THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS THE DRIVING FORCE OF CIVIC MOBILIZATION:

The case of post-soviet information autocracies

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid regimes have been developing into information autocracies, with a focus on propaganda and manipulation. In such regimes access to information is essential to resist the regime and establish an opposition movement. This thesis attempts to analyze information autocracies and the nature of mobilization under such regimes. Mobilization is explained as a three-step process, with technology playing role in each of them. Using the theory of information autocracy as well as the collective action problem framework the study positions itself in the field of information autocracies and develops this relatively novel notion further. Evaluating secondary data from surveys and interviews as well as existing literature, the paper applies the findings to three hybrid regimes: Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. The research concludes that access to technology increases the protest turnout, hence there is a direct relationship between technology and mobilization rates in hybrid regimes. Although protesters pose a threat to the regime, most of the time series of protests do not lead to a substantial change in government actions, let alone regime change. The study suggests that other actions besides protests are necessary, including external pressure by other states. Nevertheless, the mobilization process in information autocracies has a positive impact on political culture and shall be studied further.

Keywords: information autocracy, mobilization chain, technology

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GLOSSARY

CSTO - Collective Security Treaty Organization, an intergovernmental military alliance in Eurasia that includes six members: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan.

CAP - collective action problem, also known as social dilemma. A situation in which all actors would be better off if they cooperate. The problem is that actors fail to cooperate as there are conflicts of interests between/among them.

Telegram Messenger - instant messenger that has end-to-end encryption, meaning that the users can be sure that no one else accesses their chats.

INTRODUCTION

"Mass communication, in a word, is neither good nor bad; it is simply a force and, like any other force, it can be used either well or ill. Used in one way, the press, the radio and the cinema are indispensable to the survival of democracy. Used in another way, they are among the most powerful weapons in the dictator's armory."

- Aldous Huxley, Brave New World

The study of autocratic regimes has always been of interest to scholars of political science. After all, if one can better understand the reasons behind the stability and perseverance of such regimes, maybe they will succeed in applying the knowledge in practice to put such regimes on the road to democratization. This thesis studies the newly emerging form of authoritarianism - information autocracies, and analyses how information and technology can benefit and hurt the regime. More specifically, it studies the impact of technology on the mobilization process against the authoritarian regime. Scholars have started to explore this topic since 2015[1], but no conclusive arguments have been put. Therefore this thesis paper attempts to further develop the notion of information autocracy technology-based mobilization chain and creates a foundation for future research.

Some scholars have put their attention on how technology might affect the willingness of people to participate in the protest, using game theory and collective action problem framework. This paper continues this approach and focuses on less economically and

[1] Guriev, S., & Treisman, D. (2015). How modern dictators survive: An informational theory of the new authoritarianism. https://doi.org/10.3386/w21136

technologically developed countries to see how such regimes confront (or fail to do so) the opposition.

Therefore, the paper's main question is whether technology increases the likelihood of successful mobilization and protest movements in information autocracies.

After comparing countries with similar regimes, it was concluded that the use of technology, social media, and video platforms, in particular, positively impacts mobilization and protest turnout. While more empirical studies need to be conducted, from analysis of secondary data, one might find that technology reduces communication cost and encourages more people to incur potential participation costs by creating online spaces for discussion and sending an emotional message to the potential protesters.

First, I delve into the contemporary literature regarding hybrid autocracies, especially of an information-based type. I find that such regimes rely on propaganda, pinpoint coercion of emerging opposition leaders, and marginalization of free media. Then, the thesis provides a framework for research strategy and contextualizes the research question with regards to prominent theories of collective action problem, Albert Hirschmann's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework, as well as broadly discusses the nature of information autocracies. Approaching the issue from different perspectives and theoretical frameworks, the thesis provides an all-around view of the modern state of information autocracies as well as the attempts to challenge their rule. Finally, the empirical part of the research is built around three countries with similar personalistic regimes and limited use of coercion and propaganda as the main source of regime stability. The paper focuses mainly on Russia, as it has a long history of protest movements and real non-systemic opposition. Russia's sheer size also perfectly portrays the strength of mobile technologies, as the mobilization process occurs everywhere in Russia, from small cities to metropolitan areas, days after another corruption investigation is released. Alexey Navalny's "Anti-Corruption Fund", which has offices across

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the state, is responsible for active and constant population mobilization. Although similar by nature, non-systemic opposition movements in Kazakhstan and Belarus are represented not by a single non-systemic organization but by little unrelated communities on the internet. Nevertheless, recent protest movements in Kazakhstan and Belarus show that even in the absence of an elaborate network of opposition headquarters, technology helps protesters challenge the regime and either make them negotiate or resort to external forces. Regardless of the results of the protest movement, the research claims that technology gives a platform for anti-regime mobilization. I also argue that shifts in public policy, let alone regime change take a long time and require more than protests, yet the destruction of the propaganda bubble and the presence of alternative political forces in hybrid regimes justify the costs and risks for protesters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of autocracies focusing on information censorship and manipulation is not new. Political scientists have noticed the tendency of autocrats to change their behavior from a harsh and frequently violent rule with mass repressions as a fundamental tool of control into a more soft rule with propaganda and pinpoint repression of key opposition actors. This literature review will shed light on the latest research on hybrid authoritarianism and digital roots of protest formation to familiarize the reader with this rapidly developing field of political science and international relations.

Hybrid authoritarianism

Hybrid regimes, also known as competitive authoritarianism, are usually unfinished transitions from pure authoritarian regimes to democracies. Located between the two, hybrid authoritarianism (or hybrid democracy) has features of democracies, such as elections, systemic opposition, freedom of the press, and so on. Yet, the abovementioned features are decorative at best, as an authoritarian regime is not interested in strong institutions and free and transparent elections. Levitsky and Way define competitive authoritarianism as a regime that holds multiparty elections and allows for some political competition. But the established conditions are unfair: media is subordinate to the regime or the elites surrounding the leader, opposition leaders are coerced, and systemic opposition completely aligns with the regime on key issues. In resource-rich authoritarian regimes such as Russia or Kazakhstan, the elites also have a monopoly on resources and can co-opt the media and opposition. Because of these factors, such regimes are not democratic. In their book on competitive authoritarianism, Levitsky and Lucan differentiate between competitive and noncompetitive authoritarianism: "Competitive authoritarian regimes are distinguished from full authoritarianism in that constitutional channels exist through which opposition groups compete in a meaningful way

for executive power. Elections are held regularly and opposition parties are not legally barred from contesting them"[2]. This thesis will focus on competitive authoritarianism, as there is an increasing number of new competitive autocracies or noncompetitive autocracies turned into competitive. According to the Freedom House organization[3], over since 2005, the number of hybrid democracies has increased while the number of democracies went down. Guriev and Treisman[4] add that autocrats turn to a competitive form of the regime as it brings domestic stability, allows for foreign investment, and minimizes the risk of a violent coup. In the next chapter, I will focus more on Sergey Guriev and Daniel Treisman, as they further developed the concept of competitive authoritarianism and coined the so-called "information autocracy", a form of authoritarianism that has appeared with the advancement of technology.

Information Autocracy

In their later work called "A theory of informational autocracy" Guriev and Treisman further advance research on modern forms of authoritarianism. The main difference in information authoritarianism is that:

"Dictators survive not by means of force or ideology but because they convince the public - rightly or wrongly - that they are competent. Citizens do not observe the dictator's type but infer it from signals in their living standards, state propaganda, and messages sent by an informed elite via independent media. If citizens conclude that the dictator is incompetent, they overthrow him in a revolution."[5]

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[2] Levitsky, S., Way, L. A. (2013). Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War. Cambridge University Press, 7

[3] Reppucci, S., Slipowitz, A. (2022, February). The global expansion of authoritarian rule. Freedom House. Retrieved May 18, 2022, from https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule

[4] Guriev, S., Treisman, D. (2015). How modern dictators survive an informational theory of the new authoritarianism. National Bureau of Economic Research.

[5] Guriev, S. M., & Treisman, D. (2019). A theory of informational autocracy. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, [abstract] https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3426238

Most importantly, the dictator in such regimes is financially constrained, as propaganda and censorship have a significant cost similar to equipping police forces and coercing the opposition. Hence, compared to a traditional non-competitive autocrat, competitive authoritarianism is much more costly for the dictator. Yet, as Guriev and Treisman claim, noncompetitive authoritarianism is on the rise because it provides personal safety for the dictator and overall stability for the regime. Such a softer version of traditional authoritarianism is also "better adapted to a world of open borders, international media, and knowledge-based economies"[6], making it a pervasive and global phenomenon from Russia to Hungary and Peru. While scholars[7] have already attempted to trace how information control in dictatorships evolved into propaganda and spin in autocracies, Guriev and Treisman managed to present a holistic theory of information autocracies. An economist by profession, Guriev suggests a game theory model in which citizens evaluate the ruler as either competent or incompetent. If the population decides that the ruler is incompetent, they are usually overthrown. The goal of the ruler, therefore, is to appear competent. As mass repressions in the world of cameras and social media present the dictator as unable to rule via democratic principles, the latter opts for cooptation of the elites, censorship of alternative media sources, and coercion of selected political activists.

Further evaluation of information autocracies

Guriev and Treisman introduce the notion of information autocracy but do not consider the double-edged nature of the internet for both regime and the opposition. For instance, it is unclear whether the internet brings more benefits or drawbacks for the autocrat. On the one hand, anti-regime sentiments are easily ignited online, in group chats and forums. The

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[6] Ibid.,
[7] Rogoff, K. (1987). Equilibrium political budget cycles. https://doi.org/10.3386/w2428

internet also helps quickly organize the protesters to avoid police or concentrate forces. On the other hand, the regime can also spread its propaganda online, co-opting individuals and entire websites. Hence, the authors analyze the impact of television and traditional media on the population but neglect the internet. The article by Dragu and Lupu attempts to fill the niche and find whether technology undermines authoritarian regimes. Also applying game-theoretical analysis, the authors conclude that: "technology can both reduce the cost of organizing dissent, but also can facilitate the surveillance, tracking and subjugation of opposition groups and activist movements in the first place"[8]. Indeed the cases of opposition in movements in Southeast Asia show that more technologically advanced states can use the internet to their advantage, quietly disengaging the protest movement, according to Ruijgrok[9]. Meanwhile, less technologically savvy regimes cannot control the internet, hence experiencing more anti-regime behavior online. Clumsy and uncoordinated attempts at regulating the internet contribute to the deterioration of regime perception in the eyes of even neutral parts of the population. For instance, complete internet shutdowns and primitive propaganda in such regimes only help the opposition mobilize the population. In another article[10] Ruijgrok elaborates on this topic and the example of the 2010-2011 Tunisian Revolution points out four main reasons behind online mobilization's success: reduced communication costs, change in attitude towards protest, a decrease of information uncertainty regarding the protests, and reinforcement of mobilization via appeals to emotions (dramatic content and regime denunciation). Thus it might be beneficial to analyze the mobilization processes in less technologically advanced regimes to find whether the same principles apply there. Interestingly, there is also a valid argument that the internet might

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[8] Dragu, T., & Lupu, Y. (2017). *Does technology undermine authoritarian governments?*. Working Paper. New York University and George Washington University, 21
[9] Ruijgrok, K. (2021). Internet use and protest in Malaysia and other authoritarian regimes. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68325-2
[10] Ruijgrok, K. (2016). From the web to the streets: Internet and protests under authoritarian regimes. *Democratization*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1223630

reduce the probability of protests. Weidmann and Rod[11] use the Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Database (MMAD) and claim that while social media and the internet increase the geography and scale of protests, the first stage of mobilization is hindered by the internet's omnipresence.

Conclusion

Modern hybrid regimes prefer information control and "soft" power to repressions and fear. The existing literature on information autocracies is scarce as the concept was introduced only in 2015 by Guriev and Treisman[12]; hence this thesis will contribute to opposition mobilization through technology under information autocracies. While technology can be both a blessing and a curse for the regime, I focus on the opportunities that the internet and social media provide for the opposition. Therefore, this work evaluates the regime-opposition dynamic in Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan - states with a simultaneously high internet penetration and weak regime involvement in it.

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[11] Weidmann, N. B., & Rød, E. G. (2019). *The internet and political protest in autocracies*. Oxford University Press.
[12] Guriev, S., Treisman, D. (2015). How modern dictators survive an informational theory of the new authoritarianism. National Bureau of Economic Research.

CHAPTER I. THEORY

1.1. Collective action problem

Why is it so hard to engage the population against the repressive regime? Why, despite being feared and hated by a significant portion of the country, do the autocrats manage to rule for decades? The answer lies in the inability of people to engage in collective action.

1.1.1. Definition

Despite representing the interests of the society, protest movements frequently fail to attract mass support both on a personal and group levels. Hence, many opposition movements die in infancy, as a limited number of protesters are unable to threaten the regime neither by voice nor through violence. Citizens realize that the movement benefits them but value personal safety and freedom more. This is the crux of the collective action problem, as defined by Olson[13]. First implemented in economics, the collective action problem attempts to demonstrate how individuals behave when stakes are high in a group. While a certain public good might benefit a person and the rest of the society (clean drinking water and modern infrastructure are some examples of public goods), they understand risks and responsibilities linked to cooperation using a rational approach. Therefore, some of the population free rides and receives public goods without "paying" for them.

1.1.2. Application to protests

The payment could be within a legal framework (taxes or voting, for example) and as a part of social activity (protests, strikes). Applying this to protest movements, an individual is better off when they get the benefits that social movements fight for while being secure from

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[13] Olson, M. (1965). *The logic of collective action public goods and the theory of groups*. Harvard University Press.

repressions. Indeed, from a rational standpoint, under an autocratic regime, one is better off ignoring the demonstrations than joining them. However, on a group level, such behavior results in low participation rates in protest movements. In 1991 Kuran[14] found that the scope of the protests directly relies on overcoming the collective action problem. Later in 1993, Lohmann[15] supported this theory with more empirical data.

1.1.3. Relevance to the XXI century and personalistic autocracies

Collective action problem is natural to human beings, as it is based on the trade-off between ensuring survival and gaining an advantage; therefore, it is universal to any regime regardless of the time period. However, in a personalistic autocracy, issues with collective action arise to the maximum, as the cost of participation is greater than in any other political regime except maybe dictatorship, although the latter rarely grants any benefit to a group, compared to autocracy or democracy, where a call for change through going on streets might reap benefits. Any regime that claims to have democratic principles (free elections, freedom of speech, political rights) appears to acknowledge the importance of a dialogue between itself and the population through elections or protests. Therefore the quest for solving collective action problems concerning anti-government movements shall be considered.

The world has seen various successful political movements in the past that seemingly overcame the CAP. For instance, as a part of the counterculture movement, the opposition to US involvement in the Vietnam War saw a slow but steady narrative change within American society and among politicians[16]. It helped that the majority of the media and intelligence

[14] Kuran, T. (1991). Now out of never: The element of surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989. *World Politics*, *44*(1), 7–48. https://doi.org/10.2307/2010422

[15] Lohmann, S. (1993). A signaling model of informative and manipulative political action. *American Political Science Review*, *87*(2), 319–333. https://doi.org/10.2307/2939043

[16] Smith, R. B. (2017). Campus protests and the Vietnam War. *Collective Violence*, 250–277. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315080987-24

community in the US went against the war, cultivating the negative perception of war among the population, especially the youth.

The XXI century has the potential to handle the CAP even better, as now the access to information has become universal; instead of newspapers, TVs, and radios, people have smartphones and social media networks. Hence the scope of this paper is limited to modern personalistic autocracies, where I try to find whether political movements in the digital era are effective and widespread enough to influence the regime.

1.2. Exit, Voice, Loyalty

This part introduces the Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework that complements the Collective Action Problem framework and helps one better understand the rationale behind taking part in a protest or refusing to participate.

1.2.1. What is EVL?

Hirschmann's exit, voice, and loyalty framework might explain individual responses to bad governance. Like the collective action problem, the exit, voice, and loyalty framework is based on game theory and assumes rational individuals make choices that will maximize their utility when faced with negative changes to the status quo. Depending on the scenario, the individual might operate as a customer, employee, or voter, but in all of them, one is met with three options: exit, voice, and loyalty[17]. Exit means leaving the organization, changing consumer preferences, or changing political parties. Voice usually states the opposite; an individual expresses dissatisfaction or concern to the upper management, company, or political organization but is unwilling to "exit". Loyalty is usually defined as the factor that makes one stay on the fence between exit and voice. If the level of loyalty (commitment to

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[17] Hirschman, A. O. (2007). *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and States*. Harvard Univ. Press.

the organization, brand, or political affiliation) is high, then an actor might endure deterioration of his utility for the organization's good. Otherwise, the same actor will pursue rational options, including leaving or openly voicing their concerns.

1.2.2. How can EVL be applied to the protest movement?

In the context of protest movements, the EVL approach can also be helpful, as it describes relations between two actors, the citizen, and the government. In this game, the citizen can choose among three options (exit, voice, loyalty), while the government can either respond to the citizen's action or ignore it. According to Hirschmann[18], the game starts when the government negatively affects citizens. In such a scenario, citizens might stay loyal to the government for different reasons, be it a fear of job loss, patriotism, or the belief that those in power know better than ordinary citizens.

1.2.3. EVL today

The use of EVL in case of protests under modern personalistic autocracies is relevant as people are highly encouraged to sit at home and obey the regime. Such regimes label the opposition as terrorists and foreign agents, while leaders of the movement are portrayed as opportunists who benefit from the clash between the regime and the people. Therefore, according to the propaganda, the ordinary citizen is more inclined to either exit the political field by becoming apolitical or stay loyal to the regime that supposedly protects the state from foreign influence.

To instigate the "voice" option, the opposition shall persuade the population that the costs of protest will be as little as possible while the benefits are worth risking. Returning to the collective action problem, the willingness to protest correlates with the scale of the

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[18] Ibid., 33

movement. So, if an actor perceives the probability of being arrested or hurt as minimal, then the collective action problem seems to be resolved[19]. The potential protester also understands that an increase in turnout positively affects the outcome of the protests, be it concessions from the government, democratization, or regime change. The potential of social media and the internet, in general, to attract followers and demonstrate a large number of people willing to join the protest is immense; therefore, it is so important to take a closer look at the mechanism of protest mobilization through the internet.

1.3. Mobilization chain theory

1.3.1. What is mobilization chain theory?

The mobilization chain explains how ordinary people move from disgruntled with the regime to joining the protests. It is also prevalent in autocracies, especially those centered around a single leader, like Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and others. Understanding how exactly opposition movements attract the population is necessary to analyze and predict future demonstrations.

1.3.2. Mobilization chain

According to Chenoweth's widescale study of revolutions and protests, peaceful civil disobedience in the form of protests, strikes, and meetings is the most effective tool in public policy[20]. Such forms of civil disobedience require mobilization, which has taken various shapes, from graffiti and leaflets to grassroots movements. Known as micro-mobilization, the mobilization chain might be understood as a "(a) passage through analytically distinct steps

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[19] Haggard, S., & Kaufman, R. R. (2016). Democratization during the third wave. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *19*(1), 125–144. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042114-015137

[20] Chenoweth, E., & Stephan, M. J. (2013). *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*. Columbia University Press.

of incorporation into collective action (b) each of which results in individuals being differentiated through cognitive (e.g. identity development), affective (e.g. emotion development), and/or structural processes (e.g. recruitment and social ties)"[21]. That is, the main goal of mobilization is to gradually integrate the idea of resisting the regime via various channels, be it on an emotional or rational level. Hence, the mobilization chain should be understood as the primary source of any opposition movement; without a critical mass of like-minded individuals, no political actor can have a say in domestic politics. Ruijgrok, who made a systematic analysis of various protests in autocratic regimes following the Arab Spring, has found that access to information has empowered protests via four mechanisms: " (1) by reducing costs and risks for opposition groups; (2) by producing attitudinal change; (3) by decreasing informational uncertainty for potential protestors; and (4) through the mobilizing effect of dramatic images and videos."[22]. These mechanisms are especially important in authoritarian regimes that are based on information asymmetry and personal rule. Compared to democracies, such regimes only mimic the elements of democratic regime to gain legitimacy; aside from that the ruling class relies on finding outside threats, cultivating patriotism and spreading false information through state-owned media. Such approach has been quite effective for a regime stability, especially in resource-rich autocracies across the world, from Russia and Kazakhstan in Central Asia to Hungary and Peru. While, abundance of natural resources hinders democratization[23], it also accounts for regime stability. Geddes[24], for instance, finds that personalist authoritarianism survives on average for 15 years, almost twice as much as other regimes such as military ones. This can

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[21] Ward, M. (2016). Rethinking social movement micromobilization: Multi-stage theory and the role of Social Ties. *Current Sociology*, *64*(6), 855. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116634818

[22] Ruijgrok, K. (2016). From the web to the streets: Internet and protests under authoritarian regimes. *Democratization*, 499. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1223630

[23] Ross, M. L. (2001). Does oil hinder democracy? *World Politics*, *53*(3), 325–361. https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2001.0011

[24] Geddes, B., Wright, J., & Frantz, E. (2014). Autocratic breakdown and regime transitions: A new data set. *Perspectives on Politics*, *12*(2), 313–331. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592714000851

be partially explained by a more soft rule, willingness to negotiate with the opposition, and reliance on misinformation rather than violence. Fearon, for instance, claims that in autocracies, elections are manipulated to the point that they become uninformative of the distribution of discontent[25]. Hence, given access to factual information and proper agitation, a protest movement is an effective tool under an authoritarian regime.

According to mobilization chain theory, the first step starts with sympathizing with the opposition and its motives. Usually, such motives could be the inequality gap, high inflation rates, corruption, or public goods deterioration[26]. As an actor becomes emotionally attached, they move down the mobilization chain and become familiar with the details of a protest or a movement. Here a citizen learns about the root cause, the movement, and more subtle details such as the date and location of the protest. Finally, a potential protestor compares the risks and benefits of joining the upcoming protest. Their motivation and desire for a change influence whether they will become a part of collective political action.

With the widespread use of smartphones, these three steps have become much easier to go through. A person can become sympathized with the movement, learn about the scale and plans of upcoming protests, and motivate themselves and others to come out on the streets.

Thus, this thesis will build on three theoretical aspects: collective action problem, exit, voice, and loyalty framework, and the mobilization chain theory. Other scholars mentioned in the literature review chapter have established and tested these aspects for validity. The special importance of this paper would be a particular focus on personalistic autocracies of Central Asia, such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. I will apply these theories along with

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[25] Fearon, J. D. (2011). Self-enforcing democracy. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *126*(4), 1661–1708. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjr038

[26] Bailard, C. S. (2012). Testing the internet's effect on democratic satisfaction: A multi-methodological, cross-national approach. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *9*(2), 185–204. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2011.641495

qualitative analysis of the existing data such as surveys, electoral support, and statistics from internet resources.

CHAPTER II. RESEARCH STRATEGY AND CONTEXT

2.1. Background

2.1.1. Nature of information autocracies

In this chapter, I will analyze how attitudes towards the regime change thanks to various sources of information. In autocracies, based on information control and fear of repression, the population is encouraged to be disengaged in politics and merely follow the idea that rulers know what is best for the people. Hence, alternative takes on the regime are essential for citizens to start challenging their position regarding protest movements. At the same time, such regimes as Kazakhstan, Russia, or Belarus are operating with no systemic opposition, except for political parties created by the regime itself to dilute the real opposition and create an image of having a public discourse in a parliament. The internet can establish a space for potential protesters and educate them on the regime's wrongdoings in the absence of well-defined opposition[27]. I will argue that the state of collective action under information autocracies significantly limits protest potential, but access to the internet can overcome most of the factors linked to the collective action problem. This thesis will also consider measures autocracies take within cyberspace to prevent mass mobilization and dissent.

2.1.2. State of the non-systemic opposition

Autocracies are corrupt and ineffective regimes because the elites have access to resources, both financial and political. In order to establish control over the territory as well as institutions, autocrat selects mostly incompetent but loyal members of the elite. In normal democracies, checks and balances prevent power concentration; the system is designed

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[27] Beyer, J. L. (2015). Democracy's Double-Edged Sword: How Internet Use Changes Citizens' Views of Their Government. Perspectives on Politics, 13(3), 874–876. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592715001838

against power grabs through independent journalism, freedom of speech, and systemic and non-systemic opposition[28]. However, autocratic regimes lack all these features; hence the autocrat and their elites thrive in the absence of a watchdog. In such regimes, real, non-systemic opposition is the most important and oppressed element of democracy. Sources of political mobilization and challenge, opposition leaders are removed from the public sphere, either through incarceration, defamation, or threats.

Usually, opposition movements are discredited and accused of being organized by the West. For instance, state media in both Russia and Kazakhstan condemn businessmen and philanthropists for propaganda and intervention, creating and supporting conspiracies[29] and destructive "political technologies"[30]. In particular, cases though, when the leader of the opposition gains popularity, they might be physically repressed, from poisoning to incarceration. Thus, while for the outside observers, the regime might resemble a hybrid democracy with partially open and free elections, transparent government, and an independent court, on the inside, such regimes opt for clearing up the political field and claiming any potential challenger to the rule as a product of George Soros or the regime itself. Although it has similar values and goals, the opposition in such regimes is usually divided and cannot present a single front, leading to confusion among the population. In such cases, the internet provides help for particular opposition groups and supports a certain level of anti-regime sentiments thanks to the many-to-many structure.

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[28] *Freedom in the World 2018 Scores*. Freedom House. (n.d.). Retrieved May 20, 2022, from https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/scores

[29] Накануне.ru, И. С. (n.d.). *Казахстан под прицелом деструктивных политических технологий*. www.nakanune.ru. Retrieved May 19, 2022, from https://www.nakanune.ru/articles/111791

[30] Wilson, A. (2011, June 17). *"Political technology": Why is it alive and flourishing in the former USSR?* openDemocracy. Retrieved May 19, 2022, from https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/political-technology-why-is-it-alive-and-flourishing-in-former-ussr/

2.1.3. Systemic opposition

Personalistic autocracies based on information control tend to create structural or "systemic" opposition. The term systemic opposition usually refers to the Russian political system, but many similar autocracies, especially from the same region, have the same approach to political opposition[31]. This way, such regimes differ from western democracies, where parties either have a confrontation with each other or have to form alliances in the case of parliamentary systems.

Information autocracies, by design, have extremely weak systemic opposition that exists to fragment the electorate[32] and create an illusion of political competition, hence legitimizing the ruling party. The main characteristics of a systemic opposition in an authoritarian state are extremely low electorate support, barely enough to pass the minimum threshold, a tendency to criticize the regime but avoid direct attacks on the president, and complete disregard for the non-systemic opposition. These three qualities of systemic opposition are prevalent in the majority of authoritarian regimes[33]. Since the ruling party co-opts other political parties, the latter are willing to have at least some say in politics, but more importantly, to get access to financial and political benefits that come with presence in the parliament. Hence, it seems rational for both the ruling party and the "opposition" to sustain a status-quo where the President-backed party has an overwhelming majority. Based on illusions and misinformation, the autocrat cannot afford even a mirage of political competition between parties. In return, the systemic opposition receives access to state-owned media and is not

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[31]The systemic opposition in authoritarian regimes: A case study of Russian regions. (2016). *Systemic and Non-Systemic Opposition in the Russian Federation*, 131–148. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315611709-10

[32] Gainous, J., Wagner, K. M., & Ziegler, C. E. (2017). Digital Media and political opposition in authoritarian systems: Russia's 2011 and 2016 Duma elections. *Democratization*, 25(2), 209–226. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1315566

[33] Panov, P., & Ross, C. (2021). 'mobilized voting' versus 'performance voting' in electoral autocracies: Territorial variations in the levels of support for the systemic opposition parties in Russian municipalities. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2021.1962307

susceptible to repression from the regime. Open critique of the government as a whole coupled with neutrality towards the President and the closest elites is another feature of such regimes. By doing so, the systemic opposition demonstrates its main purpose of creating an illusion of confrontation and healthy political discussion within the parliament. Later on, propaganda portrays the systemic opposition as a real political force while sparing the president. Finally, the total disregard of the non-systemic opposition by a systemic one allows the regime to isolate the former from the political process. Non-systemic opposition hence is barred from the public sphere by both the regime and the systemic opposition, making it difficult to promote anti-regime sentiments. In typical autocracies, non-systemic opposition is represented by the intelligentsia and political organizations that were excluded from the political system and had to resort to the internet. In chapter III on case studies of information autocratic regimes, I will discuss the importance of both systemic and non-systemic opposition to protest formation.

2.1.4. Propaganda

While the leader in such regimes usually maintains popularity through charismatic authority[34], the regime as a whole is built around state-owned propaganda with a focus on television and is supported by radio, newspapers, and the internet. There are several ways personalistic autocracies shape the population's attitudes towards the regime and the potential opposition. The most important in terms of influence and effectiveness are state-owned television, radio stations, newspapers, and pro-regime internet resources[35]. There is a saying in Russian that a TV box can be defeated by a fridge, meaning that an average citizen is highly susceptible to propaganda and will believe it until the consequences of authoritarian

[34] Weber, M., & Eisenstadt, S. N. (1968). *On charisma and institution building: Selected papers*. University of Chicago Press.
[35] Woolley, S. C., & Howard, P. N. (2019). *Computational propaganda: Political parties, politicians, and political manipulation on social media*. Oxford University Press.

rule directly hit their well-being. It could be in the form of a food embargo after the 2014[36]

Crimea Annexation by Russian Federation or rapid inflation caused by the regime's

incompetency. But the ability of autocrats to survive for years demonstrates propaganda's

power at misinforming the general population. While the younger generations prefer the

internet, TV is especially prevalent among adults. Data shows that television is still a leading

source of information for the majority of the population in most countries, authoritarian and

democratic[37].

Enikolopov in his article on the relationship between social media and protest activity

mentions that channels like newspapers, television, or radio traditionally been controlled by

governments, who have used a mix of censorship and intimidation to prevent any negative

information about their performance or calls for oppositional collective action from reaching

a larger public[38]. Indeed, the internet, like any tool, is a double-edged sword that can be both

useful and harmful to the protest movement. Since then, internet censorship has also

developed alongside pro-regime bloggers and websites, only creating more barriers to

collective action.

2.2. Steps for mobilization chain

2.2.1. Step 1. Sympathize the population with the protest movement.

The existing literature on protest formation states that the mobilization begins with the

general public's attraction to the rational and emotional causes of protest. That is, an

indifferent part of the population shall either find their discontent with the regime to be

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[36] Yekelchyk, S. (2020). Russia's annexation of the Crimea and the war in the Donbas. *Ukraine*.
https://doi.org/10.1093/wentk/9780197532102.003.0006

[37] Saad, L. (2021, May 22). *Internet industry nets record positive rating*. Gallup.com. Retrieved May 20, 2022,
from https://news.gallup.com/poll/184901/internet-industry-nets-record-positive-rating.aspx

[38] Enikolopov, R., Makarin, A., & Petrova, M. (2015). Social Media and protest participation: Evidence from
Russia. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2696236

expressed by the opposition or learn new information that undermines their neutral stance. The range could be wide: from corruption schemes revealed by the opposition to violence towards the aforementioned opposition members. Such people become a part of the "mobilization potential"[39], meaning that protesters can attract at least a share of the protest sympathizers to the streets at any moment. This step does not assume a deep dive into movements' ideology and plans but rather ignites the population on an emotional level. In countries with little to no alternative media and political agenda, such sparks of civil disobedience can easily ignite the population leading to unpredictable consequences, from simply supporting the movement to starting a revolution, as in the example of Arab Spring. There, access to Facebook and Whatsapp led the citizens to grow their discontent with the government, as these platforms were not moderated by the regime, hence providing information that differed from the government agenda[40]. As mentioned in the theoretical part of the thesis, information asymmetry and manipulation accounts for regime survival since the potential protesters consider protests and dissatisfaction with the said regime too costly, let alone fruitless, as the official propaganda creates an illusion of stability and prosperity.

Existing research on autocratic regimes supports the claim that the internet and its derivatives promote democratization and regime change through more extensive mobilization. Especially this affects mobilization in its infancy, where it is critical to turn people's attention to the protest movement. While some scholars argue that the negative sentiment towards a regime initiates an anti-government protest[41], I argue that cyberspace can form this negative sentiment in the first place. In information autocracies, the regime carefully hides corruption and incompetency by propaganda from all possible media sources

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[39] Ruijgrok, K. (2021). Internet use and protest in Malaysia and other authoritarian regimes. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68325-2
[40] Marichal, J. (2016). Facebook and mobilization: Beyond the Facebook revolution. *Facebook Democracy*, 109–126. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315581798-8
[41] Ruijgrok, K. (2016). From the web to the streets: Internet and protests under authoritarian regimes. *Democratization*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1223630

while disregarding opposition. Hence, the internet's value in building sentiment for a protest movement cannot be underestimated. As Castells[42] states, subjective awareness of objective factors such as corruption, oppression, and low quality of life is vital for the population to change their views on the regime.

To put it another way, for successful anti-regime feelings to grow, the population shall view objective political failures of the government via a subjective lens. This, as many experts argue[43], is one of the reasons why modern opposition forces in autocracies failed to engage the population, even though there has been all the potential for a successful movement: permanently high inflation, corruption scandals, poor distribution of public goods. Internet's many-to-many relationship can overcome this problem, reducing reliance on state-owned media and establishing general sentiment about the regime. Bailard[44] suggests that regimes with extreme information scarcity, such as information autocracies, differ from democracies, where media, in contrast, gives too many opinions and positions. This unanimous agenda is a weak point of any information autocracy, and the internet is best suited to combat it. All illusions about the regime fall once a person is introduced to alternative information sources. While one can learn about the regime's mischief behavior and ratings, such as human rights abuse and position in the corruption perception index (CPI), it instills a significant negative perception of the regime alongside despair. Here, the internet's power as a mobilizer is also unprecedented, as that same person can learn about success stories of former autocracies that managed to democratize through concrete reforms. Hence, the encouragement and unity that the internet brings increase sympathy for and participation in protest movements. Described

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[42] Castells, M. (2018). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the internet age*. Polity Press.

[43] Nisbet, E. C., Stoycheff, E., & Pearce, K. E. (2012). Internet use and democratic demands: A multinational, multilevel model of internet use and citizen attitudes about democracy. *Journal of Communication*, *62*(2), 249–265. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01627.x

[44] Bailard, C. S. (2012). Testing the internet's effect on democratic satisfaction: A multi-methodological, cross-national approach. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *9*(2), 185–204. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2011.641495

by Bailard[45] as a "mirror-holding function", the internet and social media can educate the population on protest movements and their success in other autocratic regimes. Therefore, the internet's role in bringing people closer to protesting cannot be understated.

2.2.2. Step 2. Being Informed About an Anti-Government Protest

The second step in engaging people in protest movements is shifting the focus to the movement itself. Frequently potential protesters who share the same sentiments with the opposition do not participate in the movement for no other reason than being uninformed. Collective action that was previously represented by such resources as money, time, and effort is now expanded with virtual reality[46]. This expansion includes various actions, from uniting via group chats and forming petitions to virtual conferences with opposition leaders and even hacking government portals. It is worth noting that not all of the actions mentioned above are applicable and/or effective in personalistic autocracies with a focus on information scarcity. For instance, online petitions and emails to senators and congresspeople have been effective in established democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom[47]. Meanwhile, in Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, these measures have failed to change public policy.

Nevertheless, recent research suggests that the internet's power to attract potential protesters to the movement is immense[48]. The enriched "repertoire of collective action"[49] also promotes and facilitates more orthodox ways of public mobilization and protest organization, as now an

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[45] Bailard, C. S. (2014). *Democracy's double-edged sword: How internet use changes citizens' views of their government*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
[46] McCarthy, J. D., & Zald, M. N. (1977). Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, *82*(6), 1212–1241. https://doi.org/10.1086/226464;
[47] Edwards, B., & McCarthy, J. D. (2007). Resources and Social Movement Mobilization. *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, 116–152. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999103.ch6
[48] Breuer, A., Landman, T., & Farquhar, D. (2012). Social Media and protest mobilization: Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2133897
[49] Van Laer, J., & Van Aelst, P. (2010). Internet and Social Movement Action Repertoires. *Information, Communication & Society*, *13*(8), 1146. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691181003628307

ordinary citizen is not bound by location and time. One can learn about the movement from anywhere at any time; meanwhile, people were limited by the people around the in the past. Those who have been motivated by the first step of mobilization now have no excuse for not learning about a protest[50].

While the collective action problem exists everywhere in the world, scholars previously used to apply this framework mainly to Western democracies. Nevertheless, collective action in non-democracies has become a recent addition to the academy[51]. As the Middle East experienced multiple cases of revolutions called the Arab Spring, notions of collective action problems being resolved to have appeared among scholars. For instance, it was found that at least 30 percent of the protesters during the Egypt revolution in 2011 had learned about the protests on Tahrir Square through social media such as Instagram and Facebook[52]. Similar results were found elsewhere in the world, from Russia to Tunisia, showing the internet's strength in any regime, even with the most skewed and information-poor media. According to Shapiro[53],it was a Facebook revolution, as protesters were attracted through social media, beginning with smaller protests and movements (such as the 6th April movement), leading to a state-wide anti-regime protest. In Russia, people filled in Bolotnaya Square in 2011, gathering around 100,000 people, an unprecedented number before. This demonstration was initiated after opposition leaders claimed the Duma elections were a fraud. According to Russian and international political scientists[54], this demonstration led to a prolonged two-year

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[50] Van Laer, J. (2010). Activists online and offline: The internet as an information channel for protest demonstrations. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *15*(3), 347–366. https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.15.3.8028585100245801

[51] Ibid.,

[52] Tufekci, Z., & Wilson, C. (2012). Social Media and the decision to participate in political protest: Observations from Tahrir Square. Journal of Communication, 62(2), 363–379. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01629.x

[53] Samantha, S. (2009, January 22). Revolution, facebook-style. The New York Times. Retrieved May 20, 2022, from https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html

[54] McAllister, I., & White, S. (2014). Electoral integrity and support for democracy in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *25*(1), 78–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2014.911744

anti-regime movement which dried up only by 2013. Once again, the internet's many-to-many type of communication has allowed for more holistic information exchange. Before the internet, different social classes usually did not exchange opinions and were preoccupied with their own interests and concerns. As with the rise of the internet, social media covered the world, and it became apparent that Robert Putnam's[55] prominent theory of social capital needs to be revised. At first glance, communication on the internet creates social capital, just as other centers of attraction such as public spaces and organizations did before the internet era. But in the case of social media, any user can consume content that denounces the regime. As a result, the internet attracts all social strata with a minimum exclusion, creating a base for future protests with horizontal and vertical coverage of segments of society. Arguably, the internet not only acts as an information provider but as a social glue, too. The ease of information spread can also not be underestimated; despite spreading factual information that people are sympathetic to, the protest movement will not succeed without spread within society[56].

The second mobilization step is self-producing; as people learn about the protest, they mobilize others around them. This is explained from a psychological perspective, as protesters have more confidence in coming out against the regime if their friends or family members participate[57]. Thus, with a simple "share" button, a subject of mobilization becomes an object by spreading the information further. Another important aspect of the internet in the second step of mobilization is that once started, the anti-regime sentiments are very resistant and can survive without a clear leader. The best-case scenario is Alexey Navalny's Anti-Corruption Fund, which managed to keep agitating people against Putin's regime even with

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[55] Putnam, R. D. (1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, *6*(1), 65–78. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1995.0002

[56] Centola, D., & Macy, M. (2007). Complex contagions and the weakness of long ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *113*(3), 702–734. https://doi.org/10.1086/521848

[57] Klandermans, B. (1997). *The social psychology of protest*. Blackwell Publishers.

Navalny being imprisoned for almost 500 days now. The work and expenses of the Fund are fully covered by donations from viewers, making it a self-sustainable project; as long as the Fund continues exposing the regime, new viewers will join, financing their work. But even in the absence of a dedicated organization, people who negatively view the regime introduce other people to alternative information through videos, memes, and posts on social media. Although considered a source of productivity and entertainment, the internet inevitably politicizes society, shifting the clash between the regime and opposition online. Some argue that government has much capacity to hurt the opposition's chances, using state-sponsored anonymous Internet political commentators and trolls, also known as "bots"[58]. Indeed, there is an argument that using bots and censoring websites might disrupt collective action. But censoring the internet and having bot farms is costly, while people share the content out of a negative position and desire for justice, not for monetary reasons. Studies have shown[59] that it is possible to affect the opposition movement by preventing information circulation, but as mentioned before, the many-to-many structure of cyberspace is too complex of a system to be shut down completely. More than that, such measures from the regime push the population to become even more politicized and internet-savvy.

For instance, after Russia's Federal Service shut down many websites for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, also known as "Roskomnadzor", applications that allowed users to bypass these restrictions, such as virtual private networks (VPNs) became the most downloaded for all application stores[60]. Telegram Messenger, which claims confidentiality, has also instantly become one of the most popular messenger

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[58] Stukal, D., Sanovich, S., Bonneau, R., & Tucker, J. A. (2022). Why Botter: How Pro-Government Bots Fight Opposition in Russia. *American Political Science Review*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055421001507
[59] King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2013). How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. *American Political Science Review*, *107*(2), 326–343. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055413000014
[60] Faiola, A. (2022, May 8). *How millions of Russians are tearing holes in the Digital Iron Curtain*. The Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/06/russia-vpn-putin-censorship-disinformation/

applications. After the 2020 presidential elections results were published in Belarus, the internet was shut down almost completely, except for a few applications, including Telegram. Over a week, some anti-regime public channels reached over one million subscribers, becoming serious rivals to state-owned TV channels[61]. Especially prominent was the "NEXTA" channel, which covered police brutality and coordinated the protesters. Hence, drastic measures such as internet shut down are expensive and ineffective. Last but not least, according to surveys, even the apolitical part of the population became enraged with the regime for switching off the internet. Therefore attempts to fight information spread on the internet might result in more mobilization.

2.2.3. Step 3: Being Motivated to Join an Anti-Government Protest

Finally, the third step within the mobilization chain is directed at urging a sympathetic part of the population to join an anti-regime protest. According to resource mobilization theory[62], the two initial steps of the mobilization chain are often not enough to motivate the potential protesters to participate in upcoming movements. Here, during the final stage of social mobilization, Hirschmann's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty (EVL) model comes into play. A citizen, even a motivated and well-informed one, still has to calculate the costs and benefits of joining the protest. While those sympathetic to the opposition indeed have resentment and discontent towards the regime due to the first two steps of mobilization, the "voice" option is not guaranteed. Feelings of disappointment with the regime that only get reinforced via social media might push the citizen to "exit" the given society through either internal or external migration. Another case of exit within the political realm might be the complete detachment from the state's political life if, instead of encouraging the first two steps of the mobilization

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[61] Yaromich, K. (2020). *Telegram as a Tool for Dissent: The Case of Mobilizing Mass Protest in Belarus* (thesis).
[62] Edwards, B. (2007). Resource mobilization theory. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosr060

chain lead to despair. Applying these steps is especially important when considering authoritarian regimes, as the costs of participation in the political process can be extremely high, sometimes causing life-threatening injuries or sentences. On the other hand, the benefits are not as clear; according to the scholars, it is not that rare for a protest to turn into a violent revolution with undesirable results, such as the military junta in Egypt or Myanmar[63]. Given the topic's relative novelty[64]. The impact of the internet on the third step has not been studied deeply, especially in information-scarce regimes. A lack of attention towards this topic and a strong focus on human behavior results in much of the mobilization chain research is adopted from sociology and psychology. Thus, I base the explanation of the mobilization chain partially on McAdam's[65] distinction between low-risk and high-risk activism and proper ways of attracting people to the latter. McAdams, a sociologist by profession, states that participation in high-risk activism such as protests in autocracies depends on creating a foundation for association and camaraderie. Aside from creating an ideology, the internet can play a perfect role in forming a space for different people who are united by a similar goal, hence providing incentives to join the protest and overcome the collective action problem. Regarding the EVL framework, a potential protester might choose to "exit" the political process instead of "voicing" through protest, but given the limited options for an exit, they are better off taking the risk. In addition, a positive portrayal of protests can alter one's decision-making towards the "voice" option. This is where anti-regime organizations can thrive and induce undecided individuals to a nonviolent protest.

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[63] Cole, J. (2012). Egypt's New Left versus the military junta. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, *79*(2), 487–510. https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2012.0050

[64] The literature on applying mobilization chain and the use of "high-risk" activism became widespread only by the end of the 1980s. It explained the willingness to participate in seemingly high-risk activities such as open protests in autocratic regimes through various factors. Some of them are risk-seeking traits, ideology, religiosity, and even gender.

[65] McAdam, D. (1986). Recruitment to high-risk activism: The case of freedom summer. *American Journal of Sociology*, *92*(1), 39. https://doi.org/10.1086/228463

2.3. Scarcity of sources

Given the closed nature of such regimes, the actual surveys were deemed impractical, as the opposition members from Russia and Kazakhstan refused to cooperate. Hence, I decided to base this thesis on an analysis of secondary data, such as surveys from independent research organizations, as well as statistics on the most popular social media platforms. The main survey organizations used in this research are Levada Center in Russia and Public Opinion Research in Kazakhstan. Their websites are https://www.levada.ru/en/ and https://opinions.kz/en/ respectively. These institutions are not affiliated with the government and are deemed as independent as is possible under a non-democratic regime. Both institutions have conducted extensive political activism surveys and data on regime perception and protest potential. As of 2020, President Lukashenka's regime banned similar organizations in Belarus[66].

Given that independent sociological research in Belarus is prohibited, I will use the data from the independent project *Narodny Opros* (accessed at https://narodny-opros.net), created by statisticians and mathematicians. They focus on the socio-political situation in Belarus, such as election fraud, regime approval, and COVID-19 reporting. The authors of the project base their analysis on multilevel regression surveying the population anonymously through Viber messenger. Yet, given the lack of credibility, I will use the data on Belarus with particular caution.

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[66] Deutsch Welle, D. W. (n.d.). *Belarus protests: Thousands defy ban to march on Lukashenko's birthday: DW: 30.08.2020*. DW.COM. Retrieved May 20, 2022, from https://www.dw.com/en/belarus-protests-lukashenko-minsk/a-54760253

2.4. Measuring the protest moods under information scarcity and manipulation

Another valuable source of protest behavior towards the regime is indirect evidence of the opposition's popularity. Of many websites and services, I chose YouTube's view count and subscribers count, as well as Telegram channels' subscribers count. YouTube and Telegram are the most popular platforms for video sharing and messaging, respectively, in selected countries[67]. While WhatsApp messenger is much more widely used, it does not have features that Telegram does, group channels and anonymous messaging. WhatsApp messenger supports message encryption, but all users must register with their phone numbers, revealing themselves as easy targets for government surveillance. Citizens in non-democratic regimes usually are constrained in demonstrating their political stance; hence the ease of mobilization is significantly lower compared to democratic regimes. This is explained by lesser information asymmetry, freedom of assembly, and a much more competitive political field, where both systemic and non-systemic oppositions openly encourage citizens to mobilize.

In contrast, authoritarian regimes limit access to information, establish dummy parties and invest a significant portion of the budget into propaganda[68]. With widespread access to the internet, people under authoritarian regimes can bypass these barriers and undergo mobilization. Using the information gathered from secondary data and relevant literature, I will build the argument on the example of three information autocracies: Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus.

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[67] Welbourne, D. J., & Grant, W. J. (2015). Science communication on YouTube: Factors that affect channel and video popularity. *Public Understanding of Science*, *25*(6), 706–718. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662515572068

[68] Huang, H. (2017). The pathology of hard propaganda. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3055019

CHAPTER III. CASE STUDIES

3.1. Introduction

`Given the repressive nature of the regimes that this thesis studies, it was decided to omit to conduct surveys and interviews in favor of secondary data and research. Studies by an institute of Open Democracy[69] show that conducting interviews is unrepresentative for two reasons. First, people in such regimes are afraid of possible repercussions and decline interview invitations. Second, those who agree to be interviewed are mostly senior adults who support the regime. Hence, it does not provide the study with proper sampling. Recent opinion polls[70] show that results from respondents are significantly flawed, as the Russia-Ukraine war has instilled fear of repression into people. The author of the thesis has attempted to conduct a series of interviews. However, with the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine, the overwhelming number of respondents in both Kazakhstan and Russia refused to conduct an interview. Therefore, this chapter analyzes the survey data from non-governmental organizations on regime perception and, where possible, on opposition and protest movement perception. Furthermore, analytics from the largest social media platform and messenger - YouTube and Telegram, respectively, have been gathered to show the effectiveness of the internet as a medium for mobilization.

The findings[71] show that social media significantly affects the anti-regime sentiments and willingness to protest, especially among the younger generation. Corruption investigations have been among the most successful categories of content that swayed the public's opinion

[69]Alyukov, M. (2022, March 9). In Russia, opinion polls are a political weapon. openDemocracy. Retrieved May 16, 2022, from https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-opinion-polls-war-ukraine/
[70]Erpyleva, S. (2022, April 26). Why do Russians support the war against Ukraine? Social Europe. Retrieved May 16, 2022, from https://socialeurope.eu/why-do-russians-support-the-war-against-ukraine
[71]Gainous, J., Wagner, K. M., & Ziegler, C. E. (2017). Digital Media and political opposition in authoritarian systems: Russia's 2011 and 2016 Duma elections. Democratization, 25(2), 209–226. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1315566

regarding both the regime and the opposition. Messenger applications also impact the mobilization chain, as one can ensure that a large portion of the population is discontent with the regime. This thesis focuses on Telegram Messenger, as it provides end-to-end confidentiality and allows to bypass internet shutdowns. Subscriber growth of both YouTube and Telegram shows tremendous interest in opposition channels, leading to larger protests than ever. Guriev, who coined the term "information autocracy"[72]. States that the primary tool of new authoritarianism is not violence but information control. Therefore, anonymous text messengers are essential to break through the information bubble and mobilize the population.

Different types of economies hint that any authoritarian regime can be susceptible to mobilization through the internet, whether it is a resource-rich state. This chapter will demonstrate three case studies of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, where access to social media allowed to mobilize a substantial amount of population against all odds. It will also claim that the study can be replicated in other countries with similar political regimes since the research is based on perception and subsequent mobilization of the people through generally accepted marks of public frustration such as corruption and incompetence. Moreover, these cases show that political mobilization can occur without clearly defined opposition, making this approach more viable.

3.2. Russia

Like the other two countries studied in this thesis, Russia is a personalistic autocracy focused on censorship and information manipulation. According to Freedom House: "With loyalist security forces, a subservient judiciary, a controlled media environment, and a legislature consisting of a ruling party and pliable opposition factions, the Kremlin is able to manipulate

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[72] Guriev, S., ; Treisman, D. (2015). How modern dictators survive: An informational theory of the new authoritarianism, 22. https://doi.org/10.3386/w21136

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elections and suppress genuine dissent"[73]. Certainly, scoring only five points out of forty in

"political rights" and similar numbers in "civil liberties", the Russian government embodies

the hallmark of a modern information autocracy. The regime relies on propaganda and

manipulation of the civilians and resorts to violence only on rare occasions when there is a

direct threat to the regime's survival. Besides mass protests, instances of coercion have been

found when the opposition leader rose in popularity, thus challenging Putin's authority. A

region's military and economic hegemony, Russia paves the way for its neighbors: the

autocracies of Central Asia and Belarus. While there is an argument[74], that the Chinese

regime is quite similar to Russia's, cultural ties, political structure, and similar economic

development makes the Russian regime a role model for other regional autocracies and

excludes China from this thesis[75]. Therefore censored by the regime and surrounded by

fictional political parties, the anti-government sentiments are complicated to express, let

alone utilize in the protest movement. Here, the internet comes to play as a provider of

mobilization in the face of all barriers.

3.2.1. Internet as a source of the mobilization process

According to the surveys conducted by organizations with no affiliation with the

government[76] Russians choose the YouTube platform as the most popular entertainment and

education website. Telegram Messenger has seen the rise in communication, especially

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[73] Russia: Freedom in the world 2022 country report. Freedom House. (n.d.)
https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2022
[74] Guangcheng, X. (2015). The strategic interests of China and Russia in Central Asia. China, The United States, and the Future of Central Asia, 154–172. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479844333.003.0006
[75] Scholars agree that Beijing has successfully used the same tools to suppress anti-regime movements and promote Chinese policy-making as the best. Nevertheless, China's demography, economic performance, and political structure go beyond the scope of this paper.
[76] Internet, social networks, and VPN. LevadaCenter. (2022, April 22). Retrieved May 16, 2022, from https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/04/22/internet-social-networks-and-vpn/

among younger people. Here I will provide secondary data on these two services and demonstrate that the opposition successfully utilizes them to mobilize people.

3.2.2. YouTube

YouTube is an online video-sharing platform ranked the second most popular website in the world. According to Bowyer[77] and colleagues, over time, content on YouTube went from purely entertaining to involving social, political, and economic aspects worldwide. Recent studies indicate that video journalism on the internet became the most dominant source of information due to ease of content perception compared to traditional text format. Surveys[78] in Russia and worldwide, YouTube has been among the top-visited platforms for all age groups. Therefore, the decision to use YouTube as the primary source of mobilization and protest formation is justified, given the platform's penetration rate and audience preferences.

To illustrate the effect that YouTube has on the mobilization process in Russia, I decided to use two of the investigation cases that Alexey Navalny's team conducted. Navalny's organization, known as the "Anti-Corruption Fund", is Russia's largest body of non-systemic opposition. Alexey Navalny is considered the opposition leader by both the regime and the population. Information autocracies are threatened by influential individuals who can sway public perception. Hence the name "Navalny" is a taboo for pro-regime media. According to experts[79] Police detain civilians with Navanly's symbols on banners and even mugs. Some individuals used fear of Navalny to their benefit; across Russia, people write his name on snowdrifts, pits, and walls, urging public utilities to fix them overnight. With regards to

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[77] Bowyer, B. T., Kahne, J. E., & Middaugh, E. (2015). Youth comprehension of political messages in YouTube videos. New Media & Society, 19(4), 522–541. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815611593
[78] Brodersen, A., Scellato, S., & Wattenhofer, M. (2012). YouTube around the world. Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on World Wide Web. https://doi.org/10.1145/2187836.2187870
[79] Kremlin will count on Russian protests fading. (2021). Emerald Expert Briefings. https://doi.org/10.1108/oxan-db259144

public perception of Navalny, Levada-Center[80] polls show that Navalny is seen as the leader of the opposition by 90 percent of Russians. Navalny's detailed and entertaining exposure of Russia's top officials works on all three steps of the mobilization chain: it sympathizes the people with the protest movement by showing corruption among the elite, informs potential protesters about the Anti-Corruption Fund and its events, and lastly, overcomes the collective action problem by showing the tremendous number of people that watched the investigations and thus are frustrated by the regime. This paper will showcase two of the most famous investigations: against former and current Presidents of the Russian Federation: Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin.

Dmitry Medvedev served one presidential term from 2008 to 2012. During his rule, Moscow began a political thaw and worked on establishing ties with Washington and the rest of the Western world. Still, Medvedev's presidency was called a "tandemocracy", where Vladimir Putin, while being "demoted" from the position of President to prime minister, had the final say in both domestic and foreign policy. Being used by Putin as a tool to bypass the constitutional ban on serving more than two presidential terms in a row, Medvedev used to access political resources to enrich himself. Navalny's investigation[81] that came out on March 2, 2017, amassed about 40 million views monthly. Following the lack of reaction from the government, Anti-Corruption Fund announced state-wide protests[82] to be held on March 26. Independent observers claimed that the protesters gathered around 150,000 people, being one of the largest protests in several years. This number is also confirmed in some pro-state media[83]. While Medvedev only shirked from revealing his income and real estate, foreign

[80] Алексей Навальный и его потенциальные сторонники. Riddle Russia. (n.d.). Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://ridl.io/ru/aleksej-navalnyj-i-ego-potencialnye-storonniki/
[81] Он вам не Димон. YouTube. (2017, March 2). Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://youtu.be/qrwlk7_GF9g
[82] ФБК. (2017, March 26). #димонответит. митинги 26 марта по всей россии. прямой эфир. YouTube. Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2FhmpoHMiQ
[83] Кремль на развилке: каковы последствия протестных акций по всей россии. РБК. (2017, March 26). Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://www.rbc.ru/politics/26/03/2017/58d7c6f39a7947448a1a3f45?from=subject%3Ffrom

scholars mention that such protests increased the political activity of citizens and proposed a real challenge to the regime.

Another case of anti-corruption investigation is called "Putin's Palace"[84] which was published on January 19, 2021. Putin's corruption was exposed for the first time in his almost 20-year rule. Just a week after publishing, the 111-minute investigation crossed the 100 million views mark[85]. According to YouTube, most viewers are from Russia, while Levada-Center stated that every third Russian either watched the investigation or heard about it. Following the documented evidence of Putin's 1.35 billion euro palace, Navalny's team organized a demonstration a week later, on January 26, 2021. A video that opened with Navalny's call to action was a finishing touch for an anti-regime protest that brought together around 300,000 people across Russia[86]. Although by the time the video was released Navalny was sent to jail, the opposition managed to mobilize an unprecedented number of people, twice as much as the previous protest against Medvedev.

While these cases have not led to regime change or resignations, the public perception of the Russian elite significantly worsened, making it easier for the opposition to resist the regime and bring people on the streets. Overall, only Anti-Corruption Fund has over 6 million subscribers and over 1.3 billion views in total[87], therefore challenging television channels.

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[84] Дворец для Путина. история самой большой взятки. YouTube. (2021, January 19). Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://youtu.be/ipAnwilMncI

[85] Фильм "Дворец для Путина" на ютьюбе посмотрели 100 миллионов раз. Meduza. (n.d.). Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://meduza.io/news/2021/01/28/film-dvorets-dlya-putina-na-yutyube-posmotreli-100-millionov-raz

[86] На акциях протеста в поддержку Навального по всей России задержали более 4300 человек. Открытые Медиа. (2021, January 31). Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://openmedia.io/news/n1/na-akciyax-za-navalnogo-31-yanvarya-zaderzhali-bolshe-lyudej-chem-na-predydushhix-protestax/

[87] Алексей Навальный's YouTube stats- socialblade. (n.d.). Retrieved May 16, 2022, from https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/navalnyru

3.2.3. Telegram

Another source of information that exists thanks to widespread access to smartphones and the Internet is Telegram Messenger. Created by Pavel Durov, who was sent to political exile by Putin's regime[88], Telegram has become a symbol of digital resistance and an alternative way to access the content. According to Bykov[89], Telegram has seen exceptional popularity in autocratic regimes such as Russia and Belarus, where the risk of spreading the information different from the government agenda is high. Such an approach to spreading and accessing information is visible not only in a limited number of countries but all over the world, including hybrid regimes such as Iran, Brazil, and India. Some governments understand the importance of Telegram as an alternative media and are trying to step in. For example, President of Brazil Bolsonaro's channel on Telegram has over 1 million subscribers, former President of the Russian Federation's channel has amassed 500,000 users.[90]. Yet, it cannot be compared to myriads of public channels with similarly large audiences.

More evidence of the importance of Telegram can be found in regimes with no clear non-systemic opposition. Unlike Russia, where albeit with similar levels of political oppression, Navalny's Anti-Corruption Fund managed to position itself on YouTube, opposition in Belarus and Kazakhstan has to raise awareness and mobilize the population through Telegram.

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[88] Akbari, A., Gabdulhakov, R. (2019). Platform surveillance and resistance in Iran and Russia: The case of Telegram. Surveillance and Society, 17(1/2), 223–231. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v17i1/2.12928
[89] Bykov, I. A., Medvedeva, M. V., Hradziushka, A. A. (2021). Anonymous communication strategy in Telegram: Toward a comparative analysis of Russia and Belarus. 2021 Communication Strategies in Digital Society Seminar (ComSDS). https://doi.org/10.1109/comsds52473.2021.9422858
[90] How many people use Telegram in 2022? 55 telegram stats. Backlinko. (2022, January 5). Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://backlinko.com/telegram-users

3.2.4. Navalny as an x-factor?

The lack of established non-systemic opposition has been a norm for most information autocracies, while a solid and widespread anti-regime organization like "The anti-Corruption Fund" has been an outlier. Built by Alexei Navalny, the Fund has survived 11 years in Putin's Russia. Hence, the efficiency of digital resistance and mobilization can be attributed by critics to the presence of a nationwide organization with offices in major cities. However, examples of Belarus and Kazakhstan provide an argument that anti-regime movements can arise without clearly defined opposition leaders. In the case of these two countries, access to alternative media and confidential messaging was enough to ignite the mobilization chain.

3.2.5. The longevity of the protest movement

Protest movement occurs in Russia more often than in Kazakhstan or Belarus[91]. This happens despite relative similarities in economic performance and corruption perception[92]. Another critical aspect of protests in Russia is their permanence. Scholars of peaceful movements consider such longevity of the Russian opposition movement to be a product of political culture and its peaceful nature. Indeed, Arntsen[93] claims that peaceful protests are more effective and long-lasting. Hence they are capable of mobilizing more people in the long term. Violent clashes of Belarussian and Kazakh protesters with the regime turned out to result in shorter movements and failure to reach the main goals of the opposition as a result.

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[91]Elections, protest, and regime dynamics. (2020). *Elections, Protest, and Authoritarian Regime Stability*, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108893251.001
[92]Statista Research Department. (2022, January 25). *Corruption perceptions index of CIS countries 2021*. Statista. Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/1090423/corruption-perception-index-cis/
[93] Arntsen, E. (2021, November 29). *Are peaceful protests more effective than violent ones?* News @ Northeastern. Retrieved May 20, 2022, from https://news.northeastern.edu/2020/06/10/are-peaceful-protests-more-effective-than-violent-ones/

3.3. Belarus

Acting as the President of Belarus since 1994, Alexander Lukashenko and his regime have almost lost control of overpopulation in 2020. The first and only President of Belarus, Lukashenko has never enjoyed high levels of popular support, but thanks to propaganda and pinpoint repressions of opposition leaders, his regime managed to survive more than any of the post-soviet states[94]. Even Vladimir Putin had to create an illusion of regime change in 2008 and swap seats with Dmitry Medvedev to bypass the constitutional norms[95]. In the case of Belarus, Lukashenko announced his bid for the sixth consecutive presidential election. After he expectedly won the 2020 presidential election, the population became enraged, as the exit polls showed a victory of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who, on average, had 60-70 percent of the electoral votes[96]. The pro-state media announced that Lukashenko won 81 percent of the vote, while Tsikhanouskaya barely got 10 percent. In response, a significant portion of 9,4 million Belarus went on the streets, starting from the capital of Belarus, Minsk, and moving to small cities and villages. European observers described the protests as peaceful and nonviolent. Most of the discontent electorate voiced protest by marching on the streets, while some initiated strikes on factories, hurting the regime as farming and heavy industry account for a large portion of the state's GDP. As a result, the Western countries refused to admit Lukashenko's victory and requested fair elections[97]. But supported by Putin's regime, Lukashenko managed to stay in power via mass repressions and extreme violation of human rights. During protests, the Internet in Belarus was blocked, with exceptions for pro-

[94] Kasmach, L. (2015). The last dictatorship in Europe: Belarus under Lukashenko. Canadian Slavonic Papers, 57(1-2), 124–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2015.1036593

[95] Bacon, E. (2012). Public political narratives: Developing a neglected source through the exploratory case of Russia in the Putin-Medvedev era. Political Studies, 60(4), 768–786. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2011.00939.x

[96] The protest movement in Belarus: Resistance and repression. (2021). Strategic Comments, 27(2), i-iii. https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2021.1911136

[97] Aslund, A., Hagemejer, J. (2021). EU sanctions on Belarus as an effective policy tool. SSRN Electronic Journal. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3991710

state news websites. The officials denied the intentional internet shutdown, claiming that they experienced a heavy attack from abroad. However, according to experts, state-owned internet provider Beltelecom switched off most websites to hide the news about the protests from the population. Lukashenko's regime survived, but it became abundantly clear to the world and Belarussians that the President has no popular support and is unlikely to rule without Putin's financial and military support. The success of the protests is in its numbers, and during the internet blackout, Telegram Messenger became the only source of information and instant messaging.

3.3.1. Telegram in Belarus

Similar to Russia, Telegram has become a popular tool of communication and access to alternative opinions in Belarus[98]. An information autocracy, the Belarussian regime has caused immense popularity of independent, anonymous public channels in Telegram. Studies show that the presence of large information channels and smaller local groups on Telegram has mobilized the population of Belarus. As Matteo puts it: "pre-existing social networks help drive mobilization in localities by facilitating communication, coordination, and engagement prior to protest onset, priming people to be ready when the moment of protest arrives"[99]

Telegram's anonymous nature allowed citizens to publicly express their concerns without fear of repression. Independent data analytics show that on the election day in Belarus, the "NEXTA" Telegram channel had around 300,000 subscribers, while a week later, on August 16, 2021, the subscriber count reached 2 million people. This explains how the anti-regime part of the population managed to spread the information and organize a protest movement

[98] Coalson, R. (2020, August 17). How telegram users found a way through Belarus's internet lockdown. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://www.rferl.org/a/how-telegram-users-found-a-way-through-belarus-s-internet-lockdown/30780136.html

[99] Mateo, E. (2022). "All of Belarus has come out onto the streets": Exploring nationwide protest and the role of pre-existing social networks. Post-Soviet Affairs, 38(1-2), 39. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586x.2022.2026127

quickly. In this case, the collective action problem was resolved because group members had similar sentiments and knew that discontent with the regime was almost unanimous.[100]. Given the relatively small population of Belarus, every fourth Belarus citizen obtained access to the anti-regime channel. As Roman Protasevich, the creator of NEXTA, states, Lukashenko's regime shoot itself in the foot as "Telegram has picked up almost all Belarusians who are flooding the streets to bring about changes in the country"[101]. The complete shutdown of the internet has pushed even relatively disengaged citizens to look for information online, hence launching the mobilization chain.

3.4. Kazakhstan

A similar protest movement occurred in Kazakhstan after the government doubled diesel prices in January 2022[102]. A personalistic autocracy focused on information manipulation, the Republic of Kazakhstan is another case of a seemingly stable regime that began to show cracks in the information era. Just as Russian and Belorussian leaders, the Kazakhstani elite enjoyed over two decades of undisputed rule with little to no democratization. While the newly elected President Tokayev directed the political course of the regime on the West to attract foreign investment, the old problems have stayed. A price spike on diesel and gas in the Western part of the country caused uprisings and strikes among locals, then spread all over the country in a few days. The government shut down the internet in the country, similar to Belarus, but it did not help, as a significant portion of the population learned to use virtual private networks and Telegram to bypass the restrictions. As a result, some protests turned from peaceful demonstrations against high prices into violent protests to remove the President

[100] Telegram channel "Nexta live" - @nexta_live statistics - TGSTAT. TGStat.com. (n.d.). Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://by.tgstat.com/en/channel/@nexta_live/stat
[101] Kuryshko, D. (2020, August 12). Belarus election: How NEXTA channel bypassed news blackout. BBC News. Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53753412
[102] Kudaibergenova, D. T., Laruelle, M. (2022). Making sense of the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan: Failing legitimacy, culture of protests, and elite readjustments. Post-Soviet Affairs, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586x.2022.2077060

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and form a new government. Like Russia, Kazakhstan's regime relied heavily on censorship and misinformation. Petroleum rich country, the regime co-opted many of the influential people and organizations, creating oligarchs who control media and key business sectors[103]. The small number of protests before the rise of social media might indicate that such an approach worked. The first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, saw very few protests during his reign, which a lack of communication between people can explain. The ninth largest country in the world, Kazakhstan's population is only eighteen million people, making it challenging to organize and act as a single front of opposition[104]. Indeed, the ability of secure messengers to overcome the collective action problem and unwillingness to "voice" their concerns is unmatched by any preceding technologies and modes of communication. According to a recent study of civic participation in authoritarian regimes, "Telegram's performance and practices drive citizens to form affective connections to the platform and to perceive it as an ally in their struggle against repressions and digital censorship[105]. Unlike Russian and Belarussian protests, mass demonstrations in Kazakhstan turned violent. Unable to deter protesters who had already captured some municipal buildings, President Tokayev sent a request for help from Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). CSTO, which has six permanent members such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, sent special forces to suppress the protests. In the aftermath of the protests, no precise numbers of victims were released. According to independent organizations, around 300 citizens were killed during the protests. Later the state media showed Tokayev's speech in which he proclaimed the events as a terrorist attack. This act of terrorism was planned

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[103] Kendall-Taylor, A. (2012). Purchasing power: Oil, elections and regime durability in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Europe-Asia Studies, 64(4), 737–760. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.671567
[104] Kazakhstan population. Worldometer. (n.d.). Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/kazakhstan-population/
[105] Wijermars, M., Lokot, T. (2022). Is Telegram a "Harbinger of freedom"? The performance, practices, and perception of platforms as political actors in authoritarian states. Post-Soviet Affairs, 38(1-2), 126. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586x.2022.2030645

from abroad and involved about 20,000 terrorists. The independent journalists and the public demanded an open investigation, but the Ministry of Internal Affairs promised to release the results later in the year. The case of Kazakhstan shows social media can mobilize the population against a resource-rich information autocracy given access to social media. The protesters reached their initial goal: to cancel the increase in gas fuel price. Yet, the more broad socio-economic and political demands were not fulfilled, partially because of the violent nature that protest turned into.

3.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, widespread access to social media and the internet impacts the mobilization movement against authoritarian regimes. While alternative information and mass communication enabled more people to protest in selected countries, the opposition might not radically change the regime and must maintain a prolonged resistance.

3.5.1. Higher protester turnout

Information autocracies are distinguished for their rigidity and resistance to internal political turmoil. All three examples of such regimes have remained in power. Putin, Lukashenko, and Tokayev have stabilized the situation and successfully suppressed protests in their respective countries. Yet, one shall not consider these protests useless. Thanks to social media, more people than ever were mobilized and demonstrated their dislike of the regime. This, in return, affects the behavior of the rest of the population, creating incentives to voice their concerns rather than staying outside.

3.5.2. Protests alone might not fix everything overnight.

Examples of three authoritarian regimes and the body of similar literature show that however large, protests alone cannot bring change in a short period. The examples of civil

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disobedience show that in most cases, it takes years until peaceful protests bring positive change to the population. The opposition must educate the population and explain that protest movement shall become a part of one's lifestyle to challenge the autocratic regime. Alongside the protests, people shall continue to distribute politically and socially valuable content such as corruption investigations and abuse of authority. This is required to keep the mobilization state alert and attract more potential protesters.

3.5.3. Violence is not an answer.

The examples of the mobilization through social media confirm the prominent findings of Erica Chenoweth[106] who claims that peaceful demonstrations bring more change than violent ones. Indeed, in the case of both Belarus and Kazakhstan, regimes had the excuse to exercise violence due to illegal protests or threats of terrorists. As a result, such movements quickly die out, as protesters risk too much and benefit almost nothing. For the abovementioned reasons organizing a clearly defined opposition movement seems to be the most rational approach to resisting the information autocracy. Internet and technologies are proved to be useful, but they are just tools of the opposition movement, not the movement itself. Otherwise, potentially effective population mobilization might turn into what skeptics call "slacktivism" or at-home protest, where people stay home and discuss the movement online without ever joining the protest. The example of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Fund shows the viability of opposition organizations even under repressive regimes. In contrast, the cases of Kazakhstan and Belarus show the lack of organization caused by sporadic opposition movements.

[106] Chenoweth, E., Stephan, M. J. (2013). Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict. Columbia University Press.

CONCLUSION

This thesis paper examined the relatively new concept of opposition mobilization under information autocracies. Focusing on the personalistic autocracies of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, the thesis further developed the link between technology and the mobilization process. While there are obstacles in obtaining first-hand data on opposition movement through interviews or surveys due to regimes' nature, as well as media censorship and information manipulation, the study finds that actions taken by the opposition online may lead to higher protest turnout. Secondary data analysis shows that the YouTube video platform can be a source of mobilization chain as the opposition may publish videos that portray the regime in a bad light. Telegram messenger has also been proven to positively affect mobilization rates, as confidential messaging and access to alternative sources of information engage the population and overcome collective action problems.

The paper evaluated the existing literature, introduced the concept of information autocracies and pointed out gaps that can be filled by further research. The chapter on research strategy and methodology outlines the thesis's approach toward studying hybrid autocracies and steps in the mobilization chain. Lastly, I have presented case studies of three states with similar regime types and locations: the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. Throughout the case studies, I put forward an argument that there is an impact of anti-regime content that is published online. Mainly, Alexei Navalny's investigations sparked mass protests shortly after the videos were published.

Similarly, access to communication and information outside of the pro-state propaganda bubble has helped protests in Belarus and Kazakhstan to reinforce all three steps of the mobilization chain. This messenger app also allowed protesters to organize and coordinate during and after the protests as well. While studying this topic, I realized the difficulty of

conducting fieldwork in authoritarian states. Recent protests in Kazakhstan took place a month before the Russian invasion of Ukraine; hence, most respondents declined to conduct interviews. Therefore, I had to resort to the secondary body of research and evaluate the existing data to use it for my cases.

This topic is of high interest to contemporary scholars, as hybrid authoritarianism is rising globally. Also, there are gaps in my research that can be filled after the war in Ukraine ends and the situation in Central Asia stabilizes. For instance, along with the communication crackdown, the current regime in Russia has passed a law[107] that imposes fines and jail terms for spreading any information not in accordance with the state agenda. The study of information autocracies and the role of technology in mobilization and opposition formation is important as being stuck between traditional autocratic regimes and democracy, regimes across the world can turn to the latter if the mobilization and anti-regime movement is better studied. Future research questions might revolve around the evolution of internet technology. Already some authors[108] have speculated that while the internet brings freedom of communication and access to different channels of information, in the future, autocrats will manage to use the internet as another propaganda mouthpiece.

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