies and actions might be fruitful for NGOs to extend their reach (Gilbert 2016, Henry 2010, Salmenniemi 2010). Finally, in Kyrgyzstan, economic elites were unhappy with President Askar Akayev and encouraged local agitations, culminating in protests in the capital and the overthrow of the president in the 2005 Tulip Revolution. Just as the success of local protests in Kyrgyzstan is dependent on elite connections, so too is the NGO sector: many successful Kyrgyzstani NGOs are dependent on clan connections (Ziegler 2014).

However, success is not guaranteed at the local level. Torre and Lemos (2016) note that in Ecuador, under Rafael Correa, the success of organizations acting at the local level depends on the ability of these groups to create a clear alternative to the regime. Similarly, Radnitz (2012) argues of Central Asia that the scaling-up of local protests to challenge national governments can occur, but only if the local groups are mobilized by economic elites. Drawing from a comparative analysis of popular protests in Uzbekistan (the 2005 Andijan uprising) and in Kyrgyzstan (the 2002 Aksy protests and the 2005 Tulip Revolution),

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this repression evoked further creativity, as if artists and the state were engaged in an arms race. In the years around the 2008 election, even more cutting commentary of Mugabe arose in certain theatrical pieces. The plays drew some international attention to the artists' plight and Zimbabwe's political and economic crises. Eventually, artists developed "hit and run" theater, which was designed to avoid detection. This involved taking unknown actors to shopping malls, where they would stage a brief performance and host a discussion, and then move on to another shopping mall for another performance.

Radnitz shows that in non-democratic systems, mass mobilizations are a tool of self-interested oppositional elites to challenge regimes. Because the Uzbekistan government controls the economy, Radnitz (2012) contends that elites did not encourage the uprising and it remained localized.

To summarize, because of their less threatening nature, indirect strategies can provide a safe civic space that the state largely ignores or acquiesces to. If civic space is the sole goal, then these strategies show much promise of success. If political voice and change are the goals, however, indirect strategies will probably be ineffective.

### **C. Non-Violent Resistance and Protest**

Protests and other contentious political engagement are another important form of pushing back against increasing authoritarianism (Sharp and Paulson 2005, Sharp *et al.* 2013, Torres-Fowler 2011). Participation from society is higher in non-violent resistance movements than in violent ones. The former lowers the physical and moral barriers to participation. In turn, greater participation increases diversity within the movement, thereby incorporating some of the advantages of alliances mentioned above. Greater participation through non-violence also can build legitimacy for the movement and helps to delegitimize the regime, as protest movements often signal to domestic and international actors discontent with an increasingly repressive regime. Also, protest movements can leverage popular opinion to put pressure on governments that are limiting rights.

In general, there is compelling evidence that non-violent movements are more likely to be successful than violent ones, and that creative, well-timed protests can be very effective. In what is now a well-established finding in the literature, Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) show that non-violent movements are more successful than violent ones. Similarly, in a systematic analysis of 67 countries, Karatnycky and Ackerman (2005) find that non-violent resistance is effective at de-legitimizing the regime and corroding its sources of support. (See also Brysk 1994 and Jara Ibarra 2016). In fact, they are so confident in the efficacy of non-violence that they offer some explicit suggestions for development intervention, recommending assistance to education in non-violent tactics as well as support for specific groups that employ non-violent resistance as their main tool for influence.

To be sure, non-violence is a preferred and typically more successful strategy for achieving policy change in liberal democracies. But the literature on backsliding regimes suggests two primary differences with movements operating under less repressive contexts. First, non-violence may be particularly important in the former since it can provide a protective effect: governments' use of violent repression against non-violent resisters can increase sympathy for the movement at home and international awareness abroad, so dictators avoid repression in the first place.<sup>6</sup> Second, non-violence is not foolproof. Even peaceful protestors can be arrested, tortured, and/or executed by backsliding autocrats, so groups must engage in non-violent resistance only after careful thought and consideration. We discuss this caveat below.

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<sup>6</sup> In Uganda, the most important way that civil institutions have been effective is in advocating for non-violent, non-judicial/prosecution solutions to civil conflict (Omach 2014). In areas where institutions like the Catholic Church operate, counter-narratives and spaces for reconciliation can be defended against an autocratic state in specific non-violent ways.

Protests have provided a clear outlet for civic engagement and political voice in Russia, especially in Moscow, where they have become the dominant means of voicing dissent (Robertson 2013). In the 1990s, protests about poverty and unpaid wages occurred in provinces. Protest actions included industrial strikes, hunger strikes, and blockades. In the 2000s, protest activity gravitated toward Moscow and was about environmental and developmental issues, civil rights, and social justice (Argenbright 2016, Evans 2016, Robertson 2013). The use of marches and demonstrations indicates that symbolic displays are a more acceptable form of political engagement in Russia than in the 1990s. These led to the emergence of an oppositional protest culture that culminated in the swift ability of Putin critic Alexei Navalny to mobilize mass and unsanctioned protests in Russian cities against corruption in March 2017.

A particularly poignant example of how protests can increase participation is in the Middle East, where they often draw in—or are even organized by—youth and youth organizations. Khatib and Lust (2014) argue that the success in Tunisia and Egypt at overthrowing their respective dictators was due in large part to youth organizations' skills (coupled with the political knowledge and connections of more traditional organizations as well as the strategic use of technology for coordination and communication). Youth movements and new forms of civil society organization were also an important component of the regime shift in Burkina Faso, where the failure of democratic institutions throughout the post-colonial period enabled a new youth movement to capture the narrative (Reza 2016). The loose-knit groups of women's rights, students, and oppositional labor all moved outside their scopes of resistance to make claims on the legitimacy of the presidency (Harsch 2016).

Protests also play an important role in other world regions. In Southeast Asia, the public collision of civil society and government actors in political and electoral struggles is a conspicuous aspect of recent episodes of backsliding. In the case of Thailand, Hewison (2015) recognizes street protests as a key crucible in the struggle for rights and representation. Considering the end of street protests in 2014 with a military coup and new authoritarian programs promoted as "Thai-style democracy," Hewison illustrates the past importance and future likelihood of renewed street protests in the struggle over representation and, ultimately, democratic transformation. For Latin America, Silva (2015) shows that multisectoral coalitions in Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile that opted for non-violent forms of protest were more successful at influencing policy. Moreover, he suggests that non-violent mobilizations in tandem with negotiations produced more success for social movements.

At the same time, protests that directly challenge a regime can trigger violent reprisals by the government, and are not always successful in achieving political change to win back rights. The persecution of gay men by the Chechen government after the community asked to hold a march for gay rights, as well as the arrests of anticorruption protesters in 2017, demonstrate that rights-based and oppositional protests can elicit harsh and deadly reprisals from the state. Moreover, although protests are common in Russia, there is less consensus that they are an effective means of resistance. The 2011 protests in Russia's cities raised the possibility of a colored revolution in Russia (White and McAllister 2014). However, Robertson (2013) argues that the Moscow-based 2011 electoral fraud protests were a continuation of protest trends in Russia, rather than a new movement that could have led to revolution. Thus far, with Putin entrenched in power, events have borne this prediction out.

Overall, we can clearly say that non-violent strategies have a tactical (and normative) advantage over violent ones, but the role of protest movements more broadly is mixed. In some cases, they are a clear way of holding governments accountable and of mobilizing civic engagement, but in others they risk

repression and, far from achieving effective voice, are strictly an indicator of discontent with a regime that will continue to limit civic space.

#### *D. Digital Technology*

Digital communication via the internet or cellular phones can be advantageous for opening civic space because a lot of it is beyond the reach of the state. Social media “is more immune to censorship than other salvages of civil society” (Hussain and Howard 2013, p50). These means of communication offer an alternative in contexts where traditional media is controlled by the state. In other words, digital information infrastructure can decentralize state power (White and McAllister 2014; Bodrunova and Litvinenko 2016; Wilkin, Dencik, and Bognar 2015). In essence, social media can challenge political control of civic space in backsliding regimes because leaders do not have complete control over information sources and the news agenda.

Although social media did not lead to a colored revolution, it certainly aided the waves of Russian anticorruption protests from 2011 to 2013 and in 2017. The type of social media available to Russian users mattered: protesters tended to prefer Facebook, whose servers are abroad, to the more popular Russian social media network Vkontakte, whose servers are in Russia (Bodrunova and Litvinenko 2016, White and McAllister 2014). And, although most protestors were based in Moscow or Saint Petersburg, many were also in provincial capitals. The quick mobilization of protesters across Russia in 2017 points to the role of social media in generating a cascade effect and illustrates Robertson’s (2013) thesis that a new class of protesters is emerging in contemporary Russia.

Digital activism is also a means of oppositional politics in Hungary (Wilkin, Dencik, and Bognar 2015). The far-right Fidesz government in Hungary has curtailed freedom of the press and traditional media. Milla, a component of the anti-regime Hungarian Solidarity Movement, is largely based online. The goal of Milla is to challenge Fidesz by providing information about the effects of the far-right’s constitutional reform. By operating online, Milla is able to provide a non-state controlled operation.

Civil society actors throughout Asia also leverage social media as a powerful tool of organization and resistance. Lim (2013) argues that social media provides a viable and robust platform for civil society action and resistance in Indonesia, the most Twitter-oriented country on earth. Lim shows that short, light, illustrative, and punchy texts are fundamental principles of successful political activism via social media. This generates multiple and diverse networks and public spheres, allowing social and cultural participation. Looking at cases across South Asia, Yangyue (2014) shows that online activity is a tool for wider political action. Several key factors enable online communities to act effectively: political linkages to non-online actors, robustness of critical media outlets, and the cohesiveness of online communities. Moreover, Yung and Leung show that the Internet in Hong Kong provides alternative information and an alternative public sphere to China’s censored mainstream media. It is an “initiator of public discourse and an agent of civil society activism” (2014, p99). Internet-based civil resistance and state response provides valuable insights about what forms of media action remain possible in these new and more established authoritarian contexts, particularly as a “platform for social activists mobilizing for civil society activism” (Yung and Leung 2014, p99). Finally, Hussain and Howard (2013) find that Internet use contributed to the success of movements in Tunisia and other countries where unemployment rates were low and wealth distributed inequitably.

Besides providing a space for expression and resistance, the Internet can be an important recruitment tool for movements, reaching dispersed activists and creating new ones. Digital technology provides an “entry point” for activists, especially youth, and it is often a medium for organizing street protests and other events (Tufekci *et al.* 2012). Youth provide technical savvy that supplements the traditional organizations’ connections and political knowledge (Cavatorta 2012). Furthermore, Yom (2015) suggests that social media outlets are an important enabling tool for the new “informal sector” of civil society, which refers to new emerging organizations that do not fall under the more traditional views of civil society (Seeberg 2015, Cavatorta 2012). This is especially important when older organizations fall under the control of the state and face important constraints on their activities.

The Internet also allows for the production of common political grievances, creating awareness of shared problems and mobilization among people who would not otherwise know about or connect to a community that shares their problem (*e.g.*, China’s 2008 Sichuan earthquake) (Shirky 2011). It essentially allows loosely coordinated publics to demand change. What used to occur only through formal organizations can now occur through more informal, impromptu groups.

Internet-based organization and action are also parts of an international strategy, since they create a means of easy cross-national communication and documentation of events that can lead to news stories that earn sympathies of foreigners. In China, online activity creates forums for transnational solidarity between civil society, NGO actors, and foreign interest groups (Tai 2006, Zheng 2007). Similarly, Friedman (2005) finds that in Latin America, the Internet has strengthened the LGBT movement by bringing together groups within and across countries. For example, the successes of the Argentinian gay rights movement were replicated in other countries in the region due to the dissemination of information about successful techniques through internet communities.

Digital technologies thus pose tremendous opportunities for expanding civic space. However, unlike in established liberal democracies, they also pose risks and are not always successful in prying open civic space. Shirky (2013) offers the most pessimistic view. He argues that the Internet works only where the public sphere already exists and constrains government. In other words, the Internet as a means to create public space is largely endogenous to the repressiveness of the regime itself. When it does open new civic space, success is gradual and should be measured in years and decades, not weeks and months. It facilitates people power, but does not create it. It creates a supporting role to civil space, especially by facilitating conversation, but there needs to be some trigger in the first place (*e.g.*, an economic crisis, a rigged election, corruption scandal, natural disaster) to create the groundswell of mobilization.

For example, in their analysis of the capability of social media to cause revolution in Russia, White and McAllister (2014) conclude that, although protests could be organized via social media, they did not have the potential to lead to revolution. Russian authorities, with the assistance of the youth movement *Nashi* (Ours), were prepared to counter the protests; mobile Internet was unavailable at the site of the protests against the election, and, in the state-controlled media, the Putin regime classified the protest as Western-funded, anti-Russian politics. Similarly, Turbine (2015) is skeptical that the Internet can be used for organizing in truly repressive contexts. In her interviews with women in Russia, many respondents suggested that they did not feel the Internet was a safe space for organizing because it is likely to be monitored by the government. Yudina’s (2016) analysis of Russian anti-extremism laws and the Internet confirms that the government polices social media, so it is not an open civic space. Instead,

she argues that the vagueness of the law means that it can be applied arbitrarily depending on the political situation in the country.

Moreover, autocratic states themselves can use information and communications technology to extend state power. Clearly, not all online activity is outside the state's reach, as plenty of means exist for autocrats to censor and repress speech through the internet. Regimes can co-opt or coerce technology providers, or they can block global networks. In countries like Ecuador, Venezuela, and Argentina, several laws have been passed to exert control over digital forms of communication (Torre and Lemos 2016). In Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia, online transgressiveness motivates governments to impose new regulations while at the same time it represents online civil society as an inhibiting force (Yangyue 2014, Tapsell 2013). The relationship between government and media technology in Malaysia also illustrates how media activism is a definitive form of civil society resistance that is routinely met by heavy-handed governmental regulation. For example, Tapsell shows how the "government has hardened its attitude and actions toward media freedom in various waves," marking an oscillation between "potential media liberalization followed by backlash and retaliation from the ruling power" (2013, p613).

Digital media are also used by groups that are closely aligned with an autocrat and by conservative religious groups (Hamayotsu 2013). As Hamayotsu's Indonesian case study (2013) shows, radical and conservative Muslim communities have utilized information technologies (in concert with traditional political and religious resources and institutions) to gain ground against liberal and moderate opponents. Conservative, exclusive, and provocative Islamist officials and other political actors leverage state offices and resources to disseminate radical religious messages via new media and communication technologies.

A final problem that limits social media's effectiveness is that this kind of activism cannot entirely transcend the boundaries of physical space. Some social media users use physical borders to their advantage. For example, the preference of Facebook to Vkontakte for oppositional networking in Russia shows activists are more drawn to Western-based social media platforms. The physical location of the servers makes Facebook seem safer. However, social media activism is largely an urban phenomenon. Despite the reach of the Internet, activists and their protests tend to be located in urban centers (Bodrunova and Litvinenko 2016; Wilkin, Dencik, and Bogнар 2015). In Hungary, the oppositional group Milla uses Facebook to organize. They have held seven rallies in Budapest that attracted 80,000 participants. But, even though they operate via an online platform, Milla is still a Budapest-centric organization that does not reach the countryside (Wilkin, Dencik, and Bogнар 2015).

In the end, we conclude that the Internet is a double-edged sword for civic groups, and perhaps no case illustrates this better than the notorious Chinese one. Since the mid-2000s, the Chinese government has both enthusiastically accepted and promoted Internet usage and also implemented strict controls, most conspicuously through "The Great Firewall." Looking back one decade, Tai (2006) shows that Internet usage empowers individuals throughout China by creating new social spaces and by redefining existing relationships through the unique and increasingly pervasive worlds of cyberspace. Putting the growth of Internet usage in concert with widespread transformations in other communications technologies, Tai provides a key historical context for how Internet activism and the "the convergence of multiple platforms of communication media" could very well be "leading the next communication (and in all likelihood social) revolution" in China (Tai 2006, pxxii). Similarly, Zheng (2007) argues that while the

Internet empowers the state, it also empowers civil society. This transformation generally leads to further decentralization as new infrastructure allows state and society to both engage and disengage, thereby producing a recursive relationship between state and society.

### *E. Autonomy*

A final major strategic theme in the literature, and one that is particularly unique to backsliding (as opposed to stable democratic) regimes, is that success in maintaining civic space hinges on autonomy. Risks to autonomy and ultimately effectiveness can come from being too close to the government, too close to international actors, or too directly linked to the opposition. Autonomy is particularly important in the face of attempts by the state to co-opt and control, and numerous studies emphasize that the less autonomy from the state that groups have, the less effective they will be at carving out real spaces for participation and influence (Yashar 2005, Waisbord 2011, Foweraker 2001, McCoy 2005, García-Guadilla 2003, Colloredo-Mansfield 2009, Brysk 2000, Eckstei 2001).

Not surprisingly, the balance between autonomy with effectiveness and avoidance of repression is delicate. After all, autonomy is threatening to a regime. This section provides mostly negative examples, meaning instances of groups losing their autonomy and thus their effectiveness in providing an independent civil space for expressions of regime resistance, community, and free thought. Unfortunately, there is no easy or universal answer to the question of how groups can correctly toe this balance, but we document in this section the value of autonomy as well as the perils of its absence.

Brysk (2000) speaks broadly about this, arguing that, in order for civil society to be a real conduit for democracy, it must have internal democracy itself. She suggests that both domestic as well as international funders ought to look at the relative legitimacy, autonomy, accountability, and representativeness of CSOs when making policy and intervention decisions. Strengthening these characteristics in CSOs can help counter the strategies used by governments to undermine civil society. Expanding the representativeness of organizations can counteract governments' rhetoric that portrays organizations as the domain of narrow interests.

Russia serves as an important case study for considering the fine line between autonomy and crackdown. Several publications show that organizations that are more directly critical of the government are more likely to be targeted. Russia's notorious 2006 and 2012 NGO laws both increased the influence of the Russian state on NGOs and restricted the operations of organizations receiving foreign funding. NGOs must undergo an intense registration process with the government, submit to periodic check-ups, and adopt a foreign-agent moniker if they receive foreign funding. The NGO laws have pushed NGOs critical of governmental authorities out and financed those more supportive of the regime's policies (Center for Economic and Political Reform 2015; Crotty 2014; Evans, Henry, and Sundstrom 2016). Thus, Russia's NGO laws have altered the civil sphere:

- Human rights groups—who were most critical of the regime—experienced a decline in membership, media coverage, and events.
- NGOs associated with the Russian Orthodox Church, which has maintained friendly relations with the Kremlin, have received increased funding.
- Youth groups, which tended to be more neutral or loyal to the regime, experienced an increase in membership and events.

- Women’s groups had mixed experiences, with independent groups crowded out and government-supported ones making gains (Gilbert 2016).

Overall, these NGO laws have created an environment for a civil society consisting of marionettes whose objectives are in line in the state, extending Russia’s state control over civil society (Crotty, Hall, and Ljubownikow 2014).

Hungary is another important case where civil society walks a close line in staying independent from governments. Some have argued that the alliance between civil society actors and the Fidesz government explains the rise of authoritarian democracy in Hungary (Greskovits 2015). Greskovits (2015) posits that Hungary does have a vibrant civil society, but conservative populists dominate it. Drawing from survey data on participation in elections, trust in NGOs, and other indicators, Greskovits (2015) contends that the embeddedness of far right populist conservatives in civil society led to the backsliding of democracy in Hungary. This means CSOs are composed of Fidesz allies, and trusted institutions such as religious organizations and trade unions support Fidesz and mobilize their members to vote for them in elections. Thus, Hungary has developed a civil society that supports the regime, but the Hungarian model is based on grassroots populism rather than a top-down authoritarian model. Greskovits is therefore hopeful that just as populists used grassroots movements to gain power, so too can more liberal movements in Hungary.<sup>7</sup>

We also have examples from Southeast Asia where civil society is not always the basis for civic openness because civil society actors can and do foment violence and democratic regression. Kongkirati (2016) points out that a confrontational civil society, especially when tied to political elites and military actors, as in the case of Thailand, in fact causes further loss of civic space—disrupting elections, fomenting violence, and rejecting peaceful and democratic governance. NGOs have become especially partisan actors in the struggle over democracy in Thailand. Kuhonta and Sinpeng note that civil society is “ultimately rooted in self-interest and willingness to openly oppose and undermine democratically elected governments. Constitutions and independent agencies meant to ensure accountability in a democratic polity have largely proven to be shells for partisan politicking and have shifted positions based on which political elites holds the upper hand” (2014, p351). The authors point out that two pillars of democratic consolidation—political institutions and civil society—have in fact proven themselves time and again to be partisan actors in Thailand “devoid of any core liberal, democratic base” (p351).

In another examination of partisanship in Southeast Asia, Kanchoochar (2016) identifies reign-seeking as a driving force of civil society partisanship in Thailand today. Specifically, Kanchoochar shows that between 1997 and 2014, academics, doctors, NGO leaders, and other unelected officials have lobbied and acted to become new “rulers of the game” in Thailand (2016, p487). Supposedly non-partisan actors have become key participants in broader trends of depoliticization and governance reform characterized

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<sup>7</sup> A small oppositional group exists, the Hungarian Solidarity Movement. This movement is composed of Milla (a freedom of the press movement), trade unions, and other CSOs (Jenne and Mudde 2012).

by the “rise and role of professional and official elite in the persistence of authoritarianism” (Kanchoochat 2016, p487).<sup>8</sup>

In sum, accounts of civil society in backsliding regimes are filled with heroic efforts to maintain civic space but also efforts by some groups to support the regime. Autonomy from the regime is crucial for groups genuinely interested in resisting a loss of rights.

## CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS

In this section, we consider several different groups within civil society that merit special attention. We focus on women’s and LGBT groups, opposition political parties, and NGOs. In the literature, these groups are either particularly affected by regimes that limit rights, or are well-positioned as resistance actors—or in some cases both. As we searched for scholarly work on the issues of civil resistance in countries where authoritarianism is on the rise, several groups stood out as facing particular challenges that may not be generalized across all civil society groups. These challenges may derive from traditional stereotypes and expectations about societal roles (women’s and LGBT groups), a combative and confrontational relationship with the government (opposition political parties), or a position as a conduit for foreign aid and international connections (NGOs).

### *A. Women’s and LGBT Groups*

The detrimental effects of shrinking civic space in backsliding democracies are likely to be strongest for groups traditionally marginalized from formal politics, such as women and the LGBT community. We define women’s groups as collections of women who organize around a common purpose or goal. Much of the scholarly work on women’s groups and the state focuses on the demands of feminist groups, which tend to pursue the expansion of freedoms and rights they view as crucial for empowering women. These often include, but are not limited to, equal inclusion and voice in political institutions, freedom from gender-based discrimination, and bodily autonomy in the form of freedom from violence and access to contraceptives and abortion. LGBT groups tend to represent the interests of people whose sexuality or gender identity are outside of dominant heterosexual orientation or cisgender identity. Though demands vary across groups and subsets of the groups, some goals include freedom from discrimination and violence, the right to marry and adopt, and the right to legally change gender identity.

Marginalized groups such as these rely primarily on organizing and activism in civic space to advance their agendas, and, as Strolovitch and Townsend-Bell (2013) note, there is a positive correlation between civil society autonomy and the empowerment of marginalized groups. Furthermore, it is clear from the studies reviewed here that, as democracies begin to backslide, women’s and LGBT issues are often the first to be abandoned. This occurs for two reasons:

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<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in Africa, CSOs have on some occasions formed alliances with the military to enact military coups (Dougnon 2013).

1. Many backsliding democracies are actively working to return to a less socially progressive era (*e.g.*, Russia and Turkey), and gender equality and LGBT rights are often at odds with this objective. In cases where democracy is backsliding but the government does not have a conservative agenda, the state is more likely to co-opt women's or LGBT movements or issue areas as a way of limiting their independence (*e.g.*, Venezuela and Ecuador).
2. Women's and LGBT rights are often seen as an extension of broader fundamental civil liberties, such as freedom of expression and assembly. When civil society's rights are under threat, as in Russia, women's and LGBT groups often find themselves fighting for these fundamental rights rather than their specific claims as women and LGBT people. This struggle often brings together disparate groups, but it slows the advancement of rights specific to women and the LGBT community.

Paradoxically, although they tend to be among the first to lose their group-specific civil liberties, these groups are not as likely to be repressed through violence or imprisonment (though there are growing exceptions). Instead, the state is much more likely to ignore these groups, actively discredit them, or coopt them by essentializing their role in society to “caretaker” or taking ownership of their issues or movements to cover up other acts of repression. Several examples highlight these patterns.

When the Russian government cracked down on civic organizing in response to the 2004-2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, it decreased the financial and political support it provided to women's crisis centers for victims of domestic abuse (Hrycak 2010). The state began to limit its support primarily to women's groups aligned with its goal of promoting women as “mothers” (Salmenniemi 2008, Johnson 2016). A law mandating that all NGOs that receive international funding must register as “foreign agents” made it difficult for international aid to fill this void. As a result, women's crisis centers have all but disappeared in Russia at a time when domestic violence is on the rise (Johnson and Saarinen 2011).

Russia's oppression is particularly rooted in sexism and homophobia. To be a feminist in Russia today is to engage in a contentious act. Putin has made it clear that feminism is antithetical to his vision for the state, and he has fostered a political environment in which gender stereotypes and sexualization are tools of political legitimation used by both pro- and anti-regime actors (Sperling 2014). Sperling argues that gendered political rhetoric is pervasive in Russia today because, when Putin engages in masculine behavior and frames, the opposition responds in kind with gendered frames. She suggests that part of this is personal—Putin has framed himself as a machista strongman—but it is also rooted in the nearly universal patriarchal cultural structure that values masculinity over femininity, particularly as a means to power. Political actors in Russia make claims of masculinity to gain power, and power-seekers may frame their opponents in feminine terms to delegitimize their power. These actions put gender and sexuality at the forefront of the struggle for influence in Russia.

Turbine (2015) finds that one of the Russian government's key tools for suppressing opposition women's groups is to reframe their protests or demonstrations as “hooliganism,” moral degradation, or Western political intervention. The Russian government has mounted an impressive campaign to reframe LGBT rights as being in conflict with “traditional values” and “moral sovereignty” (Wilkinson 2014). Pussy Riot's “Punk Prayer” incident is an example of how Russia reframed a female-led protest to fit their desires. Following Pussy Riot's protest, the government arrested several of the group's members and publicized the protest as “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.” The government's emphasis of

this protest act as “feminist” and “queer” prevented it from appealing to people who might have otherwise agreed with Pussy Riot’s fundamental purpose, which was to protest political corruption. Putin’s power to reframe acts of opposition as feminist, queer, foreign, and non-traditional, as well as delegitimize his opponents as “feminine,” is one of his greatest strengths.

While the feminization of the opposition emerged in the literature as a tactic somewhat unique to Russia, framing women as “caregivers” is a strategy used across contexts. In Russia, the state is invested in the nationalist project of growing the population, so the political elite invest a lot of capital in welfare projects and policies aimed at child rearing and care. Women are the key beneficiaries of these programs, and in this way, the state keeps women quiet and under their control (Turbine 2015).

LGBT groups in Russia are repressed even more aggressively than women’s groups. In 2006, the Duma of Ryazan Oblast passed a law outlawing the promotion of homosexuality to minors, which led to the 2009 arrest of activists displaying banners with pro-gay rights phrases like “homosexuality is normal.” Since then, many other provinces in Russia have adopted similar laws, and a national law outlawing “homosexual propaganda” was passed in 2013 (Wilkinson 2014). Russian politicians have also attempted to recriminalize sodomy in recent years, and consistently deny requests for gay pride marches throughout the country (Holzhacker 2013). These actions by the Russian state signal a clear reversal of freedom of speech and right to assembly for the LGBT community.

The trend of targeting women’s or LGBT groups first is also present in other backsliding contexts. Although Kyrgyzstan has managed to resist a full-scale assault on civil society, gender-focused NGOs are targets of political ire because they are viewed as agents of the international community (Hoare 2016). In Turkey, secular feminist and Islamist women’s groups alike have been largely shut out by the government, even though Islamist women’s groups enjoyed a close working relationship with the AKP as recently as 2010 (Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011, İçduygu 2011, Aksoy 2015). Similarly, Othman (2006), Al-Ali (2003), and Moghadam and Mohr (2015) highlight how women in Muslim majority countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa tend to be the first targets of “Islamization.” Islamic fundamentalists seek to control women, their societal roles, their movements, and their sexuality as a way of creating a “pristine Islamic society and state” (p341).

Elsewhere, appeals to women as “mothers,” “wives,” and “sisters” have been employed in Venezuela and Bolivia as tactics to ensure that women’s organizing remains within the purview of the state. This dynamic was particularly strong in Hugo Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution. Women were elevated as the face of the revolution, but within a framework of traditional heteronormative gender roles as mothers and wives. Women were politicized as caretakers of their families, communities, and Venezuela itself. This created political opportunities for women that did not exist before (Elfenbien, forthcoming), and today women hold significant power in community councils. However, these local governing bodies remain closely tied to the objectives set forth by the national government (Wilde 2016). Similarly, in Bolivia, Evo Morales’s indigenous “sisters” were essential to the election of the *Movimiento al Socialismo* party, and received many high-profile positions within the government. Yet, many of their claims as women were deemed secondary to the goals of the indigenous movement (Mullenax, forthcoming).

The tactic of pink washing, defined by Wilkinson (forthcoming) as, “the promotion of highly visible, strategic, and often nominal concessions or rhetoric favorable to sexual minorities as a means to foster perceptions of progressive politics, or to detract from other failures or rights violations,” is commonly

used by backsliding democracies to cover up oppression. In Ecuador, Correa has received a lot of praise for the government's recognition of same-sex partnerships and constitutional protections for gender identity and sexual orientation, but these actions have largely been used to cover up the cooptation, defunding, legal harassment, and direct repression of feminist, indigenous, and environmental activists. Similarly, Johnson (2016) argues that the upsurge of women in politics over the past few years has not resulted in increased gender equality or more democracy because, as she finds in her case study of Russian politics, once in office, women are rarely able to advocate for women. Female politicians are used as symbolic "loyalists," "showgirls," and "cleaners," when the credibility of a regime needs to be restored. Similar acts of pink washing are detailed in Mullenax's (forthcoming) account of Bolivia.

The concerns about co-optation and autonomy raised above hold true for women's groups. In Turkey, Islamist women's CSOs enjoyed a great deal of influence when the AKP first came to power in 2002, but they have now been replaced by state-created NGOs that aim to dominate society through their charity work with children and the elderly. These state-founded organizations eliminate the need to consult with women's groups (Islamist or secular feminists) on civil society issues by filling that role themselves (Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011, Aksoy 2015). Likewise, in Ecuador, the government coopted the LGBT movement by appointing their own LGBT leader who does not enjoy support from the broader movement. Activists try to combat this cooptation by speaking out against this appointed leader, but the state discredits their claims (Wilkinson, forthcoming).

How, then, can women's and LGBT groups safely challenge a backsliding regime to maintain their civic space? Again, we find that building broad coalitions and alliances is the most widely mentioned successful strategy. Domestic alliances are the most useful strategy, because weakened groups gain strength when they stand together against repression, and diverse alliances add validity to the socially progressive rights claims of these groups. For example, sidelined Islamist and feminist groups in Turkey came together to challenge the AKP when they banned headscarves in public spaces (targeting Muslim women) and repeatedly demonized abortion (targeting secular feminist goals). Similarly, LGBT rights activists rely on coalitions with supportive allies in places where public and elite opinion are largely against the expansion of their rights (Holzhacker 2012), as in Latin America (Encarnación 2011). The validity that comes from these diverse alliances is particularly important for LGBT groups whose rights claims can easily be painted as "foreign" or out of sync with the values of the nation when they lack support from other domestic groups.

For women and LGBT groups, the maintenance of autonomy from the regime is a trickier proposition than it is for other groups. Buranajaroenkij *et al.* (2016) argue that women's participation in the yellow and red shirt movements of Thailand spring-boarded many women into formal politics and put Thailand on a path toward gender equality, and İçduygu (2011)—who suggests that secular feminist politicians are key allies for women's groups in Turkey—argues that the involvement of these groups in formal politics is a key way to challenge the state. Similarly, Venezuela is also a unique case because the sweeping changes that brought much of Venezuelan civil society under the purview of the state also greatly advanced the political empowerment of women (Fernandez 2007). Their centrality to the revolution has mobilized many women and placed them in positions of power in their communities, and there is growing discontent that the structure of the revolution has reinforced traditional gender norms and roles rather than transforming them (Motta 2013). At the same time, Johnson (2016), Wilkinson (forthcoming), and Mullenax (forthcoming) were pessimistic about the ability of descriptive

representation to fight state repression because women are so frequently used to legitimize the actions of a backsliding government.

### ***B. Opposition Political Actors***

The role of political opposition in a backsliding regime is at once precarious and crucial. The presence and continued activism of opposition parties and politicians is fundamental for pushing back against the closing of civic space and the loss of rights as well as sustaining hope for redemocratization. Yet it is precisely for these reasons that the political opposition has a target on its collective back. Because the opposition is a direct threat to the goals and survival of the incumbent regime, its leaders and rank-and-file members must take action with great care. We found several recommendations for opposition parties in resisting civic space closure and maintain political voice. Most importantly, findings reaffirmed:

1. Our primary claim about the importance of forging broad alliances and coalitions.
2. That in deciding between engagement in regime-sponsored institutions, which may legitimize the status quo, and withdrawal to delegitimize the regime, the opposition should choose the former.

LeBas (2013) finds alliances to be crucial to opposition success. She seeks to explain whether protest movements in Africa's semi-authoritarian settings can successfully transition into broad-based opposition parties or not. For example, some countries, like Zimbabwe, have seen the emergence of parties (MDC) that evolve from anti-incumbent protest movements and subsequently serve as an effective opposition force and unite individuals from various ethnic groups. A crucial factor is the extent to which a movement draws on organizations that existed under past periods of authoritarian rule. The best example of this is drawing on a trade union structure—often one that had a corporatist structure in alliance with the state. This is what occurred in Zimbabwe and Zambia. When the movement does so, it can more easily draw on diverse constituencies and transition to a party with broad-based appeal.

Alliance formation between political opposition and other groups in Burkina Faso provides another positive example. Frere and Engelbert (2015) argue that it was a “sustained coalition” of multiple groups that brought down a repressive regime. Civil society groups were organic in their coalition building, with musicians leading loosely organized protests filled with youth alongside sustained efforts by centrist elites to reign in the military repression of riots and street protests.

The trend toward political polarization in Southeast Asia carries similar implications—oppositions groups should seek alliances and commonalities. Looking at electoral processes in Malaysia and Thailand since the late-1990s, Bonura (2015) finds that “extended polarization distorts existing democratic processes and facilitates autocratic rule...polarized politics results in the consolidation of political oligarchies, the politicization of civil society, and extensive mass mobilizations. ...the result is a vacillation of polarized politics characterized by chronic political crisis, in which the tensions between competing political establishments are not resolved” (pp1-2; see also Kuhonta and Sinpeng 2014). On one hand, these polarizing trends have created remarkably strong alliances between political leadership and religious leaders as well as national elites in Malaysia and Thailand, respectively. On the other hand, these consolidations of political, religious, and elite power at the top have in turn motivated civil society actors to forge new, creative alliances from the bottom up. This is evident in new alliances that can be seen in

the streets, where students, ethnic and religious minorities, women's groups, labor, and others have forged coalitions that before did not often exist.

As always, however, alliance formation can be difficult. The state itself can overwhelm attempts at alliance formation. Some anti-incumbent protest movements in Africa turn into ethnic niche parties with no broad-based appeal, which limits their ability to exercise effective opposition. In Kenya, under authoritarianism, organized labor was repressed, so opposition parties did not have a mobilizing infrastructure in place that could cross-cut ethnic and geographic lines (LeBas 2013). In Uganda, Tapscott (2017) contends that the state represses civilians in remote districts through a process called “institutionalized arbitrariness.” This system includes a vast network of informants, paranoia about these informants, random enforcement of small policies and laws, and the overall historical memory among civilians of previous conflicts (Vokes and Wilkins 2016). Thus, the opportunity for coalition building and oppositional party empowerment is lessened through governance mechanisms installed by the central party.

Beaulieu (2014) argues that election boycotts are effective only when they have international linkages and support, not when boycotts are strictly domestic in scope. The political opposition also faces a catch-22 when it comes to maintaining the things we are most concerned with in this essay: civic engagement and political participation. Doing so may legitimize regime institutions and the status quo. Nonetheless, research suggests that regime opponents should remain involved, distasteful though it may be.

For example, the most comprehensive account and set of recommendations lies in Schedler (2013), who counsels the opposition to stay involved in elections. Schedler uses a large cross-national quantitative dataset of competitive authoritarian states.<sup>9</sup> He argues that, while elections can legitimize an incumbent, they also create “opportunities for challenging the prevailing balance of power” (p147) and boost, albeit mildly, the probability of alternation of the party in power. Elections can trigger internal rifts and elite defection from the regime. They also provide opportunities for contentious collective action, as they can serve as triggers for grievances that get people into the streets, energizing parties and civic associations, and offering new activist roles to citizens. These “vertical threats” (meaning opposition and threats to the government from below, including strikes, protests, and even political violence) themselves reduce the incumbent’s margin of victory and thus can be effective in diminishing incumbent hegemony. The opposition can also work through local elections: the presence of municipal elections creates an alternative potential arena for governing and lowers the incumbent's margin of victory in the national election. All told, elections should be embraced by the opposition, even if this results in repeated frustration; election boycotts by the opposition are extremely ill-advised.

Based on an analysis of a different quantitative dataset, Chernykh (2014) agrees. She finds that when parties reject and protest the results of elections in which they just participated, it can compel the incumbent to reform electoral rules, thereby improving conditions for the opposition in the next election. The best time to express dissatisfaction and make calls for rule changes is soon after a questionable election. Mobilizing long after an election has passed will fail to garner attention. Similarly, Hawkins (2016) advocates the electoral route as a legitimate mechanism for contesting Maduro’s

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<sup>9</sup> His focus is thus not solely on backsliding regimes, but his findings are relevant.

regime in Venezuela. Political opposition parties, he says, should direct their efforts into reorganizing themselves into a programmatic, pluralistic option for the future.

Part of this electoral strategy is to maintain clear messaging and provide a credible alternative to the existing regime. Electoral success in Venezuela and elsewhere depends on the opposition's delivery of a clear, credible, and common message that provides the population a real alternative to the current administration (Hawkins 2016). García-Guadilla (2003) notes that the failure of civil society groups to carve spaces for effective participation and influence in Venezuela comes partly from the myriad mixed messages sent from various opposition groups that fail to legitimize these demands and further expose the fractionalized nature of the opposition. Parties should not have short-term gains as their sole focus, instead focusing on long-run objectives as well (Yashar 2005; Risley, 2006, 2015; Kuran 1989; Schilling-Vacaflor 2011).

All told, political opposition and parties that seek to create an effective organizational form for opposing an incumbent in a backsliding regime should draw on existing structures that crosscut ethnic and other narrow social grouping and use rhetoric and strategies that maintain the focus on broad-based appeals. A successful transition to full democracy is unlikely without a strong opposition party/ies in place. At the same time, these parties must be careful to not polarize politics too much, since this could result in a repressive backlash.

### **C. Non-Governmental Organizations**

NGOs have garnered much attention as potential conduits for promoting democracy. These organizations, which have grown in numbers all over the world since the 1980s, make up a large part of professional civil society, often receiving development aid and contracts from governments to work on issues ranging from health to education to environmental issues and agriculture. NGOs range from small, local groups to huge multinational organizations.

In terms of the role that NGOs can play in maintaining civic space in the face of increasing repression, a few lessons stand out:

1. Although there is strong evidence that NGOs boost political participation, the context of how well democracy is working largely determines the impact, not the characteristics, of choices of individual organizations (Boulding 2014). This finding is important both because it shows how strong the political impact of NGOs can be, but also how difficult it is for them to control the agenda.
2. Some studies show that people can be quite skeptical of NGOs, preferring more informal community organization.
3. Although much has been made of the potential for NGOs to promote democracy, evidence from China suggests that NGOs can quite readily co-exist with authoritarian rule.

#### **i. NGOs and Political Participation**

One of the clearest and most rigorous findings on the effect of NGOs in weak democracies is that they tend to boost political participation. Boulding's book (2014) on NGOs, civil society, and political protest in developing world democracies explores the relationship between NGOs and political participation,

demonstrating that NGOs tend to boost political participation in developing countries even when that is not part of their stated objectives. The main findings are that NGOs boost political participation in ways that are contingent on the quality of democracy. Where people have high confidence in elections and elections are generally free and fair, NGOs tend to boost voting. In countries with weaker democratic institutions, the main effect is on protest. This is clear evidence that where democracy is weaker, NGOs involvement leads to more contentious forms of political action than where democracy is stronger. These patterns are established using subnational data on NGO projects, voting, and protest from Bolivia, and survey evidence from Latin America and other developing regions.

There is little evidence, however, that protesters in these countries hold less democratic attitudes than non-protesters, offering some hope that supporting NGOs in weak democracies does strengthen the ability of groups to make demands on the government without undermining democracy (Boulding, 2014). More importantly, however, it is clear from this study that the major impact of NGOs on political behavior is shaped more by the context of how well democratic institutions are working in a country than by the specific activities of an NGO. This finding is a frustrating one for NGO activists, since the lessons at the organizational level are unclear—and the potential for unanticipated consequences is quite high. For example, few development NGOs see promoting protest as a main goal, although the evidence suggests it may be a main result of NGO activity.

## **ii. NGOs and Public Perception**

NGOs, like other actors in civil society, also walk a fine line in terms of autonomy, both from governments and international donors, and there is some evidence to suggest that people are skeptical of them and prefer more informal community action, especially where there is distrust of the state. Ágh (2015) argues that contrary to EU theories of rapid democratization, the establishment of formal democratic institutions does not automatically lead to the creation of an independent civil society. This is because most new EU member states are “low-trust” societies, where social capital is composed of personal relationships. Thus, distrust in institutions prevented formerly socialist member states from naturally creating a civil society.

This argument about low trust societies is complicated in Szent-Ivanyi and Lightfoot's (2016) comparative analysis of development NGOs (NGDOs) in the Czech Republic and Hungary. Drawing from interviews with key informants from governments and the NGDO sector, they conclude that as the Czech public is more supportive of NGDOs, view them in a more positive light, and are more affluent and can provide donations and support work in developing countries, Czech NGDOs are more successful at gathering funds, changing policies, and pooling resources to act as a coalition via a national advocacy platform. Hungary's largest NGDOs meanwhile do not participate in a national advocacy platform, leading to less successful outcomes. So, the socialist legacy of low levels of institutional trust does not hinder civil society in all new member states. The low-trust legacy can be overcome and have positive effects on the perceptions and work of NGOs in new member states.

Informal initiatives provide a means to civil society participation in an atmosphere of distrust toward institutions. Informal activism is on the rise in Poland, and is perhaps a platform for grassroots democratic initiatives to grow upon. Although Polish civil society in the 1990s was characterized by formal NGO involvement, informal activism is a key component of Polish civil society in the 2010s (Polanska and Chimiak 2016). Interviews and surveys with social activists and people from urban and rural areas show that whereas 17.2 percent of people had volunteered with non-state organizations,

16.1 percent had been active in informal initiatives over the past year. The most popular organizational activities included working with youth and sports, followed by religion. The most popular informal initiatives included cleaning neighborhoods and advocating for the environment. NGOs are viewed with skepticism in Poland, but this does not mean that people are not interested in engaging in civil society initiatives.

Notably, participants in grassroots groups do not see their initiatives as leading to the institutionalization of their activities. Instead, they view NGO work as potentially corrupt, limited by funders, and less enthusiastic and energizing. Participants in informal initiatives feel that there are more symmetrical relationships than in hierarchical NGOs, and that NGOs are driven by ideology and their desire to attract outside funds. Also, informal activists tend to adopt an intelligentsia and *noblesse oblige* ethos, where only individuals with a certain set of qualifications and values belong in their initiatives (Polanska and Chimiak 2016). In Poland, informal initiatives operate by their own logics and are not indicative of a chaotic civil sphere.

Thus, skepticism about NGOs drives people to participate in non-organized initiatives in Poland. Providing funding to non-organized groups outside of NGOs might be a pathway to encourage civil society development. However, these funds might lead to distrust of these groups (Jenne and Mudde 2012, Polanska and Chimiak 2016). Moreover, small CSOs lack the professionalization and financial stability to compete for funds and are currently pushed out of competitions (Sagan 2010).

Kyrgyzstan notably has an active and professionalizing civil society open to foreign donors.<sup>10</sup> Kuchukeeva and O’Loughlin’s (2003) nationwide survey of registered NGOs in that country showed some dynamics of civic engagement in the country: member fees funded most NGOs; the second most common source of funding was foreign governments and foundations, followed by foreign NGOs. Ninety-two percent of NGOs networked with other NGOs. Women outnumbered men two to one amongst respondents, showing that women might be more active in NGOs. Kyrgyz was the most active nationality in NGO activity, and Russian the least. NGO leaders were more confident in individuals than in political institutions, showing the emergence of “thick” interpersonal trust instead of “thin” institutional trust. However, in case studies, Kyrgyzstani NGOs tend to engage more with social issues and service provisions than with advocacy or policy change, thus shying away from the political sphere.

### iii. NGOs and Authoritarianism

NGOs in stable authoritarian contexts also face particular challenges. In China, for example, where NGOs face more extreme restrictions now than any other time in recent memory, civil society in both domestic and transnational forms takes unique shape. Morton examines the historical evolution of NGOs in China to show that “the real political value of NGOs and other civil society organizations in China lies in their potential to help create the necessary conditions for a more just and democratic society” (2005, p529). As new political constraints in China make the connections between national and transnational civil society ever more complicated and tenuous, NGOs are seen as highly important and exceptionally vulnerable organizational units.

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<sup>10</sup> In 2016, the Kyrgyzstani parliament voted against a law that would limit the operation of Western-funded NGOs in the country.

As many scholars have shown, NGOs in China are shaped and operate differently because of the particular configuration of state and society. Much of the literature on Chinese NGOs (CNGOs) poses a problematic and unproductive theoretical impasse between viewing civil society in an international sense and the powerful grip that the central government holds over NGOs. This has led to problems between the more macro-discourses of civil society vs. corporatism-based analyses of NGO organization and action in China.

Arguing that neither of these two rival theoretical traditions is an adequate approach for understanding the role of NGOs in Chinese state and society relations, Wang *et al.* (2015) argue for a new “contingent approach” that better considers the relationship between the government and CNGOs. The contingent approach provides a useful analytical framework between the more generalized and macro-discourses of civil society versus corporatist-based approaches; it therefore comes closer to “a value-neutral empirical approach” (Wang *et al.* 2015, p419). Bearing in mind the critical role of NGOs in China as well as the relationship of NGOs to both governments and citizens in the context of other non-democratic regimes, Wang *et al.* show that a contingent approach allows observers and analysts to “revise the core concepts of CNGOs’ characteristics and operationalize these concepts in order to improve their applicability in the Chinese context” (2015, p419).

In China, NGOs do not align with Tocqueville-inspired considerations of civil society (under democratic governments), nor do they fit nicely within corporatist frameworks (under authoritarian regimes). Instead, Spires (2011) shows that grassroots NGOs can exist and operate under authoritarian regimes when the state is fragmented and under localized terms of censorship. In the case of China, Spires argues that the state in fact tolerates NGOs when they serve state social purposes *and* the state can claim credit for their good works: “Grassroots NGOs and an authoritarian state can thus coexist in a ‘contingent symbiosis’ that—far from pointing to an inevitable democratization—allows ostensibly illegal groups to operate openly while relieving the state of some of its social welfare obligations” (Spires 2011, p1).

Overall, NGOs—as organizations that often have international support or funding—are particularly vulnerable to concerns over co-optation by the government or by international actors. In their role as non-political service providers, however, they may have space that more overtly political organizations lack. Most importantly, as the discussion above makes clear, there is a wide variety of organizations that fall under the NGO umbrella, and both the type of organizations and the context in which they are operating can vary widely.

## CONCLUSIONS

### *A. The Risks of Foreign Intervention*

Before we proceed with some summary thoughts, it is important to point out that the literature preaches caution when it comes to foreign aid agencies and other foreign groups helping civil society actors to pry open civic space in backsliding regimes (Sagan 2010). We were not necessarily seeking sources and information on the efficacy of foreign involvement in this sphere, but the point appeared frequently and scholars expressed skepticism on several grounds:

1. Close alliances with international organizations and rights claims, based on international norms, are not effective in contexts where elite opinion is against these groups and/or where nationalism is particularly strong. In fact, such alliances are used to discredit these groups as tools of Western imperialism.
2. Foreign interventions are often not well-attuned to the local context.
3. Donors' motives and practices are often not well-aligned with the goal of keeping civic space open.

Elite distrust in the motivations of foreign-funded NGOs, and resulting attempts to discredit and defund them, is evident in multiple settings. In Russia, ruling parties view Western-backed NGOs as anti-regime. As a result, the series of recently promulgated NGO laws, implemented under the guise of increasing transparency in the NGO sector, have effectively reduced the influence of international actors in civil society. For example, according to the “Foreign Agent” law passed in 2012, foreign-funded NGOs engaged in political activities must register as foreign agents and submit quarterly reports to the Russian government (Crotty, Hall, and Ljubownikow 2014; Gilbert 2016). This law not only creates a negative connotation for these NGOs in the public eye, but it also creates barriers for the establishment and continuation of foreign-funded NGOs in the country (Buxton 2016; Crotty, Hall, and Ljubownikow 2014). In 2015, the government passed the “undesirable organizations” law, which bans NGOs whose works are seen as detrimental to the Russian state.

Elsewhere, the Fidesz government in Hungary labels Western-backed organizations as traitors, and it recently approved legislation that is similar to Russia's in placing strict monitoring and a foreign agent label on NGOs receiving foreign funding. Jenne and Mudde (2012) go so far as to recommend against Western groups allocating funds to the NGO sector in Hungary. In Kyrgyzstan, local NGOs have monitored elections and work with transnational NGOs to maintain a transparent electoral democracy, but foreign funding has caused tensions between the Kyrgyzstan state and civil society (Ziegler 2016). The openness to foreign funding has led to distrust and tension between the government and NGOs (Spicer *et al.* 2011). The government was resentful of some HIV/AIDS groups because they received Global Fund money and the governments did not.

Another recurring theme is that foreign interventions are often not well-attuned to a country's needs and desires, which decreases their effectiveness (Holzhacker 2012, 2013; Turbine 2015; Hoare 2016). For example, an analysis of women's NGOs in Russia from 1995 to 2001—a time of relatively open civil society and foreign involvement—suggests that the “NGOization” of gender issues in Russia during the 1990s reinforced divisions between elite and ordinary women, and did very little to help or even reach the latter (Hemment 2007, 2015). This suggests that foreign interventions that do not do enough to bring together diverse groups of women may strengthen attitudes against the goals of socially progressive women's groups. Moreover, women's groups in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa are fighting extremism or repressive interpretations of Islam by forming strong alliances to reinterpret Islam in a way that supports equality for all (Al-Ali 2003, Al-Ali and Pratt 2016). The success of these context-specific tactics suggests that foreign interventions to promote secularism are unlikely to be as effective as programs to help progressive women's movements in these countries expand their research and public education programs.

Finally, foreign efforts also often fall flat because of donors' motives, practices, and processes. For example, competition for foreign grants has created inter-group divisiveness and thus hindered coalition building in Kyrgyzstan (Spicer *et al.* 2011). As another example, Jenne and Mudde (2012) state that the EU and International Monetary Fund have done little to directly encourage democracy in Hungary because they are more interested in fiscal stability than in the internal democracy of its members. Similarly, the EU's "neighborhood program," intended to provide a pathway for cross-border civil society activity in eastern new member states and their formerly Soviet neighbors, has been unfocused and undermined by the EU's "realist" interests, such as economic cooperation, security, and energy (Sagan, 2010).

In sum, even well-intentioned efforts to support civil society groups in a difficult context of growing government repression can have unanticipated consequences or be ineffective. Foreigners should think carefully before intervening.

### ***B. Summary and Questions to Consider***

This report has drawn from a diverse literature in the social sciences. We have explored the dilemmas and successes of civil society in contexts where governments are increasingly employing authoritarian practices of limiting free speech, opposition, and rights of association. In this final section, we consider the overall lessons learned.

There is clearly an active discussion in the scholarly literature on these issues, and interesting case studies abound. However, it is essential to reiterate that there are no rigorous social scientific studies that directly address the central research question of what strategies consistently work in helping groups keep civic space from closing in backsliding regimes. In other words, there are no studies that systematically test the hypotheses that arise from this discussion in even a moderate number of countries. We simply do not know if the strategies discussed here are actually more successful than others at keeping spaces for civic engagement open in the face of repression, or if these are merely the strategies that tend to come up in discussion and case study findings. With this in mind, we frame the conclusions here as a series of questions that may be useful for civil society groups or those seeking to support them to consider and ask of themselves when seeking to confront a closing civic space.

#### **1. Are there opportunities to form potentially valuable alliances or coalitions among groups within civil society? What are the barriers that need to be overcome to do this?**

Groups often have the most leverage when they can bring multiple actors together to put pressure on a government and create civic space. In some contexts, we found coalition-building and alliance-formation among groups to be an important strategy for successfully resisting democratic backsliding. Groups in alliances have been viewed as more legitimate and more capable of combatting repression, and they can often leverage greater resources. But, these advantages must be counterbalanced against the possibility of internal divisions.

#### **2. What sorts of indirect strategies seem to be working? What can we learn from innovations in indirect strategies of other groups?**

Another approach that has worked in maintaining civic space is a group of strategies that we collectively label indirect strategies—indirect in the sense that they are not necessarily anti-regime or even overtly

political. They still, however, provide a space for community involvement, expression, and problem-solving. By focusing on apolitical agendas, organizations may be less likely to be repressed since they are seen as non-threatening. There are several different examples that we group together here. Civil society actors as a whole tend to be more successful and active when they serve as providers instead of advocates. Additionally, civic space in backsliding democracies can often be reclaimed by artists. Finally, several studies underline local-level participation as an effective way to counteract closing civic spaces. The tradeoff, however, lies in the risk of becoming politically irrelevant, an outcome many groups may find distasteful.

**3. If direct action is necessary, can we commit to pursuing non-violent strategies? Can we make commitment to non-violence a visible and widely understood principle of our movement to gain broader support and potential protection from government crackdowns?**

Protest and contentious political engagement is another important strategy for pushing back against authoritarian rule. In general, there is compelling evidence that non-violent movements are more successful than violent ones, and that creative, well-timed protests can be very effective. This has to be measured and weighed with actors' local knowledge and expectations, however, since protests that directly challenge a regime can trigger a violent response.

**4. How best can the tools of social media and other communication technologies be leveraged without risking a crackdown?**

Digital communication via the internet or cellular phones can be advantageous for opening civic space because a lot of it is beyond the reach of the state. However, it also poses risks, since the state itself can use technology to monitor groups and pursue its repressive agenda.

**5. What are the threats to our organizational autonomy? How can we best maintain a balance of effectiveness and organizational autonomy?**

Virtually all studies point out that success hinges on autonomy. Groups can be discredited and rendered less effective by co-optation by the regime, influence from international actors, or strategic mistakes in messaging. Groups seeking community engagement and voice must toe the balance between independence and threat to the regime.

Were we to speculate about which of our five questions is the most important and which of the strategies is the most likely to be successful, we would begin with domestic alliance formation. We found the fewest caveats and downsides on this front, and this theme recurred across the literature—in studies on LGBT groups, the political opposition, and civil society more generally. Large coalitions of domestic groups have greater audience size, resources, and legitimacy than small, narrow groups. They are also costlier for the regime to repress. The challenges we found to domestic alliance formation lie on the front end, in their formation: divided societies make alliance formation difficult. If these differences can be overcome, however, they are likely to succeed in maintaining civic space. By contrast, transnational alliances pose the many risks of foreign intervention. Among the other four strategies, the caveats are many. Indirect strategies can sustain civic involvement, but groups hazard losing their political *raison d'être*. Engagement in non-violent forms of opposition via protest or digital

communication still risks repression. In the end, our foremost recommendation would be to urge domestic alliance formation.

## APPENDIX A: DEFINITIONS AND APPROACH

Backsliding occurs when a nominally democratic government infringes on political and civil rights or restricts political competition or accountability. We agree with Lust and Waldner (2015), who define backsliding as a “change in a combination of competitive electoral procedures, civil and political liberties, and accountability... [B]acksliding occurs through a series of discrete changes in the rules and informal procedures that shape those elections, rights, and accountability” (p2).

Our definition of backsliding incorporates the fact that democracy and regime type are multidimensional phenomena. Unfortunately, this means that operationalizing the concept and identifying backsliding cases entails uncertainty, judgment calls, and scholarly disagreement. In thinking about issues of case selection, we found rather little agreement in the political science literature on which countries have and which have not backslid. Relying on quantitative indices results in classifications that vary rather dramatically according to the index and criterion used, while those that rely on qualitative assessments can be prone to anecdotal and idiosyncratic evidence. We even found disagreement in the literature over whether there has been an overall backsliding among third-wave democracies (Levitsky and Way 2015).

Given this, we chose cases through a collaborative process with USAID and Institute of International Education personnel. Some headliner cases of backsliding were easy to identify (*e.g.*, Russia, Thailand, Turkey, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe) (Croissant and Buntë 2011, p257; Cubit 2014; Esen and Gumuscu 2016). Others we chose were potentially more subtle or contested as backsliders (*e.g.*, Bolivia, Ecuador, Hungary, and Mali). Still others we chose not because they clearly fit the definition of democratic backsliding but because of a substantive interest among USAID personnel (*e.g.*, China). In the end, the cases we focused on are Bolivia, Burkina Faso, China, Ecuador, Kyrgyzstan, Hungary, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mali, Peru, Poland, Russia, Thailand, Uganda, Venezuela, Tunisia, Turkey, and Zimbabwe. We also consulted a variety of studies that relied on cross-national statistical datasets.

We focus on contemporary cases—countries in which backsliding has occurred within the last 15 years—because the nature of democratic backsliding is different today than it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, democratic breakdown was often marked by clear, violent events that resulted in regime change: a military coup, an assassination, and/or other violent acts (Linz and Stepan 1979). Mali 2012 and Thailand 2006 and 2014 provide recent examples of this, but today backsliding often occurs more incrementally, usually through executive aggrandizement (limiting political rights, harassment of the opposition, disqualification of opposition leaders, intimidation of journalists, and/or takeover of the judicial branch) and often with a public that is largely supportive of the incumbent and his actions (*e.g.*, Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela) (Bermeo 2016). Self or soft coups, rather than military coups, are the order of the day.

Our approach in reading the literature and gathering evidence is interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse. Collectively, our team of authors contains expertise across a variety of topical, disciplinary, methodological, and regional areas. The two supervising faculty members (Baker and Boulding) are political scientists, as are two of the graduate student members (Mullenax and Velasco-Guachalla). The remaining graduate students are from anthropology (Zackary) and geography (Murton and Todd). The team has regional foci that span the developing world: Central Asia and Eastern Europe (Todd), East Asia (Murton), Latin America (Boulding, Mullenax, and Velasco-Guachalla), Middle East (Velasco-Guachalla),

South Asia (Murton and Zackary), and sub-Saharan Africa (Zackary). We also have methodological skills that encompass a host of different quantitative and qualitative techniques. Finally, again at the request of USAID, we had as part of our effort a thematic focus on women's and LGBT groups and issues, a line of inquiry that was headed by Mullenax.

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