

POLÁNYI PUBLICATIONS

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**CIVIL SOCIETY AND AUTHORITARIAN STATE:
RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF 'RESISTANCE'
AND 'OPPOSITION' IN BELARUS AND
AZERBAIJAN**

II.2022/WP01

ABSTRACT

The so-called 'color revolutions' have clearly produced an academic trend of portraying opposition and civil society, in the post-Soviet sphere, as 'successful' or 'failed' depending on the outcome of popular protests against authoritarian regimes. In the countries where popular upheavals are considered as 'failed', the academic interest has shifted more into elaboration of 'authoritarian stability', rather than focusing on the resistance itself. But how pro-democratic civil society continues to survive under adverse conditions, after 'failed' attempts to prevent authoritarian consolidation? With a major focus on the very existence of the resistance, rather than outcome, this research investigates the unique structure and strategies implemented by civil society, to stay in the severely restricted public space and produce an alternative public discourse in Belarus and Azerbaijan.

Key Words: civil society, resistance, opposition, authoritarianism, contentious politics, democratization

Civil society and authoritarian state: Rethinking the concept of ‘resistance’ and ‘opposition’ in Belarus and Azerbaijan

Ravid Taghiyev

I. Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the development of civil society has been regarded as one of the main pillars of transition and democratization within the post-Soviet space. The first half of 2000s proved to be the period of ‘revolutions’ and ‘popular protests’ in the region, as almost in all the post-Soviet countries opposition and civil society attempted to change the power through massive protests. Some of these attempts were successful in removing the authoritarian leaders from the power, while the others were brutally crushed by the government followed by consolidation of an authoritarian rule. Depending on their outcomes, the post-Soviet cases are mainly classified as ‘successful’ or ‘failed’ pro-democratic resistance movements in academic literature.

Over the past three decades, we have observed how civic initiatives and activism play a central role in resisting authoritarian consolidation and preserving fragile democratic experience in the post-Soviet countries. However, the level of impact of civil society initiatives on political and social changes in these countries vary extensively. This research paper focuses on two Eastern Partnership countries which are considered as consolidated authoritarian states, Belarus and Azerbaijan. In both the cases the authoritarian rule has been consolidated through suppressing fragile democratization process and systematically crashing any resistance in society throughout the last three decades.

In the first part, the research article briefly describes the development and current state of resistance in Belarus and Azerbaijan, by focusing on the ‘authoritarian environment’ and adverse conditions the civil society and opposition try to survive under. The unique features of the civil society and its interconnection with the opposition centers in Azerbaijan and Belarus will be addressed in the second part of the article. This part will also focus on the structure of the opposition and how it is different from an open or competitive systems. Finally, the final part will describe the models and strategies implemented by the resistance groups (e.g., opposition, independent civil society, NGOs), as well as the main challenges for the future of the civil society sector.

II. Research objectives

The studies on pro-democratic social movements and resistance in the post-Soviet countries have thoroughly investigated the social movements that lead to democratic changes in post-Soviet cases, most famously in Georgia, Ukraine, and more recently in Armenia. However, there are also the countries, like Belarus and Azerbaijan, where popular upheavals and attempts to change the political system have failed to achieve any ‘considerable’ outcome. These countries are referred in the academic literature about authoritarian studies (Bunce and Wolchik 2011) as ‘failed cases’. Furthermore, the independent reporting organizations (e.g., Freedom House, Human Rights Watch) continuously classify these cases as ‘consolidated authoritarian regimes’ that oppresses any democratization attempts and violates the fundamental human rights since, at least, the last two decades. However, compared to the other closed authoritarian regimes (e.g., Turkmenistan), the resistance and political activism in Belarus and Azerbaijan still remain vibrant and actively participate in the public discourse, although their participation is being regularly constrained and oppressed.

Considering the features of the resistance under the adverse conditions, the main research objective of this article is to develop a closer look into the unique role of the civil society and opposition in the post-Soviet countries where the regime change through popular revolts has been failed. In that sense, the research article focuses on analysis of two countries Belarus and Azerbaijan, where consolidation of authoritarianism progressed in two similar scenarios. By doing so, I aim to elaborate about the distinguishing conceptual features of civil society in Azerbaijan and Belarus. Therefore, the objective is to focus more on the notions of “civil society” and “opposition” in these countries to understand the conceptual differences in operation of the opposition compared to a competitive/open system. At the same time, I suggest focusing on the dynamics and strategies within resistance itself and how it survives under adverse conditions imposed by the regime (e.g., limited public space, lack of resources, repression, persecution). Lastly, it is important to develop an alternative view through avoiding the dominant reference to resistance as ‘failure’ or ‘success’ merely by their performance outcome. So, while examining the concept of resistance/opposition in authoritarian context, the general approach of this research is based on the inner dynamics and perspectives, rather than the achieved results.

III. Research Methods and Techniques

Before elaborating the research techniques that I intend to use for this research project, it is important to mention how difficult it is to access reliable empirical sources about the conditions at place. In both the countries, the authorities severely constrain the space for non-governmental initiatives and independent journalism. Independent research projects and opinion polls are not allowed to operate, or, in extreme cases, they are being persecuted and jailed. The lack of data that could be independently accessed is one of the main challenges to research the social structures and view the general picture. However, through multi-dimensional approach one could bring together different practical aspects via combined research techniques and that is exactly what is required for this research paper as well.

A combination of different types of research techniques allowed me collect sufficient empirical data to understand the situation. Considering the need for multidimensional approach, I implemented the research techniques which could be classified into ‘observatory analysis’ (digital ethnography, online content analysis) and interviews with the people who are directly engaged in the field.

The aim of using digital ethnography technique is to try to observe how people and associations interconnect online and what kind of media content is being produced and consumed in the Belarusian and Azerbaijani societies. It is extremely significant to understand the dynamics of online communication and self-organization. In the contemporary world, online platforms have become central for the operation of civil society and activism, because the physical and public spaces, as well as traditional media (e.g., TV channels, print media, radio) is under total control of the regime. That is why observing the online social interaction becomes very significant for understanding the general ‘opposition mindset’. While observing the online platforms where the civil society members, activists and opposition groups operate, I implement online content analysis of the websites, social media content, and discourse analysis of prominent figures who play important roles in various pro-democratic activities.

Simultaneously, I carried out online qualitative (in-depth) interviews with civil society members from Azerbaijan and Belarus. The interviewees were experienced civil society activists who are closely involved in educational activities for younger generations, as well as civic associations. The predefined questions were as following:

- *What are the main challenges to the civil society in the country?*
- *What strategies are used to bypass the restrictions imposed by the regime?*

- *What role does the civil society play in resistance activities?*
- *What are the relations between the civic initiatives and opposition?*

The interviews have been organized in semi-structured style to let the interviewees to talk freely, because alongside the pre-defined questions, random questions were being asked according to the flow of interviewee's speech. It allowed me to collect the data I did not expect to get, but eventually became useful to understand some additional aspects.

IV. Conceptual Framework

Building a relevant and/or explaining conceptual approach would be the most challenging point of this article. Thus, the deformed nature of the resistance/opposition under the contemporary authoritarian regimes that implement new strategies misfits the traditional explanation of how civil society operates and what role it plays in democratization. Therefore, it is of a great importance that we look into some concepts in the literature as an 'ideal model' in order to be able to detect how the roles and functions are reshaped.

To start with a fundamental one, by 'civil society' I refer to the definition suggested by Jurgen Habermas (1996, 366-367) as following:

“Civil society is composed of those ... associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework or organized public spheres.”

Habermas' definition suggests us the understanding of the key role played by civil society to interconnect private concerns and public sphere in a society. However, as I suggested earlier, we shall take this definition as an 'ideal model' to better understand how the model is being deformed or reshaped in the authoritarian context. Before moving into more elaboration of different types of civil associations operating in civil society, we also need to understand what the main features of 'ideal type civil society' are.

Cohen and Arato (1992, 346) describe “a modern differentiated civil society” as having the following main features:

- **plurality**: families, informal groups, and voluntary associations whose plurality and autonomy allow for a variety of forms of life
- **publicity**: institutions of culture and communication
- **privacy**: a domain of individual self-development and moral choice
- **and legality**: structures of general laws and basic rights needed to demarcate plurality, publicity, and privacy from at least the state, and the economy

In other words, Cohen and Arato define the aforementioned structures as the fundamental requirements for the institutional existence of a modern society. However, we observe how civil society and resistance could mutate and adapt to the changing and adverse conditions in authoritarian regimes. More on this topic and its empirical elaboration will be discussed later, while elaborating the case studies.

The contemporary authoritarian regimes implement different strategies to keep the society and opposition under strict control. One of the most significant features of these regimes is their ability to co-exist with civic associations. If we look solely through the traditional ‘lenses’ of civil society’s democratizing function, it would seem counterintuitive, because the expectation would be the regime’s ‘merciless intolerance’ towards autonomous civic associations. However, over the past decades, the modern authoritarian regimes have developed several unique features that make them more ‘immune’ to democratic changes. Perhaps, the ability to deal with pro-democratic resistance comes on top of the list in authoritarian handbook. Contrary to the previous work on the topic of the role of civic associations in competing against authoritarianism, Lewis (2013, 325) lays out his argument as following:

“... Instead, most contemporary authoritarian states are able to co-exist with a wide range of non-governmental associations, raising important questions about the nature of modern authoritarianism and the status of these civic groups.”

He suggests looking into the other side of the coin, because it is becoming more and more evident in the contemporary authoritarian regimes where the authority imitates the democratic institutions, including elections and, even, opposition. Without underestimating the significant role of civic associations in competing an authoritarian rule, Lewis (2013) singles out a potential role of non-governmental associations to legitimize the authoritarian regime through cooperation, instead of contestation.

This conceptual viewpoint allows us to understand civil associations as a ‘two-way road’ which might produce contradicting results depending on the system and conditions they operate in. But what makes civil associations cooperate with an authoritarian state and how the authoritarian state co-exists with these groups? In this very point, Cohen and Arato (1992), suggests two types of ‘collective action’ depending on their role in the public sphere: *defensive* (focusing on changes within civil society) and *offensive* (targeting political and economic society). The offensive type collection action appears to be more dangerous for the authoritarian regime as it threatens to change certain things that the regime is built on.

Deriving from Cohen and Arato concepts, Young (2000) developed a classification of civic associations to understand how the regime decides to allow or persecute certain types of civic associations. Her dualistic characterization of civil society offers to classify civil associations, according to their functions played in the society, into two main groups: ‘self-organizing’ and ‘contributing into the public sphere’.

By ‘self-organization’ she refers to the civil associations that focus on organization process itself for the sake of voicing concerns or interests together (e.g., marginalized groups, environmental movements, association among the members of certain fields like art, sport etc.) in order to be represented or heard in society. More precisely, these types of civil associations play the role of ‘representation’ in society, aimed at ‘self-determination’ or ‘self-development’ (Young 2000, 165).

Contrary to ‘self-organizing’ associations, Young defines the second group of civil associations as ‘contributing to the public sphere’. As it is obvious from their name, these association do not only organize, but also contribute to the public sphere, be it political or socio-economic matters, through producing alternative discourses and approaches. In other words, alongside the representative role, ‘contributing’ civil associations maintain the function of participation in the socio-political life of the society, which she refers as ‘public sphere’ and defines it as ‘the primary connector between people and power’ (Young 2000, 173). The civil associations that contribute to the public sphere appear as the main driving forces of pro-democratic movements and resistance in authoritarian regimes. Therefore, this article focuses mainly on this particular type of civil society associations.

V. Civic initiatives under authoritarian rule

There are two reasons why I decided to choose Belarus and Azerbaijan as case studies for this research project. Firstly, both of the cases are considered as ‘consolidated authoritarian regimes’ as an outcome of ‘failed’ popular upheavals and referred as ‘closed political systems’. Secondly, both the cases suggest similar features of the resistance and political life, as well as the strategies of the regimes resembling each other.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Belarus and Azerbaijan experienced a short period of liberalization in the early 1990s and it was the time when early civil society initiatives emerged. However, during the initial phases of the development period, the civic initiatives and NGO sector were extremely fragile and weak. Starting from the mid-1990s, the charismatic leaders, Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus (1994) and Haidar Aliyev in Azerbaijan (1993), came to power who gradually consolidated their power over the next years by building a powerful presidential position that would dominate the whole political life of the country for the next three decades. As the civil society was weak in both the countries, they couldn’t resist the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Although there were significant popular upheavals against both the regimes over the time, the autocratic leaders could eventually consolidate their power within the next decade until the mid-2000s, through suppressing the resistance movements and complete control of the public sphere.

Despite the ever-strengthening authoritarian tendency, the euphoria of the ‘color revolutions’ (e.g., Serbia 2000, Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2004) in and around the region during the 2000s encouraged the opposition groups and political activists to try to change the power through electoral protests in Belarus (2001, 2006) and Azerbaijan (2003, 2005). Eventually, the protests were brutally suppressed by the authorities which resulted in systematic persecution of any activism and civil society ever since. The failure and brutal suppression have left a ‘trauma’ in the society in regard to the resistance (Bedford and Vinatier 2019, 7). Over the time, the interest of the people in political activism became significantly less and the lack of any outcome made opposition groups gradually lose their image among people.

In fact, one of the biggest challenges for the pro-democratic resistance in Azerbaijan and Belarus is the presence of a large group of apolitical people. Apart from the two separate groups of committed supporters of the regime and those in opposition to it, there is an overwhelming majority of, so called, “hesitating voters” who keep distant from any matters that are connected to politics (Manaev, Manayeva and Yuran 2011). Both of the civil society members mentioned

how the majority of people in Belarus and Azerbaijan try to keep away from any issue with political significance. People still view public discourse as a separate sphere from their daily lives.

Although the attempts failed to consolidate democracy, we need to mention the significance of the election years, as they have always created a ‘window of opportunity’ to mobilize masses to the protests and politicize the society. Especially, presidential elections in both the countries are more popular and attract more political activism than parliamentary elections, because majority in the society knows that the parliament has limited power to change the course of the events in the country. That is why, the period of color revolutions during election years and increase of the activism in Belarus and Azerbaijan contributed immensely to the emergence of civic initiatives which later developed into an institutional civil society.

The regimes in Belarus and Azerbaijan tend to oppress certain civic associations while tolerating the operation of some others. The regimes rather permit ‘self-organizing’ associations, as Young (2000) puts it, because they could be further controlled or co-opted to legitimize the existing order or to help to deal with the issues that the authorities cannot easily reach. At the same time, these civic associations do not question the legitimacy of the authority and do not try to politicize the wider masses in society. The latter is vital for an authoritarian regime, because the state tries, with any means, to deprive civil society of interaction with the rest of the population. Bedford and Vinatier (2019) refer to this strategy implemented by an authoritarian state as ‘ghettoization’ of pro-democratic civil society.

Due to the activities of the opposition and political activists, the level of interaction between people and opposition camps (e.g., opposition parties, political activists, civil society) is usually much higher during election years people. Simultaneously, the regimes deploy much more coercion in this period than usual. During this period, more and more people get politicized which significantly increases the emergence of those civic initiatives that contribute to the public sphere through alternative discourses questioning the political and economic system. So, alongside the political opposition, civic associations and political activists also join in producing alternative public discourse. For instance, the civic associations and self-organization that helped people in Belarus to cope with the difficulties of COVID-19 period in early 2020 became the main participants of pro-democratic election campaign and post-election protests. The government’s negligence of actions against the virus made voluntary youth groups engage in different types of activities to help the people with the basic needs like food,

medicine, masks etc. (Orlosky 2020). So, the year 2020 proved to have various cycles of events that allowed emergence of self-organization (COVID-19 measures), as well as contributing to the public space a couple of month later when the election campaign started.

The authoritarian state has different tools in their disposal to constrain the public sphere and civil society's ability to act as a producer of an alternative discourse, making circulation of non-official discourse almost impossible. To this end, the state imposes institutional regulations, but also develops strategies to manipulate the alternative discourses on different platforms. Interestingly enough, online platforms and social media are also increasingly becoming under authoritarian influence. In his book, Steven Feldstein (2021) develops a distinctive viewpoint contrary to the debates over the 'liberating' (positive) potential of digital technologies to the development of pro-democratic resistance. According to him, the manipulation and surveillance potential of digital technologies are increasing, as it helps repressive regimes to spread disinformation and track down political activism/opposition activities.

VI. The 'paralyzed' opposition in Belarus and Azerbaijan

As an outcome of regime oppression and lack of much promised changes, the established opposition groups (e.g., parties, leaders, movements) in Belarus and Azerbaijan lost their credibility and image among the people. The opposition have got less and less able to mobilize social groups in society, eventually being marginalized in the public sphere. The following constraining tactics applied by the regimes contributed to this process immensely: institutional regulations; abusive legislation; repressions and coercion; discreditation; and creating counter-associations. Needless to mention that these tactics are aimed at constraining the resistance attempts in general which includes both the opposition groups and civic associations.

Basic obstacle for the operation of any opposition or civil association is the registration requirement. Without registration, any self-organization or political activity could be easily deemed by the government as illegal, and their activities are usually not allowed in public spaces. Then there is the 'abusive' approach regarding the legislative and constitutional experience. The governments adopt laws and regulations that could be easily misused to disallow or even prosecute any opposition activity. In this regard, the abuse of constitution is at the top of the list. Throughout the three decades since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, both Azerbaijan and Belarus held referendums for constitutional changes that further

strengthened and consolidated the regime's power. David Landau (2013) refers to this practice of using 'mechanisms of constitutional change to erode the democratic order' as 'abusive constitutionalism'.

In smaller scales, there are several laws that limit fundamental human rights, but still being referred by the public officers as the legal framework for certain actions. For example, the laws regulating the freedom of assembly in both the countries indicate that any meeting or protest must be agreed with the local authorities to let them organize security matters. Thus, this precondition plays a role of informing public offices. However, the local authorities always give a negative official answer by saying that the collective action cannot be held due to the security concerns or just because there is another public event planned for that day. If any group of people appear on the streets, police immediately arrest and justifies their action by referring to the same law saying that there was no any permission for this public gathering. In reality, the law only requires giving information to the authority, not getting permission.

Repressions and coercion are a traditional tool to deter people from joining collective actions, but there are also softer ways to marginalize the pro-democratic initiatives. One of them is public discreditation of the opposition groups and political activists by labelling them as 'anti-national elements', 'Western agents' and so on. At the same time, the government develops counter-associations like government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) or systemic opposition groups (e.g., parties, political figures). Both in Azerbaijan and Belarus, there are state-sponsored youth organizations that supports the official discourse and legitimizes the ruling authority in many ways. The usual way of attracting young people to these organizations is through providing certain material benefits and promotion in public offices.

Compared to an open/competitive system, the modern authoritarian regimes imitate democracy by establishing 'systemic opposition'. It operates in parallel with the traditional opposition that is constrained from public institutions and political life. Systemic opposition is referred to the formal opposition parties or figures who in reality do not challenge the existing political regime. They are a part of the system and legitimize the authority of the ruling regime. Most of the time they are allowed to be represented in parliament to imitate the plurality in legislative power. In Belarus and Azerbaijan, these type of opposition parties are referred as 'pocket', 'satellite' or 'puppet' opposition/parties. In contrary, the non-systemic opposition refers to itself as 'genuine opposition'.

As the *Figure 1* shows the opposition in an authoritarian system gets deformed and much smaller than it is in an open system. At the same time, its legitimacy is being challenged by a systemic opposition which is promoted by the regime itself. The picture is more or less the same in both Belarus and Azerbaijan where opposition is not only weak, but also marginalized through losing its credibility among younger generations. Therefore, the level of civic associations' role in the public life unprecedentedly growing, creating a unique resistance structure.

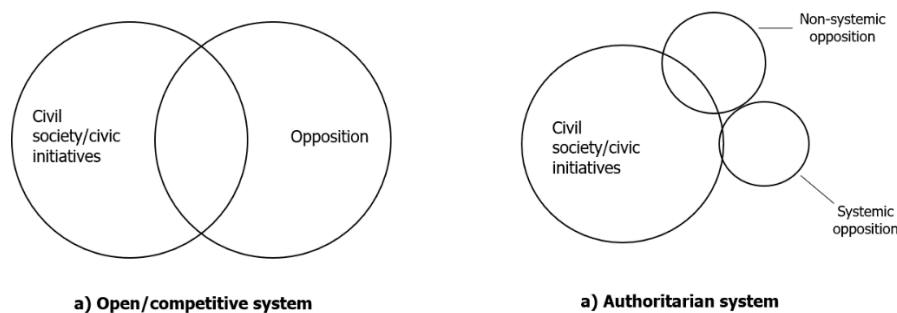


Figure 1: *Opposition and civil society in open and authoritarian systems*

The lower and lower public voice of the traditional opposition resulted in increasing number of younger generations who tend to rather self-organize in civil society and NGOs. Thus, this shift of ‘opposition mindset’ from established opposition groups into political activism and civil society gradually changed the balance of power within the resistance in favor of independent youth movements and self-organizations. Is the term ‘opposition’ an inseparable part of a political system or a broader term explaining a larger circle in authoritarian systems? What does the concept ‘opposition’ refer to in Belarus and Azerbaijan? It clearly something wider than the traditional opposition centers, as we understand it.

Michal Kubát (2010) suggests viewing oppositional mindset through two lenses: *sensu stricto* and *sensu largo*. By *sensu stricto*, he refers to the established structural opposition which is defined as traditional opposition in Azerbaijan and Belarus. However, equating the term ‘opposition’ with the existing parties proves counter-productive in understanding the ‘resistance’ in this case, because ‘opposition to the ruling regime’ means much wider concept than just the opposition parties. At the same time, any institutional resistance under the adverse conditions discussed above becomes almost impossible, because institutional way of contentious politics is restricted, and the authority manipulates the society in a cycle of ‘election game’.

In the context of authoritarian systems in Azerbaijan and Belarus, civil society is becoming more and more involved into the contentious politics and slowly grows as an alternative camp for opposition mindset by bringing the concerns in the wider society into the public discourse. As per Habermas's (1996) ideal type, civil society is supposed to be the connecting space between public and private spheres and in this sense, civil society in Belarus and Azerbaijan try to play the role of a 'bridge', but it is 'trapped' in between. It does reflect oppositional discourse and concerns of private spheres but struggles to break through into the constrained public space.

VII. Civil society as a 'melting pot'

Due to the surrounding environment, the civil society sectors in Belarus and Azerbaijan underwent certain structural changes in order to adapt to the conditions that are changing rapidly. The main characteristics of the political life include the following:

- Institutional limitations (official ban, taxation issues, registration etc.)
- Repressions and persecution
- Unpopularity of traditional opposition groups
- Lack of financial resources
- Constrained public sphere and apolitical masses
- Generational change

These conditions allow us to understand the strategies and tactics implemented by the civil society. In order to escape the 'trapped' position, civil society is evolving into an informal 'testing lab' or 'pool' in which new ideas that better reflect the social demands become a part of the resistance, challenging both the opposition and regime. It leads to a renewal of the opposition structure in both the countries. The civil society significantly contributes to the development of alternative opposition. At times, it happens through separation of youth wings from traditional opposition into an independent civic association as in the case *Zubr* Movement and *Molody Front* in Belarus (Nikolayenko 2015, 477). However, civil society gives birth to a new opposition center (parties, movements etc.) which is highly demanded by the wider masses due to the unpopularity of the traditional opposition. In the case of Azerbaijan, Republican Alternative (ReAl) emerged as a movement, but gradually turned into a political party that competes in elections.

Observation of these processes clearly explains how the civil society in both the countries generates new ideas to renew the political life and try to find alternative ways of resistance. Thus, the third sector turns into a ‘melting pot’ of ideas and strategies connecting the oppositional thoughts. Although both Azerbaijani and Belarusian cases have similarities regarding the process, but it evolves in Belarus quicker than in Azerbaijan. The protests in 2020 in Belarus were clear indication of how civil society and political activism gradually step into the opposition’s shoes. Although some leaders of the opposition election campaign took some kind of leadership during the protests, the role of the opposition in organizing marches and rallies was very few.

Despite the fact that the public space is severely constrained, there certain spaces, such as informal spaces which is difficult to trace for the regime; online platforms and social media; educational platforms organized by activists, where civic associations can still operate. However, political activists try to target the so called ‘gray area’ between public and private spheres where state’s cultural and political messages and neither accepted, nor necessarily wholly rejected (Ackermann, Berman and Sasunkevich 2017, 11). During the interviews with civil society members from Belarus and Azerbaijan who are engaged in educational activities, both the interviewees mentioned the importance of reaching out to these groups that comprise the majority of the society.

There are still some physical spaces as well. In these spaces, civic associations try to get engaged in personal development, discussion of events and elements characterizing the dominant order. However, activists think twice before initiating these kinds of events in order not to trigger oppression from the regime’s side.

VIII. Resistance features and models

After discussing the structure and interconnection between opposition and civic associations, it is also important to look into the main features the civil society possess and models they built their strategies in. The observation of different civic initiatives and NGOs through online content analysis suggests that the main features of associations operating in Belarus and Azerbaijan have mainly the following features:

- The civic associations are getting more and more informal, a feature that allows them to be flexible, as well as difficult to trace. This feature is very significant for the survival

of the civic associations, if they are engaged in contributing to the public discourse. Informality is not necessary in open systems and is one of the main features of political activism under an authoritarian rule.

- Another feature that allows civic association to operate freely is virtuality. More and more online operation is being developed. It allows self-organize and communicating different ideas among activists. At the same time, online platforms and social media is one of the main sources of information, since the traditional mass media is under total control of the regime.
- Civil society groups are getting more decentralized over the time. If during the 1990s, the mainstream opposition parties and leaders were coordinating the resistance activities, today civic associations operate independently, even criticize and challenge the opposition. Being decentralized is also one of the features to avoid giving the regime an easy target.
- Since the financial resources are blocked by the government, the associations and activists organize crowd-funding programs that help grassroots ideas and project to be realized. This feature, in a sense, is developing out of ‘helplessness’, because any financial resource is limited, including the funding from abroad. The government deprives the civil society of foreign funding with different means.

The resistance features are also reflected in the models of operation in civil society. Sofie Bedford and Laurent Vinatier (2019, 14-17) classify four main models of focus for resisting the ‘ghetto’: elections, media, lobbying, and education (Figure 2). According to the authors, the electoral associations mainly work for attracting more people to voting polls, while organizing their activities in that direction. These activities are mainly organized both by established entities like opposition parties, and informal associations like youth movements, political activists.

Media model is one of the wide-spread and essential focus for civil society, as independent media is crucial for pro-democratic initiatives. Main actors involved in these model are mainly bloggers, online news channels, online discussion platforms, opposition media outlets and independent activists. They play the role of ‘watch-dog’ and monitor the government’s actions. There are independent media organizations taking this responsibility in Belarus and Azerbaijan, but at the same time, the opposition groups have their own media channels (most of the time online). ‘Nash Dom’ (Our Home) news website in Belarus and ‘Meydan TV’, which means a square in Azerbaijani, online news agency are some of the most prominent media

models. However, these organizations do not only limit themselves to providing news, but also deal with lobbying activities.

Educational associations are also very crucial for the societies where there is considerably lower democratic experience. They play the role of educating public about their fundamental rights, necessity of democratic institutions, violation of human rights in the country and etc. Most often, these are youth associations, training centers, online lectures, and initiatives by intellectuals that make the model work effectively. Although, physical spaces for organization of these activities are limited, activists try to organize online or informal gatherings to arrange lectures or discussions. The popularity of online platform since the start of the pandemic made their work easier, since more and more meetings are conducted online nowadays which makes organizational matters easier and faster.

The lobbying model is rather a combination of the first three explained earlier. These activities could be carried out by almost all the civic associations that work towards pro-democratic changes through organizing masses.

In this sense, lobbying activities help to change people’s mind about certain things, popularize ideas or initiate new social institutions with for the sake of pro-democratic changes. It may include campaigns by opposition to bring apolitical people into voting stations, feminist activities to change certain narratives in the society, human rights activism to educate people, environmental movements to

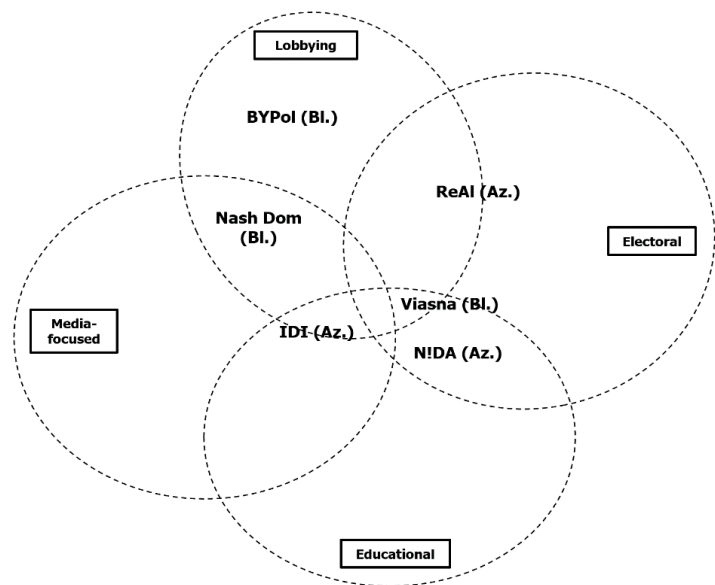


Figure 2. Main resistance models in Belarus and Azerbaijan

increase people’s awareness about over-exploitation of nature around them and so on. BYPol is an initiative by defected Belarusian security officers is one of the best examples for lobbying activity. The union includes both incumbent and former officers who help the pro-democratic resistance via different activities. They try to reach out to as many officers in the security forces as possible and provide secret information about the violation of human rights by revealing different information like videos where security forces torture people. Among the other activities, they also help the families of former officers who lost their source of income.

According to some reports, the members of this union try to help the Ukrainian defense forces with intelligence information, sabotaging the Russian supply lines through Belarus, and even joining the fight against the Russian forces in Ukraine (Kakissis and Krawczyk 2022).

Some of the civic organizations and associations could be easily classified into one or two models, whereas some others are operating in more than two directions, actively engaged in educational, electoral, lobbying and media models. ReAl Party in Azerbaijan, for instance, which was discussed earlier, is essentially an electoral model of resistance, but also carries out activities on educational direction by organizing academic lectures, and lobbying activities through various campaigns to change the general tendency in the society.

In the Belarusian case, a human rights center Viasna (Spring) has various social activities which could be characterized as educational, electoral and lobbying. It has been initially created to help those who were being arrested during the 1996 protests. Therefore, its first name was 'Viasna-96'. However, over the years it has developed educational programs and lobbying of human rights in the society.

Although the models are very important to consider, however, the civil society groups, movements, parties, and activists are very flexible. They are able to change very ably and adapt to new conditions, thanks to the decentralized and informal characteristics. They adapt to the changing environment and evolve over time. Therefore, a certain classification could be totally different with new conditions and impositions over certain period of time, but as Bedford and Vinatier (2019, 20) argues, most of the activist and civil society groups usually tend towards the electoral model in election years.

IX. Challenges for Civil Society

The main challenges of adverse conditions under the authoritarian regimes in Azerbaijan and Belarus were discussed earlier in this paper. However, these conditions mainly stem from the authoritarian measures of the regime to maintain the resistance under control. There are also various other challenges posed by the inner structure of the resistance itself and society as a whole that further limits the operation of the pro-democratic attempts.

As we discussed earlier, the regime repressions forced the civil society initiatives to decentralize and retreat into informality which helped them to continue their operation. However, decentralization also created a chaotic structure within the resistance circles, making

it difficult to coordinate. These feature, at times, becomes an obstacle to self-organize and coordinate certain actions together. At the same time, the civil society is fragmented along the lines of values and principles that make them hesitate to make a joint effort. For instance, there are leftist and right wing (e.g., nationalist, traditionalist) lines, liberal and conservative lines, but also different groups having different principles and approaches over the debates what is “the right strategy” democratize the country.

In Azerbaijan, for example, whether to participate or boycott the elections separates the resistance and opposition into two main groups. Each side accuses the other of helping the regime to survive, because the other side`s strategy is totally wrong and ruins the efforts of the opposition. Eventually, they end up publicly cursing each other which further damages their image in the eyes of the society. In the Belarusian case, there are serious debates over whether the resistance protests must include more direct clashes with the security forces, or it should be non-violent. A member of the Belarusian extreme leftist group, Anatoly (pseudonym), living in Warsaw expressed his opinion about the topic as following:

“Without any doubt, direct confrontation is necessary to achieve any result. I think all the methods are important, both peaceful and non-peaceful, but they need to be combined. The peaceful character of the protests let masses to join. If it was violent, there would be less people. We need masses, but we also need some activities that include physical resistance against the brutal regime. Violence is necessary to win on violence. It is impossible without it. People were scared that the same results as in Maidan would happen in Belarus as well. These narratives are mainly spread by Russian propaganda that “Maidan is chaos” and the regime in Belarus re-streams the same ideas. I think after all these repressions to the protestors, more and more people will think that violence is necessary.”

The challenges posed by the socio-economic structure of both the societies include fragmentation or lack of middle-class, lack of counter-elites, and socio-economic inequalities between the urban areas, mainly the capital city, and rural areas. The fragmented middle-class and lack of counter-elites prove to be main challenges that deprive the resistance of enough support within the society, while lower socio-economic activities in the rural areas make those regions as distant spaces to reach out within the political life.

Lastly, as a more abstract challenge, the geopolitical dimensions significantly contribute to the public narratives about the overall contentious politics, being at the very center of borderlines

of East-West cultural, geopolitical clash. Both in Azerbaijan and Belarus, the geopolitical narratives are at the center of political discussion. Ideas of integrating to Europe or finding its values “alien” confront each other. It is also ably used by the regime to build a counter-narrative to appeal to the traditionalist social groups in both the countries. For instance, the case of Ukraine is used a lot to label the resistance in Belarus as a “destabilizing” factor.

X. Summary

This research paper is rather a product of observation of political life in Belarus and Azerbaijan implementing different methods and getting in-depth interviews who are actively involved in day-to-day operation of different civic associations. Therefore, the results of this research article offer empirical findings that contribute to the authoritarian studies in the post-Soviet sphere.

Against the background of the references about “failed cases”, the findings of this research proves that the civic activism in both Azerbaijan and Belarus is still quite vibrant and, despite all the limitations, contribute to the public sphere through producing an alternative discourse. Although they are limited into the “ghetto” created by the regime, the resistance produces alternative discourses that question the legitimacy of the current political system. In that sense, the generational change is one of the crucial points that brings new ways of coping with the challenges and reshapes the traditional strategies in the contentious politics. The process is developing relatively quicker in Belarus where younger generations are more involved in political activities. The process led to a greater involvement of youth groups in the 2020 post-election protests.

Civil society in Belarus and Azerbaijan are getting involved more in the contentious politics. It becomes a large space for the oppositional mindset among social groups, especially the younger generations. Therefore, it is highly difficult to draw a clear line between civil society groups and opposition. At times, some civic associations steps into the opposition role and organizes resistance activities that target electoral strategies. Main reason for this process is the limited capacity and popularity of the established opposition parties. Therefore, civil society takes a bigger role in reshaping the opposition and its agenda. It produces alternatives to the mainstream opposition groups, meeting the demands for fresh players in the contentious politics, leading to a deinstitutionalized and decentralized resistance that appeals to larger masses in the societies.

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