

# Fight or Flight: How Authoritarian Leaders Respond to Nonviolent Resistance Movements

Maartje Weerdesteijn and Willemijn Born

**Abstract:** Nonviolent resistance scholarship predominantly focuses on the structural opportunities within a country and the choices of dissidents, while the considerations of the opposing authoritarian regime are largely overlooked. We aim to create a multi-level theoretical framework that can be used to analyse why some authoritarian leaders cede power when protests commence while others use violence. We argue that, given the high costs of repression, it is only used if authoritarian leaders deem it absolutely necessary, when they estimate the costs and backlash to be manageable, and when they have the resources. What the costs are, where the authoritarian leader gets their resources from, and what impacts their decision-making will be analysed on three levels. At the macro level, we will focus on the role of the international community, at the meso level on the regime, and at the micro level on the decision-making process. Finally, the interaction between these levels and the nonviolent resistance movement will be discussed. This framework serves as a heuristic tool that can be used to systematically analyse the choices of authoritarian leaders that are confronted with nonviolent resistance, highlighting which factors are important in their decision whether or not to use repression. To illustrate the function of the theoretical framework as a heuristic tool, we will apply it to the uprisings in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and in Belarus in 2020.

**Keywords:** authoritarianism, nonviolent resistance, repression, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan

## Introduction

Authoritarian leaders are expected to respond with repression when they face challenges to their rule, a finding so consistent that Davenport called it ‘the law of coercive responsiveness’.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the extent to which they do so differs and scholarly re-

1 Christian Davenport, ‘State Repression and Political Order’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10 (2007), pp. 1-23 (p. 7).

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search has struggled to explain this variation.<sup>2</sup> Most of the research either entails in-depth case studies or large N-studies from a rational choice perspective, usually investigating specific elements, such as the characteristics of the leader or the interaction between an authoritarian leader and the dissidents, in order to explain the authoritarian decision whether or not to use violence.<sup>3</sup> Yet, a comprehensive theoretical framework that combines these dispersed elements is currently lacking.<sup>4</sup> This article seeks to bring together the scattered literature in order to create a theoretical framework that can be used to analyse an authoritarian leader's decision whether or not to use repression when faced with non-violent resistance.

As electoral authoritarian regimes have proliferated since the end of the second world war, we have chosen to predominantly focus on these countries to analyse why some of their leaders opt to fight nonviolent resistance while others ultimately flee. In these regimes some limited pluralism is possible and elections are frequently held, but they are neither free nor fair.<sup>5</sup> The reaction of the authoritarian regime to nonviolent resistance is analyzed on three levels of analysis: macro, meso, and micro. This approach is particularly suitable for interdisciplinary research such as ours because these levels of analysis are common across various fields of study, including international relations, perpetrator studies, and nonviolent resistance studies.<sup>6</sup> The

- 2 Erica Chenoweth, 'Trends in Nonviolent Resistance and State Response: Is Violence Towards Civilian-based Movements on the Rise?', *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 9 (2017), pp. 86-100.
- 3 Jaclyn Johnson and Clayton L. Thyne, 'Squeaky Wheels and Troop Loyalty: How Domestic Protests Influence Coups d'état, 1951-2005', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 62.3 (2018), pp. 597-625; John Chin, Wonjun Song, and Joseph Wright 'Personalization of Power and Mass Uprisings in Dictatorships', *British Journal of Political Science*, 53.1 (2022), pp. 25-44; Jan Henryk Pierskalla, 'Protest, Deterrence, and Escalation: The Strategic Calculus of Government Repression', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 54.1 (2010), pp. 117-45; Stephen M. Shellman, 'Leaders' Motivations and Actions: Explaining Government-Dissent Conflict-Cooperation Processes', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 23 (2006), pp. 73-90; Maria Josua and Mirjam Edel, 'To Repress or Not to Repress—Regime Survival Strategies in the Arab Spring', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27.2 (2015), pp. 289-309; Stephen McLoughlin and Maartje Weerdesteijn, 'Eliminating Rivals, Managing Rivalries: A Comparison of Robert Mugabe and Kenneth Kaunda', *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 9.3 (2016), pp. 116-36; Stephen M. Shellman, 'Process Matters: Conflict and Cooperation in Sequential Government-Dissident Interactions', *Security Studies*, 15.4 (2006), pp. 563-99. Shellman, however, does not focus explicitly on nonviolent resistance but rather discusses all types of dissent.
- 4 There are steps towards a more comprehensive theory (e.g. Josua and Edel) but they have not focused on all levels of analysis.
- 5 Yonatan L Morse, 'The Era of Electoral Authoritarianism', *World Politics*, 64.1 (2012), pp. 161-98.
- 6 See for international relations Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (Columbia University Press, 2001); for history Ugur Ümit Ungör, 'Perpetration as a Process: A

multi-level framework allows for a more systematic analysis across different case studies, enabling a better insight into which of the factors are important for an authoritarian leader in their decision to use, or refrain from using, repression.

To illustrate the usefulness of the theoretical framework as a heuristic tool, we will apply the framework to two case studies in order to explore why one authoritarian leader may decide to use repression and another may not. On 25 March 2005, Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akaev, decided to flee to Russia after nationwide protests, while in Belarus the protests that emerged in the spring and summer of 2020 were harshly and violently repressed by Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime.<sup>7</sup> We have chosen these countries because Kyrgyzstan (2005) and Belarus (2020) are both post-Soviet countries that are best characterized as electoral authoritarian regimes with president-centric forms of government and consistent manipulation of turnout and election results.<sup>8</sup>

In the following paragraphs, we will first describe when authoritarian leaders use repression to stay in power. Thereafter, the 'authoritarian response to nonviolent resistance framework' will be set out, including the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis and the interaction between them. Finally, the framework will be used to analyse Belarus and Kyrgyzstan.

Historical-Sociological Model', in *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, ed. by Alette Smeulers, Maartje Weerdesteijn, and Barbora Holá (Oxford University Press), pp. 117-31; and for nonviolent resistance studies Willemijn Born, Maartje Weerdesteijn and Joris van Wijk, 'Dissecting Dissent in Russia: A Multilevel Framework of Nonviolent Resistance in Repressive Regimes', *International Criminal Law Review*, 24.4 (2024), pp. 462-93.

7 Yevgeny Ivanov, 'Revolutions in Kyrgyzstan', in *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century*, ed. by Jack A. Goldstone, Leonid Grinin, and Andrey Korotayev (Springer, 2022), pp. 517-47; Shairbek Juraev, 'Kyrgyz Democracy? The Tulip Revolution and Beyond', *Central Asian Survey*, 27.3-4 (2008), pp. 253-64; Scott Radnitz, 'What Really Happened in Kyrgyzstan?', *Journal of Democracy*, 17.2 (2006), pp. 132-246; Anastasiya Astapova and others, 'Authoritarian Cooptation of Civil Society: The Case of Belarus', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 74.1 (2022), pp. 1-30; Tatsiana Kulakevich and Jan Kubik, 'Anti-Authoritarian Learning: Prospects for Democratization in Belarus Based on a Study of Polish Solidarity', *Nationalities Papers*, 51.4 (2023), pp. 823-37; Sergei A. Mudrov, 'Doomed to Fail? Why Success Was Almost Not an Option in the 2020 Protests in Belarus', *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 29.1 (2021), pp. 109-20.

8 Marianna Abramova and Maksim Vilisov, 'The Post-Soviet Transition: Constitutional Structuring and Political Reality', *Cuestiones constitucionales*, 42 (2020), pp. 3-38; Rob Kevlihan and Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'Menus of Manipulation: Soviet Authoritarian Continuities in Post-Soviet Elections in Central Asia', *Demokratizatsiya*, 25.4 (2017), pp. 407-34; Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in a Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

## When Do Authoritarian Leaders Use Repression?

Authoritarian leaders rely on three ‘pillars of stability’ to stay in power: legitimacy, co-optation, and repression.<sup>9</sup> The first pillar, legitimacy, as conceptualized by Gerschewski, ‘seeks to guarantee active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population’.<sup>10</sup> The second pillar, co-optation, relates to the ‘capacity to tie strategically relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite’,<sup>11</sup> often through policy concessions or the redistribution of rents.<sup>12</sup> When powerful individuals have a vested interest in the continuation of the regime’s rule, the regime becomes more resilient against being overthrown.<sup>13</sup> The third pillar, repression, can either entail ‘high’ or ‘low’ intensity repression.<sup>14</sup> High intensity repression is visible and targeted towards well known opposition leaders, organizations, or a larger number of people. Low intensity repression is less visible, more subtle, and encompasses repressing civil rights and liberties.<sup>15</sup>

Repression may work because it increases the costs of opposing an authoritarian regime, but the impact of repression on dissent is subject to debate.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, repression can prevent citizens from

9 Johannes Gerschewski, ‘The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes’, *Democratization*, 20.1 (2013), pp. 13–38. Empirical research concluded that while not a single pillar on its own can explain authoritarian stability, combined they may explain the stability of electoral authoritarian regimes. Although Gerschewski envisioned his theory to be applicable to all dictatorial regimes, Scheider and Maerz tested its explanatory power only on electoral authoritarian regimes and according to the authors ‘The jury is still out’ as to whether Gerschewski’s pillars are underlying regime stability in all non-democratic regimes (also those without elections). Carsten Q. Schneider and Seraphine F. Maerz, ‘Legitimation, Cooptation, and Repression and the Survival of Electoral Autocracies’, *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 2.11 (2017), pp. 213–35 (p. 232).

10 Gerschewski, p. 18.

11 Ibid., p. 22.

12 Erica Frantz and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, ‘A Dictator’s Toolkit: Understanding How Co-Optation Affects Repression in Autocracies’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 51.3 (2014), pp. 332–46 (p. 334); Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, ‘Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships’, *Economics and Politics*, 18.1 (2006), pp. 1–26.

13 Frantz and Kendall-Taylor, pp. 334–35.

14 Gerschewski, p. 21.

15 Ibid.

16 Frantz and Kendall-Taylor, p. 334; Christian Davenport and Molly Inman, ‘The State of State Repression Research Since the 1990s’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24.4 (2012), pp. 619–34 (p. 624); Erica Chenoweth, Evan Perkosi and Sooyeon Kang, ‘State Repression and Nonviolent Resistance’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61.9 (2017), pp. 1950–1969; Amy Yunyu Chiang, ‘Violence, Non-Violence and the Conditional Effect of Repression on Subsequent Dissident Mobilization’, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 38.6 (2021), pp. 627–53 (p. 642); Stephanie Dornschneider-Elkink and Bruce Edmonds, ‘Does Nonviolent Repression Have Stronger Dampening Effects than State Violence? Insight from an Emotion-Based Model of Nonviolent Dissent’, *Government and Opposition*, 59.1 (2024), pp. 249–71.

sharing grievances, which lowers the chances of civil unrest. On the other hand, repression can increase discontent, undermine the legitimacy of a regime,<sup>17</sup> and escalate isolated incidents into a larger resistance movement.<sup>18</sup> Repression also entails financial costs and requires resources from the regime.<sup>19</sup>

Given the costs of repression, authoritarian leaders will generally only use repression when they deem it absolutely necessary, if they have the resources to do so, and if they do not expect the unintended consequences of repression to undermine their rule. Where the costs come from, what resources the authoritarian leader has at his disposal, and what factors weigh into his decision-making process will be analysed through a multi-level theoretical framework below.

## **When Do Authoritarian Leaders Repress Nonviolent Resistance Movements?**

### MACRO: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The international community can be an important player in the success of nonviolent resistance movements.<sup>20</sup> When countries decide to get involved, they can either impose costs or provide support to a regime, a choice which is often predetermined by self-interest which, according to Kalin et al., entails favoring pragmatic considerations, such as trade relationships or strategic political alliances, over the more ideological goal of helping the campaign achieve its objectives.<sup>21</sup> Kalin et al. argue that the more strategic a country is, the more backing it can expect from other countries when a nonviolent resistance movement emerges.<sup>22</sup> Other non-democratic regimes are especially likely to offer support if they expect this to be beneficial to their own chances of regime survival.<sup>23</sup>

17 Gerschewski, p. 28; Yasha Mounk, 'The Dictator's Last Stand', *Foreign Affairs*, 98.5 (2019), pp. 138-49 (pp. 139-40).

18 Frantz and Kendall-Taylor, p. 334.

19 Ibid., p. 336.

20 Ilker Kalin, Marie Olson Lounsbury, and Frederic Pearson, 'Major Power Politics and Nonviolent Resistance Movements', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 39.3 (2022), p. 242.

21 Ibid., p. 247.

22 Ibid., pp. 245, 247.

23 Christian Von Soest, 'Democracy Prevention: The International Collaboration of Authoritarian Regimes', *European Journal of Political Research*, 54.4 (2015), pp. 623-38 (p. 627).

Tolstrup et al. argue that ‘great power patrons’ – the five permanent powers of the UN Security Council – send cues about the permissibility of repression.<sup>24</sup> When a great power patron signals support, the authoritarian leader may be less concerned about the available resources for repression and the elite may be assured that sanctions are not forthcoming. This will likely weaken the nonviolent resisters by negatively influencing the perceived chances of success. Neighbouring states can be important as well.<sup>25</sup> When autocrats join what Debre calls ‘clubs of autocrats’ – regional organizations which include many other autocracies – they reduce the risk of democratization.<sup>26</sup> Debre argues regional organizations may boost all three pillars of stability that autocrats have at their disposal by increasing legitimacy through a more traditional, regional rhetoric, coopting elites with new high-level diplomatic positions or promises of liberalization, and boosting repression with intelligence cooperation, cross-border policing and exchange of knowledge, security technology, and military equipment.<sup>27</sup>

Countries can also provide safe havens for authoritarian leaders, although international norms against impunity seem to increasingly form an obstacle to exile.<sup>28</sup> Providing impunity through a safe haven allows an authoritarian leader to repress at will, but also offers an escape that allows an authoritarian leader to compromise when his personal security is at risk.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, impunity can thus potentially promote the success of nonviolent resistance movements by offering the authoritarian leader a way out.<sup>30</sup>

Other countries can also directly back nonviolent resistance movements by imposing costs on the authoritarian regime. External support may promote defections from the security forces, making nonviolent

24 Jakob Tolstrup, Michael Aagaard Seeberg, and Johanne Grøndahl Glavind, ‘Signals of Support From Great Power Patrons and the Use of Repression During Nonviolent Protests’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 52.4 (2019), pp. 514–43 (pp. 519–20).

25 Steve Hess, *Authoritarian Landscapes: Popular Mobilization and the Institutional Sources of Resilience in Nondemocracies* (Springer, 2013).

26 Maria J. Debre, ‘Clubs of Autocrats: Regional Organizations and Authoritarian Survival’, *The Review of International Organizations*, 17.3 (2022), pp. 485–511.

27 Debre, ‘Clubs of Autocrats’, p. 490; Maria J. Debre ‘The Dark Side of Regionalism: How Regional Organizations Help Authoritarian Regimes to Boost Survival’, *Democratization*, 28.2 (2021), pp. 394–413.

28 Abel Escribà-Folch and Daniel Krmaric, ‘Dictators in Exile: Explaining the Destinations of Ex-Rulers’, *The Journal of Politics*, 79.2 (2017), pp. 560–75.

29 Tolstrup, Seeberg, and Glavind, pp. 520–21.

30 Chenoweth, ‘Trends in Nonviolent Resistance’, p. 100.

movement success more likely.<sup>31</sup> However, the international community might also inadvertently harm the efforts of nonviolent resistance movements. Sanctions against a regime might allow the regime to shift public anger towards these external actors, frame the dissenters as foreign agents, and create new allies among other sanctioned countries.<sup>32</sup> Direct funding of nonviolent resistance movements by external states seems to negatively impact the participation in those movements.<sup>33</sup>

How authoritarian regimes, and in particular great power patrons such as China and Russia, can lend support to each other was visible in Zimbabwe in 2008.<sup>34</sup> When the presidential elections seemed to favor the opposition to the ruling dictator, Mugabe, his refusal to acknowledge defeat sparked protests throughout Zimbabwe. After delaying to put the situation on the agenda of the UN Security Council, Russia and China backed the proposal of South Africa (a democratic ally of Mugabe) to let the Southern African Development Community, which was unlikely to act unfavorably towards Mugabe, handle the unrest. In addition, China indicated it was willing to ship weapons to Zimbabwe. With these signals of support, violence in Zimbabwe escalated, forcing the opposition to withdraw.<sup>35</sup> Countries can, of course, also try to back nonviolent resistance movements. OTPOR in Serbia, for instance, received financial assistance from the National Endowment for Democracy and International Republican Institute in the United States and the Westminster Foundation in the United Kingdom, although their contributions were exaggerated in the press.<sup>36</sup>

31 Chenoweth, 'Trends in Nonviolent Resistance', p. 100.; Kalin, Lounsbery, and Pearson, pp. 250, 257-58; Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *The Role of External Support for Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail* (Washington, D.C., ICNC Press, 2021).

32 Kalin, Lounsbery, and Pearson, p. 244. Scholars have recently started to empirically investigate the impact on non-democratic regimes, see for example Mikhail A. Alexseev and Henry E. Hale, 'Crimea Come What May: Do Economic Sanctions Backfire Politically?', *Journal of Peace Research*, 57.2 (2020), pp. 344-59; Sharon Erikson Nepstad, *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 134.; Chenoweth and Stephan, *The Role of External Support for Nonviolent Campaigns*, pp. 74.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

34 Tolstrup, Seeberg, and Glavind, pp. 530-34.

35 *Ibid.*; Debre, 'The Dark Side of Regionalism', 401-03.

36 Srđa Popović, Slobodan Djinić, and Edin Mujkić, 'Nonviolent Struggle and Effective Tactics: A Comprehensive Analysis of the OTPOR Movement', *International Criminal Law Review*, 24.4 (2024), pp. 494-511; Julie Corwin, 'Regime Change on the Cheap', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 19 April 2005, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/1058543.html>> [accessed 21 November 2024].

## MESO: THE MILITARY AND POLITICAL ELITE

In order to repress dissidents, authoritarian leaders need domestic allies. These allies are created by co-opting the elite. Yet these elites may also form a threat to the authoritarian leader, as coups have historically been a more common end to authoritarian rule than revolutions.<sup>37</sup> This means that authoritarian leaders engage in a careful balancing act.<sup>38</sup>

When nonviolent resistance movements emerge, authoritarian leaders need security forces for the 'endgame'.<sup>39</sup> The endgame materializes when normal police forces are overwhelmed by protests and the regime needs to rely on the military.<sup>40</sup> The military can then either 1) listen to orders and use large scale repression, 2) defect and do nothing, or, 3) defect and initiate a coup.<sup>41</sup> In the endgame, the military wields significant power, as security defections are the most important determinant for the success of nonviolent resistance campaigns.<sup>42</sup>

The army's loyalty to the regime likely depends on how the regime treats them, including whether they receive economic or political benefits and have policy influence.<sup>43</sup> Other determining factors include how cohesive the military is across a wide range of factors, including ethnicity and religion, how legitimate the regime is in the army's eyes, and the extent to which it receives unambiguous orders during an uprising.<sup>44</sup> In addition, whether the military identifies with the people or the regime,

37 Antonio Costa Pinto, 'Introduction: Repression and Cooptation in Mass Dictatorship,' in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mass Dictatorship*, ed. by Paul Corner and Jie-Hyun Lim (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 101-04 (p. 101); Elizabeth Ann Stein, 'Information and Civil Unrest in Dictatorships,' in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Johnson and Thyne; Mounk, p. 143.

38 Elina Sinkkonen, 'Dynamic Dictators: Improving the Research Agenda on Autocratization and Authoritarian Resilience', *Democratization*, 28.6 (2021), pp. 1172-1190 (p. 1179); Milan W. Svobik, 'Contracting on Violence: The Moral Hazard in Authoritarian Repression and Military Intervention in Politics', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 57.5 (2013), pp. 765-94 (p. 766).

39 Taku Yukawa and others, 'Losing Power Safely: Explaining the Variation in Dictators' Responses to Anti-Regime Protests', *Politics and Policy*, 50.2 (2022), pp. 274-97 (p. 275).

40 Aurel Croissant, David Kuehn, and Tanja Eschenauer, 'The "Dictator's Endgame": Explaining Military Behavior in Nonviolent Anti-Incumbent Mass Protests', *Democracy and Security*, 14.2 (2018), pp. 174-99 (p. 176).

41 Ibid., p. 177. The state of course does have a degree of control over the military and can take measures such as coup-proofing to prevent disobedience, as will be explained below.

42 Kalin, Lounsbury, and Pearson, p. 257; Sharon Erickson Nepstad, 'Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria', *Journal of Peace Research*, 50.3 (2013), pp. 337-49.

43 Zoltan Barany, 'Armies and Revolutions', *Journal of Democracy*, 24.2 (2013), pp. 62-76 (pp. 64-70); Nepstad, 'Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring', p. 338; Svobik, p. 766.

44 Barany, pp. 64-70.



whether they previously perpetrated human rights violations, and the level of cohesion in the military all tend to impact whether the military is willing to resort to violence.<sup>45</sup> For the regime, the ability to repress thus means a need to co-opt the military and keep them satisfied.<sup>46</sup>

Civilian elites, often organized in seemingly democratic institutions, are also important for regime stability. Institutions, whether they are formalized as legislatures or are more informal and tradition-based, tend to enhance the longevity of autocratic regimes.<sup>47</sup> Parties and legislatures facilitate co-optation by creating an arena for communication between the regime and the elite, reducing the risk of a coup and, to a lesser extent, popular uprisings.<sup>48</sup> Reuter and Robertson argue that legislatures in authoritarian regimes function as a way to limit protest because they provide rent-seeking opportunities 'to key opposition elites who, in return for access to these spoils, demobilize their supporters'.<sup>49</sup>

Coopting elites, however, may also increase grievances among the population, motivating them to mobilize. When citizens see elite sharing in benefits, but are not sharing in the wealth themselves, this may increase feelings of relative deprivation and the awareness that grievances are more widely shared among the population.<sup>50</sup>

The benefits and other incentives to co-opt the elite require resources. Modernization, defined by Butcher and Svensson as expanding industrialization, urbanization, education, and wealth, might provide the regime with more resources, but can be considered a risk, as it also increases access to the resources required for nonviolent resistance.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, economic elites that have access to independent resources can pose a threat by either withholding resources from the state or explicitly funding nonviolent resisters.<sup>52</sup>

45 Croissant, Kuehn, and Eschenauer, pp. 175-76; Barany, pp. 68-72.

46 Svolik, pp. 767-68.

47 Carles Boix and Milan W. Svolik, 'The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government: Institutions, Commitment, and Power-Sharing in Dictatorships', *The Journal of Politics*, 75.2 (2013), pp. 300-16 (p. 307); Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, 'Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats', *Comparative Political Studies*, 40.11 (2007), pp. 1279-1301 (p. 1282).

48 Boix and Svolik, p. 311.

49 Ora John Reuter and Graeme B. Robertson, 'Legislatures, Cooptation, and Social Protest in Contemporary Authoritarian Regimes', *The Journal of Politics*, 77.1 (2015), pp. 235-48.

50 Boix and Svolik, p. 311; Ae Sil Woo and Courtenay R. Conrad, 'The Differential Effects of "Democratic" Institutions on Dissent in Dictatorships', *The Journal of Politics*, 81.2 (2019), pp. 456-70.

51 Charles Butcher and Isak Svensson, 'Manufacturing Dissent: Modernization and the Onset of Major Nonviolent Resistance Campaigns', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 60.2 (2016), pp. 311-39 (p. 313).

52 Sharon Erickson Nepstad, 'Religious Support for Civil Resistance Movements: When and How Does It Contribute to Regime Change?', *Socius*, 7 (2021), pp. 1-14.

Religious elites can also pose a threat to the regime. Religious support for a nonviolent resistance group can grant moral credibility to an opposition movement and incite further security force defections.<sup>53</sup> Religious elites base their choice to defect on the political and financial benefits of defecting, along with an assessment of anti-religious stances or ties to those who are being repressed.<sup>54</sup>

In Egypt, the military and political elites were interconnected and the military had strong vested economic interests tied to Mubarak's regime.<sup>55</sup> Their vested economic interests meant that especially the top of the military would have preferred to retain the status quo. The lower echelons, however, were much less well-off under Mubarak. They were conscripts and many had family members in the crowd when protests started in January 2011. While the secret police, and possibly some elites, still sided with Mubarak, maintaining support for the regime was untenable as there was no willingness among the lower echelons to use violence in support of the regime.<sup>56</sup> The religious elite diverged in their responses. While the Coptic church openly backed Mubarak,<sup>57</sup> Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood made participation obligatory for its members a few days into the protests. They then actively spurred people on to join protests and when protests were backed by the organization they seemed to draw bigger crowds. So while the Muslim Brotherhood did not lead the protests, they actively participated in them.<sup>58</sup> Members of the Muslim Brotherhood then stood united with Copts who decided not to be deterred by the stance of their religious leaders. This was symbolized by the frequently heard slogan 'Muslim, Christian, we are all Egyptian.'<sup>59</sup>

53 Ibid.

54 Sharon Erickson Nepstad, 'Religion, Ideology, and Support for Nonviolent Revolutionary Struggles: A Comparison of Catholic Leaders in Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador in the 1970s-1980s', in *Bringing Down Divides: Special Issue Commemorating the Work of Gregory Maney (1967-2017)*, ed. by Lisa Leitz and Eitan Y. Alimi (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), pp. 89-108.

55 Hicham Bou Nassif, 'Generals and Autocrats: How Coup-Proofing Predetermined the Military Elite's Behavior in the Arab Spring', *Political Science Quarterly*, 130.2 (2015), pp. 245-75 (p. 262); Nepstad, 'Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring', pp. 342-43.

56 Nassif, pp. 266-267; Nepstad, 'Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring', pp. 342-43.

57 Elizabeth Iskander Monier, 'The Arab Spring and Coptic-Muslim Relations: From Mubarak to the Muslim Brotherhood', *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online*, 11.1 (2014), pp. 169-86.

58 Eric Trager, 'The Unbreakable Muslim Brotherhood: Grim Prospects for a Liberal Egypt', *Foreign Affairs*, 90 (2011), p. 114. Unislaw Williams, 'The Fading Halo of Religious Elites', *Central European Journal of International & Security Studies*, 8.1 (2014), pp. 104-21.

59 Monier, p. 169.

In Syria, the military was divided along sectarian identities and rank, with Alawites disproportionately in positions of command while lower-level positions were predominantly filled by Sunnis.<sup>60</sup> Al-Assad had built several parallel elite units to coup-proof his forces, and he allowed his senior officers to gather tremendous wealth by partnering with business elites. This ensured that throughout the uprising the military elite remained loyal.<sup>61</sup> The low-level soldiers identified more with the population and defected more often, as they could not bear the moral costs.<sup>62</sup>

#### MICRO: THE AUTHORITARIAN LEADER

In comparison to democratic regimes, the individual leader in an authoritarian regime tends to be more influential in shaping policies and decisions within the regime. As Frantz argues, 'key decisions require [the authoritarian leader's] support, and major policies cannot get passed unless they agree to them'.<sup>63</sup> The authoritarian leader's use of repression is determined by their perception of potential threats.<sup>64</sup> When resisters' demands bring up core issues that are central to the ruler's justification for power,<sup>65</sup> repression is more likely.<sup>66</sup>

Most literature assumes that authoritarian leaders are rational actors who seek to continue to hold on to their position of power above all else.<sup>67</sup> At times, however, leaders may choose to relinquish power. Yukawa et al. argue that this is particularly likely if leaders can go into exile and fear coup attempts or personal harm.<sup>68</sup> Rational decision making in authoritarian regimes is also hindered by the incomplete information that is available to the leader, which can result in mistakes.<sup>69</sup> Overall,

60 Nepstad, 'Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring', pp. 344-45.

61 Nassif, pp. 268-70.

62 Nepstad, 'Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring', pp. 344-45.

63 Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 44.

64 Sabine C. Carey, 'The Use of Repression as a Response to Domestic Dissent', *Political Studies*, 58.1 (2010), pp. 167-86; Chenoweth, 'Trends in Nonviolent Resistance', p. 100.

65 Eda Keremoğlu, Sebastian Hellmeier, and Nils B. Weidmann, 'Thin-Skinned Leaders: Regime Legitimation, Protest Issues, and Repression in Autocracies', *Political Science Research and Methods*, 10.1 (2022), pp. 136-52 (p. 139).

66 Ibid. p. 150.

67 E.g. Shellman; Pierskalla, p. 119.

68 Yukawa and others, p. 284.

69 Pierskalla, p. 126; Daniel Treisman, 'Democracy by Mistake: How the Errors of Autocrats Trigger Transitions to Freer Government', *American Political Science Review*, 114.3 (2020), pp. 792-810, p. 804.

rationality in authoritarian regimes tends to be more constrained than it is in its democratic counterparts,<sup>70</sup> as its leaders may be surrounded by ‘yes men’<sup>71</sup> and stuck in a state of ‘authoritarian myopia’<sup>72</sup> in which they cannot accurately assess threats from society. In addition, crisis situations in particular are characterized by imperfect information and the need to act quickly,<sup>73</sup> making mistakes more likely.<sup>74</sup> Finally, ideologies and beliefs are likely to play a role in the decision whether or not to use violence against the opposition.<sup>75</sup>

Slobodan Milošević, for instance, decided to step down after the protests of OTPOR in Serbia in 2001. While it is difficult to know for sure what his reasons were, Schulte hypothesized that Milošević – calculating as he was – likely thought his interests were best served by stepping down, as he believed he would lose power anyway.<sup>76</sup> Kenneth Kaunda seems to have been less calculating. His philosophy of humanism had been a guiding principle throughout his reign; when faced with protests and the choice of clamping down violently, he decided not to. Instead, he chose to implement far-reaching changes that eventually cost him his hold on power.<sup>77</sup>

#### INTERACTION BETWEEN THE ACTORS ON THE DIFFERENT LEVELS

The international community, the elite and the authoritarian leader also interact in a myriad of ways. In order to understand when authoritarian leaders repress nonviolent resistance movements, it is important to analyse how the actors on the different levels influence each other.

The political and military elite will most likely take the potential of foreign intervention into account. International community involvement on behalf of the movement may convince troops the regime is fragile, therein inspiring defections among the military elite, while in-

70 Maartje Weerdesteijn, *The Rationality of Dictators: Towards a More Effective Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect* (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2017).

71 Gandhi and Przeworski, ‘Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats’, p. 1289.

72 Diana T. Kudaibergen, *The Kazakh Spring: Digital Activism and the Challenge to Dictatorship* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), p. 16.

73 Von Soest, p. 630.

74 Tolstrup, Seeberg, and Glavind, p. 519.

75 McLoughlin and Weerdesteijn.

76 Gregory L. Schulte, ‘Regime Change Without Military Force’, *Prism*, 4.2 (2013), pp. 45–55.

77 Stephen McLoughlin, ‘Authoritarianism, Popular Resistance and Regime Change in Zambia’, *International Criminal Law Review*, 24.4 (2024), pp. 438–61.

ternational support for the regime limits the likelihood of defections.<sup>78</sup> The elite in turn can impact the response of the international community. When a coup is presented as a 'democratic coup', other countries will be less inclined to impose costs on coup plotters.<sup>79</sup>

Authoritarian leaders will try to prevent being overthrown by 'coup proofing', which often entails imposing barriers on the ability of potential coup plotters to coordinate. This can be done, for instance, by rotating personnel, increasing specialization, and building counterforces.<sup>80</sup> Regimes may also personalize the security forces by allocating strategic positions on the basis of personal loyalty through socio-personal ties based on clan, ethnic, or family affiliation.<sup>81</sup> In doing so, the fate of the security forces may be more closely linked to that of the authoritarian leader, making them more loyal and increasingly willing to respond violently to uprisings.<sup>82</sup> Coup proofing, however, may also backfire. When some forces are disenfranchised in comparison to others, the former may become less willing to quell dissidence.<sup>83</sup> In addition, if competent officers that could pose a threat are purged from the military, the repressive forces are left with limited skill and capacity.<sup>84</sup> This form of security force personalization then increases the regime's vulnerability to outside challengers.<sup>85</sup> The choice to undertake coup proofing measures is thus likely dependent on the leader's perspective on these outside threats as well as an assessment of the impact coup proofing may have.

In addition, measures taken by the international community are likely to impact individual leaders differently. Not all authoritarian leaders are equally responsive to (dis)incentives from other countries. Not only are sanctions likely to be more effective in personalist regimes

78 Chenoweth, 'Trends in Nonviolent Resistance', p. 100; Chenoweth and Stephan, *The Role of External Support for Nonviolent Campaigns*, p. 1; Kalin, Lounsbury, and Pearson, pp. 250, 257-58; Nepstad, 'Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring', p. 340.

79 Johnson and Thyne, p. 601.

80 Ibid., p. 600; Wonjun Song, 'Dictators, Personalized Security Forces, and Coups', *International Interactions*, 48.2 (2022), pp. 204-32.

81 Chin, Song, and Wright, p. 27; Song, pp. 207-09.

82 Chin, Song, and Wright, pp. 27, 29-30, 40-41; Croissant, Kuehn, and Eschenauer, p. 179.

83 Nassif, pp. 251-55.

84 Song, pp. 205-06; Caitlin Talmadge, 'Different Threats, Different Militaries: Explaining Organizational Practices in Authoritarian Armies', *Security Studies*, 25.1 (2016), pp. 111-41.

85 Alexander Taaning Grundholm, 'Taking it Personal? Investigating Regime Personalization as an Autocratic Survival Strategy', *Democratization*, 27.5 (2020), pp. 797-815.

(compared to other non-democratic regimes), but ideological leaders also seem to be harder to influence.<sup>86</sup>

#### INTERACTION BETWEEN THE NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE MOVEMENT AND OTHER ACTORS

The actors on these different levels also interact with the nonviolent resistance movement. When a nonviolent resistance movement is repressed, the response of the international community depends on whether the regime or the dissidents more convincingly frame their actions as just and proportionate.<sup>87</sup> The odds of the resisters winning this struggle are partially determined by their methods, as nonviolent resistance movements are 70% more likely to receive diplomatic support than violent movements.<sup>88</sup> Presumably, indiscriminate, brutal repression from the regime's side is more likely to elicit action from the international community than restrained and proportionate measures.<sup>89</sup> Nonviolent resistance movements can raise the (moral) costs of repression by broadcasting it widely and placing groups deemed innocent at the forefront of the resistance. In the Philippines in 1986 this, for instance, involved priests and nuns.<sup>90</sup> In addition, nonviolent movements can lower the costs of defection by facilitating the safety of soldiers who defect.<sup>91</sup>

Military, political, economic, and religious elites are crucial to the success of nonviolent resistance movements. Nonviolent movements that directly aim at swaying military, political, and economic elites

86 Abel Escribà-Folch and Joseph Wright, 'Dealing with Tyranny: International Sanctions and the Survival of Authoritarian Rulers', *International Studies Quarterly*, 54.2 (2010), pp. 335-59; Dursun Peksen 'Autocracies and Economic Sanctions: The Divergent Impact of Authoritarian Regime Type on Sanctions Success', *Defence and Peace Economics*, 30.3 (2019), pp. 253-68; Weerdesteijn.

87 Chenoweth, 'Trends in Nonviolent Resistance'; Brian Martin, 'From Political Jiu-Jitsu to the Backfire Dynamic: How Repression Can Promote Mobilization', in *Civil Resistance: Comparative Perspectives on Nonviolent Struggle*, ed. by Kurt Schock (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. 145-67; Jonathan Sutton, Charles R. Butcher, and Isak Svensson, 'Explaining Political Jiu-Jitsu: Institution-Building and the Outcomes of Regime Violence Against Unarmed Protests', *Journal of Peace Research*, 51.5 (2014), pp. 559-73.

88 Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2011);

89 Yet, as Chiang argues, studies on civil resistance generally do not distinguish between different forms of repression (Chiang, p. 628), making it difficult to assess the impact of the type of repression on international actors.

90 Nepstad, 'Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring', pp. 337-40.

91 Ibid.

to defect have been most successful.<sup>92</sup> In addition, large protests can provide important information to political elites, which may allow them to overcome communication barriers and thus prepare for a potential coup, provided there is sufficient freedom of the press and enough information about the regime's pillars of support.<sup>93</sup>

Governments and dissidents thus act in response to, and in anticipation of, the other's behavior. When repression is used, this could either cause a backlash and increased participation in the nonviolent resistance movement, or deter dissidents from participating.<sup>94</sup> This also depends, among other things, on the framing of the repression.<sup>95</sup> Preparing for repression is essential for nonviolent resistance movements, who need to 'constantly update their information, adapt to conditions, and outmanoeuvre the adversary'<sup>96</sup> through varying strategies and tactics.<sup>97</sup> Yet, in response, regimes also learn to better repress dissent,<sup>98</sup> resulting in a cat and mouse game with an uncertain outcome.

## Belarus and Kyrgyzstan

In order to illustrate how the theoretical framework above might be used to analyse the response of authoritarian leaders to nonviolent resistance movements, we will apply it to two post-Soviet electoral authoritarian regimes. In doing so it is important to take the specific characteristics of the post-Soviet sphere, and how they translate to the framework, into account. On the macro level, post-Soviet countries are often geopolitically, economically, or militarily reliant on Russia, who, through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), has previously intervened against domestic nonviolent resistance

92 Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*; Erica Chenoweth, Andrew Hocking, and Zoe Marks, 'A Dynamic Model of Nonviolent Resistance Strategy', *PLoS ONE*, 17.7 (2022).

93 Chenoweth, Hocking, and Marks, 'A Dynamic Model of Nonviolent Resistance'; Brett Allen Casper and Scott A. Tyson, 'Popular Protest and Elite Coordination in a Coup d'état', *The Journal of Politics*, 76.2 (2014), pp. 548-64.

94 Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*; Chiang; Martin; Sutton, Butcher, and Svensson.

95 Sutton, Butcher, and Svensson.

96 Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, p. 222.

97 Sharon Erickson Nepstad, 'Towards an Agency-Centered Iterative Approach to Social Movement Repression', *Sociology Compass*, 17.5 (2023), pp. 1-12.

98 Chenoweth, 'Trends in Nonviolent Resistance'; Erica Chenoweth, 'The Future of Nonviolent Resistance', *Journal of Democracy*, 31.3 (2020), pp. 69-84.

movements.<sup>99</sup> On the meso level, the process of privatization after the fall of the USSR defined the intertwined, often informal structure of the political and economic elite.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, the police, rather than the military, tends to be the main domestic power structure in post-Soviet states.<sup>101</sup> On the micro-level, authoritarian diffusion and learning within the region over time also shapes the authoritarian leader's choices.<sup>102</sup> These post-Soviet characteristics exist in tandem with wide regional diversity, rich national histories, and diverging trajectories since the 1990s, which we will further explore in the application of our framework to the following cases.

In March 2005, president Askar Akaev of Kyrgyzstan was desperately trying to hold on to power as opposition members pushed for more competitive elections.<sup>103</sup> The opposition were angered by Akaev's habit of putting family members in key positions, which precluded opposition members from running.<sup>104</sup> After parliamentary elections, protests erupted, first in the countryside and then in the capital, causing Akaev to flee and step down from power. Some argue that the Tulip Revolution 'appears to have been little more than a short, chaotic interlude in a broader trend towards greater centralization and authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan'.<sup>105</sup> Yet while it may not have led to the end of authoritarian rule, the uprising led to the end of Akaev's reign and the question remains why he chose to let go of his hold on power.

99 As was observed in Kazakhstan in 2022, although the intervention is considered to be predominantly symbolic. Alexander Libman, Igor Davidzon, and Rhea Sagar, 'How to Intervene Symbolically: The CSTO in Kazakhstan', Chatham House, 27 June 2023, <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/06/how-intervene-symbolically-csto-kazakhstan>> [accessed 3 June 2025].

100 Alexander Kupatadze, 'Political Corruption in Eurasia: Understanding Collusion Between States, Organized Crime and Business', *Theoretical Criminology*, 19.2 (2015), pp. 198-215.

101 Erica Marat, *The Politics of Police Reform: Society Against the State in Post-Soviet Countries* (Oxford Academic, 2018).

102 Stephen Hall, 'Tracing Authoritarian Learning in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine' (unpublished Doctoral thesis, University College London, 2020); Tomila Laankina, Alexander Libman, and Anastassia Obydenkova, 'Authoritarian and Democratic Diffusion in Post-Communist Regions', *Comparative Political Studies*, 49.12 (2016), pp. 1599-1629.

103 Ivanov, p. 522; Emir Kulov, 'March 2005: Parliamentary Elections as a Catalyst of Protests', *Central Asian Survey*, 27.3-4 (2008), pp. 337-47; Mathijs Pelkmans, 'On Transition and Revolution in Kyrgyzstan', *Focaal*, 46 (2005), pp. 147-57.

104 Pelkmans, p. 151.

105 David Lewis, 'The Dynamics of Regime Change: Domestic and International Factors in the "Tulip Revolution"', *Central Asian Survey*, 3-4 (2008), pp. 265-77 (p. 265). Similar arguments are made by Lincoln A. Mitchell, 'The Color Revolutions: Successes and Limitations of Nonviolent Protest', in *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century*, ed. by Jack A. Goldstone, Leonid Grinin, and Andrey Korotayev (Springer, 2022), pp. 435-45; Henry E. Hale, 'Formal Constitutions in Informal Politics', *World Politics*, 63.4 (2011), pp. 581-617.



In 2020, the arrests of Belarusian opposition candidates, along with the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, led to broad discontent within the country.<sup>106</sup> When falsified election results were published, thousands took to the streets. The extreme violence against the protesters in the days that followed shocked the country, incentivizing nearly half a million people to join the protests.<sup>107</sup> While, as Mudrov argues, ‘the scope, spirit and intensity of these protests in August laid the grounds for expectations that Aleksandr Lukashenko would resign’, he managed to cling to power.<sup>108</sup> In the following section, we will illustrate the usefulness of the theoretical framework set out above as a heuristic tool to analyse why these authoritarian leaders chose either fight or flight.

## MACRO

As was highlighted in the theoretical framework above, when another country decides to get involved, it can either (threaten to) impose costs, or it can decide to back the regime. This decision is largely based on self-interest and is thus dependent on the strategic position of the country facing protests, as well as the risk that the protests may pose to other countries, specifically their own.

Kyrgyzstan tried to maintain good relations with Russia and the West, welcoming Russian and American military bases on their territory, thus securing a strategically important position in the region.<sup>109</sup> However, in response to the other colour revolutions and leading up to the elections, Akaev was pulling closer to Putin and announcing expansions of Russia’s military presence. In return, Russia’s troops had trained Kyrgyz forces in crowd control and the Kremlin supposedly

<sup>106</sup> Nadja Douglas, ‘Belarus: From the Old Social Contract to a New Social Identity’, *ZOIS Report*, 6 (2020); Mikhail Minakov, ‘The Protest Movements’ Opportunities and Outcomes: The Euromaidan and the Belarusian Protest-2020 Compared’, *Protest*, 1.2 (2022), pp. 272-98; Petra Stykow, ‘Making Sense of a Surprise: Perspectives on the 2020 “Belarusian Revolution”’, *Nationalities Papers*, 51.4 (2023), pp. 803-22; Lucan Way and Amelie Tolvin, ‘Why the 2020 Belarusian Protests Failed to Oust Lukashenka’, *Nationalities Papers*, 51.4 (2023), pp. 787-802.

<sup>107</sup> Olga Onuch, Gwendolyn Sasse, and Sébastien Michiels, ‘Flowers, Tractors and Telegram: Who are the Protesters in Belarus? A Survey Based Assessment of Anti-Lukashenko Protest Participants’, *Nationalities Papers*, 51.4 (2023), pp. 744-69.

<sup>108</sup> Mudrov, p. 109.

<sup>109</sup> Eugene Huskey, ‘Foreign Policy in a Vulnerable State: Kyrgyzstan as Military Entrepot Between the Great Powers’, *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 6.4. (2008), pp. 5-18 (p. 11).

advised Akaev's on faking elections.<sup>110</sup> Yet, in 2005, Russia had limited capacity and political will to intervene, only offering Akaev a safe haven in Russia while at the same time recognizing the new interim regime.<sup>111</sup>

The influence of the European Union (EU) and United States (US) on the Tulip Revolution was indirect. Western assistance had been essential in creating and training thousands of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Kyrgyzstan<sup>112</sup> and many prominent opposition politicians were supported by the US.<sup>113</sup> Independent media, funded by the international community, broadcast the falsification of the elections, but its reach mostly did not extend beyond the capital.<sup>114</sup> Although Akaev himself claims that 'it was the outside factor, the West, of course, and first and foremost the USA',<sup>115</sup> most scholars agree that NGOs and the West remained passive and predominantly reactive, as the revolution was more locally-led.<sup>116</sup>

Belarus is likewise an important regional player, in particular for Russia.<sup>117</sup> Although relations between Lukashenko and Putin were tense before the 2020 elections, Russia started to signal support for Lukashenko's regime after the first week of protests by offering public congratulations on his re-election, replacing Belarusian reporters with Russian anchors, and offering loans and military consignments.<sup>118</sup> The belated support showed, as Leukavets argued, 'that the Belarusian regime is vulnerable and fully dependent on Russia's support for

110 Martha Brill Olcott, 'Lessons of the Tulip Revolution', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 April 2005, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2005/04/lessons-of-the-tulip-revolution?lang=en>> [accessed 3 June 2025].

111 Ivanov, p. 527; Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese, 'What Happened to the Colour Revolutions? Authoritarian Responses from Former Soviet Space', *Journal of International and Area Studies*, 17.2 (2010), pp. 31-51; Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese 'American Boots and Russian Vodka: External Factors in the Colour Revolutions of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan', *Totalitarismus und Demokratie*, 5.1 (2008), pp. 87-113 (p. 110).

112 Juraev, p. 256; Ivanov, p. 523.

113 Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'Roses and Tulips: Dynamics of Regime Change in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 25.2-3 (2009), pp. 199-227 (p. 214.)

114 Lewis, p. 269; Ivanov, p. 523.

115 Ó Beacháin, p. 213.

116 Lewis, p. 270; Ó Beacháin, p. 216; Radnitz, p. 138; Azamat Temirkulov, 'Informal Actors and Institutions in Mobilization: The Periphery in the "Tulip Revolution"', *Central Asian Survey*, 27.3-4 (2010), pp. 317-35.

117 Von Soest, p. 630.

118 Way and Tolvin, p. 789; Alla Leukavets, 'Crisis in Belarus: Main Phases and the Role of Russia, the European Union and the United States', *Kennan Cable*, 74 (January 2022).

ensuring its survival'.<sup>119</sup> Eventually, Putin threw his weight behind Lukashenko and urged other states to stay out of it.<sup>120</sup>

Western support for the Belarusian nonviolent resistance movement was late and ineffective.<sup>121</sup> The response of the EU and USA entailed asset freezes and entry bans for specific individuals, with sectoral sanctions only being introduced in mid-2021.<sup>122</sup> A clash between EU auditing rules and Belarusian regulations on registering civil society organizations also made it nearly impossible for the EU to offer funds in support of the resistance movement.<sup>123</sup> The USA was initially preoccupied by its own elections, so by the time aid was offered in December 2020 most of the opposition had already fled Belarus and the external support predominantly aided those in exile.<sup>124</sup>

## MESO

The support and resources of military, political, and religious elites are important to quell dissidence, but when elites become too strong authoritarian leaders risk an impending coup. In Kyrgyzstan, dissident elites have been credited with playing an important role in furthering the Tulip revolution,<sup>125</sup> while in Belarus the elite continued to support Lukashenko.<sup>126</sup> Although the military is typically instrumental in the 'endgame', Kyrgyzstan<sup>127</sup> and Belarus,<sup>128</sup> like other post-Soviet states, traditionally rely more on police forces and internal troops to 'control the people and suppress any rebellion'.<sup>129</sup>

119 Alla Leukavets, 'Russia's Game in Belarus: 2020 Presidential Elections as a Checkmate for Lukashenko?', *New Perspectives*, 29.1 (2021), pp. 90-101.

120 Kalin, Lounsbery, and Pearson, 'Major Power Politics', pp. 241-42.

121 Leukavets, 'Crisis in Belarus', p. 2; Mudrov, p. 114.

122 Giselle Bosse, 'Authoritarian Consolidation in Belarus: What Role for the EU?', *European View*, 20.2 (2021), pp. 201-10; Leukavets, 'Crisis in Belarus', p. 2; Minakov, p. 289.

123 Bosse, p. 205.

124 Ibid.; Leukavets, 'Crisis in Belarus', p. 5.

125 Although the agency of the nonviolent resisters should not be underestimated, as argued by Arzuu Sheranova and Marat Uraimov, 'The Declining Role of Political Elites in Revolutions in Post-Communist Eurasia: The October Revolution in Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Affairs*, 10.2 (2023), pp. 183-208.

126 Stykow, p. 808.

127 Bekchoro Aliiaskarov, 'Police Repression and Trauma in Light of the Revolutions in Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Affairs*, 10.2 (2023), pp. 157-82.

128 Nadja Douglas, 'Belarus: "Securitization" of State Politics and the Impact on State Society Relations', 51.4 (2023), *Nationalities Papers*, pp. 855-74 (p. 866).

129 Aliiaskarov, p. 161.

In Kyrgyzstan, low salaries, loss of power, and blame for the escalation and deaths during the Aksy protests of 2002 diminished the loyalty of the police to the regime.<sup>130</sup> As a result, the usually quite controlled police became 'extremely reluctant to use force against protestors'.<sup>131</sup> By 2005, the police were wholly unequipped to face the masses and were 'certainly not motivated to risk their lives in a confrontation'.<sup>132</sup> In addition, many officers shared the grievances of the protestors and saw themselves as being from the same community.<sup>133</sup> It is unclear whether the police were under orders not to use lethal violence or were lacking orders completely,<sup>134</sup> but when asked about orders to use violence, the head of Kyrgyzstan's Internal Affairs Ministry even said, 'No. Moreover, if I am given an order to do so, I shall go over to the demonstrator's side'.<sup>135</sup>

As for the political elite, alternative political parties functioned relatively well in Kyrgyzstan, comparative to the region.<sup>136</sup> Spoils were common within Kyrgyz politics and the system was structured around patronage networks and informal ties.<sup>137</sup> Akaev's habit of predominantly sharing the few accessible spoils with his own family and other Northern politicians frustrated the political elite.<sup>138</sup> By 2004, opposition started to loosely unify through the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, which brought together many influential politicians from both the North and the South, who later mobilized their constituencies in the revolution.<sup>139</sup> Yet lack of a clear structure and organization within the political elite led many to argue that 'power was not seized by opposition politicians but handed to them on a plate by mob action'.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., pp. 161-63; Lewis, p. 268.

<sup>131</sup> Lewis, p. 268; Marat, p. 4.

<sup>132</sup> Aliiaskarov, p. 164; Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese, 'American Boots and Russian Vodka', p. 109.

<sup>133</sup> Aliiaskarov, pp. 169-70.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., pp. 174 and 176.

<sup>135</sup> Ó Beacháin and Polese, 'American Books and Russian Vodka', p. 109.

<sup>136</sup> Theodor Tudoroiu, 'Rose, Orange, and Tulip: The Failed Post-Soviet Revolutions', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 40.3 (2007), pp. 315-42 (p. 332); Ivanov, p. 524.

<sup>137</sup> Viktoria Akchurina, 'Kyrgyzstan and Intermingling of Elites: From a State of Enlightenment to a Shadow State', in *Political Regimes and Neopatrimonialism in Central Asia: A Sociology of Power Perspective*, ed. by Ferran Izquierdo-Brichs and Francesc Serra-Massansalvador (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 295-322; Radnitz, p. 137; Ó Beacháin, p. 211; Juraev, p. 259.

<sup>138</sup> Ivanov, p. 520; Tudoroiu, p. 332.

<sup>139</sup> Alisher Khamidov, 'Kyrgyzstan's Revolutionary Youth: Between State and Opposition', *SAIS Review*, 14.2 (2006), pp. 85-93; Tudoroiu, p. 332; Scott Radnitz, 'The Color of Money: Privatization, Economic Dispersion, and the Post-Soviet "Revolutions"', *Comparative Politics*, (2010), pp. 127-46.

<sup>140</sup> Ó Beacháin and Polese, 'What Happened to the Color Revolutions?', p. 41.

In the words of opposition candidate Roza Otunbayeva, ‘Those of us in the opposition tried to lead this uprising, but we were often left in its wake’.<sup>141</sup>

The business elite became similarly frustrated with the corruption and state interference under Akaev’s rule.<sup>142</sup> Therefore, as Radnitz argues, ‘once large crowds had amassed, otherwise ambivalent business and political elites began to bandwagon with the opposition’.<sup>143</sup> Many (licit and illicit) Kyrgyz businessmen hoped to secure legislative seats if the revolution succeeded<sup>144</sup> and thus financially supported the protests, even sending protesters to Bishkek by bus.<sup>145</sup> The role of religion was limited, serving more as a tool than an independent actor, with the Southern political opposition often employing religious rhetoric to mobilize against the more secular Akaev,<sup>146</sup> while being framed as religious radicals and extremists by the regime and state media.<sup>147</sup>

In Belarus, the survival of the security forces and the regime were intertwined.<sup>148</sup> Lukashenko prepared a ‘wartime cabinet’ ahead of the elections, and by the summer of 2020 most of the important government positions were given to security officers.<sup>149</sup> Lukashenko could appoint and dismiss ministers and the high command of the security forces at will<sup>150</sup> and he used this power to remove relatively liberal political elites that could potentially form a threat to his power.<sup>151</sup> Those that subsequently showed sympathy to the protesters were immediately fired, inspiring nearly all senior officials to remain loyal to Lukashenko.<sup>152</sup> In

141 Eugene Huskey, ‘Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution: Interview with Roza Otunbayeva’, *Demokratizatsiya*, 13.4 (2005), pp. 483–89 (p. 487).

142 International Crisis Group, ‘Political Transition in Kyrgyzstan: Problems and Prospects’, *Asia Report*, 81 (2004), p. 12; Akchurina, p. 302.

143 Radnitz, p. 138.

144 Ó Beacháin, p. 212; Alexander Kupatadze, ‘Organized Crime Before and After the Tulip Revolution: The Changing Dynamics of Upperworld–Underworld Networks’, *Central Asian Survey*, 27.3–4 (2008), pp. 279–99.

145 Radnitz, p. 138.

146 Ibid, p. 15.

147 Pelkmans.

148 David R. Marples, ‘Changing Belarus’, *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 63.3–4 (2021), pp. 278–95.

149 Minakov; Artyom Shraibman, ‘Belarus Reshuffle Produces “Wartime Cabinet”’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 12 May 2020, <<https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/82063>> [accessed 3 June 2025].

150 Way and Tolvin, p. 793.

151 Shraibman.

152 ‘The Protest movement in Belarus: Resistance and Repression’, *Strategic Comments*, 27.2 (2021), pp. i–iii.

addition, members of the Belarusian security services generally enjoy a multitude of privileges within society, which made them reluctant to defect.<sup>153</sup> While some defections did occur,<sup>154</sup> those who remained in the security services seemed to be sufficiently well prepared<sup>155</sup> and willing to violently repress the resistance movement.

Government control over the Belarusian economy continued to limit the independent power of the economic elite.<sup>156</sup> It was common for the government to impose sanctions on the economic elite, who made up about a fifth of the prison population in the mid-2000s.<sup>157</sup> In 2020, two of the opposition candidates, Viktor Babaryko and Valery Tsepkalo, the former head of the Belgazprombank and the Belarus High Technologies Park, respectively, could be considered part of the economic elite. Their positions probably facilitated the funding of their presidential campaigns, but Babaryko was arrested in May 2020 and Tsepkalo was forced to flee the country.<sup>158</sup> Businesses supporting the opposition were similarly prosecuted and fined,<sup>159</sup> further diminishing the role the economic elite could have played.

Finally, religion played an even smaller role, as Belarusians generally do not consider the opinions of religious leaders important during social crises<sup>160</sup> and Lukashenko warned the churches not to become involved in the protests.<sup>161</sup> Several churches did offer refuge from violence during the protests and called for prayers for peace,<sup>162</sup> but their impact remained limited.

153 Douglas, 'Belarus: "Securitization"'.  
 154 Matthew Luxmoore, 'Exiled Defectors From Belarus's Law Enforcement Are Now Holding Their Ex-Colleagues To Account', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 November 2020, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/exiled-defectors-belarus-police-holding-ex-colleagues-to-account/30976835.html>> [accessed 3 June 2025].

155 Douglas, 'Belarus: "Securitization"', p. 860.  
 156 Way and Tolvin, p. 795.  
 157 Ibid.  
 158 Stykow, p. 810.  
 159 Way and Tolvin, p. 795.

160 Regina Elsner, 'Praying Instead of Protesting? The Belarusian Churches and Political Protest After the 2020 Presidential Election', *Nationalities Papers*, 51.4 (2023), pp. 770-86.

161 Ibid, p. 776.

162 Ibid, p. 777.

## MICRO

Generally, the leader's response to nonviolent resistance movements tends to be determined by their assessment of the threat, their pre-existing fear of a coup, the option of a safe haven, and their access to reliable information to prevent making 'mistakes'. This was no different for Akaev and Lukashenko. However, there were stark discrepancies between the rule of the two post-Soviet presidents. Akaev, a former academic, chose to present Kyrgyzstan as Central Asia's democratic alternative, arguing that 'living free can bring incredible possibilities' but 'is born under stormy conditions and can be consolidated only with great difficulty among civil discord'.<sup>163</sup> Lukashenko, popularized through his anti-corruption committee, consolidated his rule around the purging of other officials<sup>164</sup> and strengthening ties with Russia.<sup>165</sup> These differing origins partially explain the variations in coercive capacity and military elites within the two countries, predetermining their responses to the revolutions.

Regardless of his earlier democratic posturing, Akaev openly criticized what he called 'foreign funded revolutions' in 2004 and warned that such events in Kyrgyzstan would be detrimental to the people's interests.<sup>166</sup> He narrowed his patronage base, marginalized regional elites, squandered political opportunities, openly sabotaged the political opposition, and inefficiently attempted media shutdowns, all of which made him lose legitimacy.<sup>167</sup> According to Schatz, 'Akaev consistently made leadership decisions that undermined his ability to shore up his rule'.<sup>168</sup> Overall, his behavior gives the impression that he did understand the threat of a revolution, but had limited means and know-how to actually intervene.

After losing control of the south of the country in mid-March 2005, Akaev still muddled through and swore in a new parliament.<sup>169</sup> However, once the protests reached his White House, to quote Radnitz,

163 Askar Akaev, 'Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Democratic Alternative', *Demokratizatsiya*, 2.1 (1994), pp. 9-25.

164 Stephan Hall, 'The End of Adaptive Authoritarianism in Belarus?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 75.1 (2023), pp. 1-25.

165 Marples, p. 282.

166 Ó Beacháin and Polese, 'American Boots and Russian Vodka', p. 106.

167 Ibid.

168 Edward Schatz, 'The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit: Agenda-Setting Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan', *Comparative Politics*, 41.2 (2009), 203-222, p. 217.

169 Olcott.

‘Akaev was left to defend his office with several hundred plain-clothed mercenaries, who were quickly overpowered by the throngs in the square’.<sup>170</sup> Akaev thus quickly fled, albeit without public resignation, likely because it gave him bargaining power to procure security guarantees for himself and his family.<sup>171</sup>

It is generally argued that Lukashenko made a multitude of mistakes in handling the 2020 elections.<sup>172</sup> He greatly underestimated the threat that Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya could pose as an alternative presidential candidate, especially after the arrests of the other candidates incited nationwide anger.<sup>173</sup> Similarly, he underestimated the extent to which the high intensity repression of the initial protests could backfire and incite many more Belarusians to take to the streets.<sup>174</sup> It is possible that Lukashenko was acting on limited information. According to Hall, ‘Lukashenko’s inner circle was increasingly withholding information from him, and it is likely he was unaware of these societal changes’.<sup>175</sup> In addition, there used to be an Information Analytical Centre in Belarus, which tested citizen dissatisfaction with proposed legislation, but this was disbanded sometime around 2015,<sup>176</sup> making societal responses more difficult to gauge.

Lukashenko, however, kept up appearances. To quote Stykow, ‘Even seemingly bizarre actions, such as appearing before a squad of riot police officers with an automatic weapon, were part of an “inventive political spectacle” that conveyed his determination to remain in power and to evoke the perception of the absence of alternatives’.<sup>177</sup> By stating openly and regularly that he would not be ousted, Lukashenko guaranteed many quickly lost hope that he could be.

170 Radnitz, ‘The Color of Money’, p. 138.

171 Ivanov, p. 523; Radnitz, ‘The Color of Money’, p. 137; Olcott.

172 Stykow, p. 810.

173 Ibid; Lucan A. Way, ‘Belarus Uprising: How a Dictator Became Vulnerable’, *Journal of Democracy*, 31.4 (2020), pp. 17-27.

174 Ibid, p. 24; Stykow, p. 813.

175 Hall, ‘The End of Adaptive Authoritarianism in Belarus’, p. 8.

176 Ibid.

177 Stykow, p. 816.



## INTERACTION

The previously described process is not static; the international community, elites, leaders, and nonviolent resistance movements also interact with each other. In Kyrgyzstan, Akaev tried to blame the social unrest on international actors, stating that ‘our homegrown provocateurs now have skilled coaches who have learned how to use provocations [...] trying to pitch tents and infect people with the yellow plague [...] I want to call on the entire nation to counter the exporters of revolution and the provocateurs’, but his words fell on deaf ears.<sup>178</sup> The widespread protests signaled the opportunity for political change to the national political elite.<sup>179</sup> To quote Roza Otunbayeva, ‘the people passed us by. They decided to act, and we only appeared on the scene later’.<sup>180</sup> More local, traditional elites, on the other hand, are credited with inciting the people to resist and providing resources for the movement.<sup>181</sup> Initial efforts by Akaev to coup proof by firing Bakaev after Aksy only further angered the Southern elite, who then mobilized their constituencies.<sup>182</sup> With the similarly aggrieved police unwilling to act, the quick fall of Akaev’s regime reportedly even took the dissidents by surprise.<sup>183</sup> The internationally funded democratic foundation, the existence of alternative elites, the lack of loyalty to Akaev, and the anger of the people were thus sufficiently aligned to facilitate this type of revolt.

In Belarus, these ambitions were less aligned. While Akaev’s efforts to frame the protests as the acts of foreign agents or the West were largely unsuccessful, Lukashenko’s anti-West rhetoric managed to sow discord, with European and American sanctions becoming a highly polarizing subject in Belarus.<sup>184</sup> Belarusian protest supporters also had limited faith that sanctions could force Lukashenko’s hand.<sup>185</sup> After all, Lukashenko faced threats to his rule in 1995, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2010, and 2017 and survived them all, serving as a success story for authoritarian learning.<sup>186</sup> Once it became clear in 2020 that Russia

178 Ó Beacháin and Polese, ‘American Boots and Russian Vodka’, p. 106.

179 Ó Beacháin and Polese, ‘What Happened to the Color Revolutions?’, p. 41.

180 Huskey 2005, p. 485.

181 Temirkulov, p. 319.

182 Ó Beacháin, p. 221.

183 Pelkmans, p. 147.

184 Anton Radnianskou, ‘How Sanctions Influence the Belarusian Regions: A Blow to Employment and Budgets, Increased Social Polarization’, *Research Paper*, (Center for New Ideas, 2021), pp. 1–51.

185 Ibid.

186 Hall, 2020.

supported Lukashenko, the elites saw that the window of opportunity was lost and remained unified.<sup>187</sup> Lukashenko's efforts to coup proof the opposition did aggrieve the population and backfired into the significant resistance movement, but his decade-long process of sustaining loyalty among the elite proved resilient.<sup>188</sup> Although the repression was widely regarded as brutal,<sup>189</sup> the sanctions could also be construed as backfiring, and Lukashenko never seemed to waiver nor consider exile.

### COMPARING FIGHTS AND FLIGHTS

In comparing the two case studies, important differences between the two countries become apparent on the macro, meso, and micro levels. On the macro level, in Kyrgyzstan the groundwork for strong opposition and alternative elites was built through Western support, while both the West and Russia remained passive during the revolution. The opposite was true for Belarus, where Russia ultimately threw its weight behind Lukashenko while Western sanctions were ineffective. These developments on the macro level subsequently trickled down to the meso level. Russia's support for Belarus convinced the elite that enough resources were available to weather the storm, allowing for widespread repression. And while this did initially backfire as more people took to the streets, violent repression by a loyal security apparatus ultimately prevailed. There was less loyalty among the deprived and demonized police forces that faced the resistance movement in Kyrgyzstan, forcing Akaev to flee to Russia. On the micro level, both leaders made a multitude of political mistakes and miscalculations, but ultimately Lukashenko's will and capacity to repress proved sufficient for him to stay in power.

Additionally, some contextual factors, including the passage of time, also interact with these observed differences. In the post-Soviet context, Russia dominates the international relations of most post-Soviet countries. However, Russia's positioning towards its 'backyard' has

187 'The Protest Movement in Belarus: Resistance and Repression'.

188 Artyom Shraibman, *The House that Lukashenko Built: The Foundation, Evolution and Future of the Belarusian Regime* (Moscow: The Carnegie Moscow Center and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018).

189 Stykow, p. 812.

not remained constant between 2005 and 2020<sup>190</sup>, which, outside of its different ties to Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, may also have impacted the varying responses. In addition, throughout the last decade, meso level elite relations were reshaped in the process of continued privatization. The threat that Barbaryko and Tsepkalo, as relatively independent elite oppositional candidates, could pose to Lukashenko's rule highlighted this change. Time also facilitated Lukashenko's process of authoritarian learning, which Akaev simply had less off.

## Conclusion

When authoritarian leaders are faced with nonviolent resistance movements that want to oust them, they can either fight or flee. As repression is costly, an authoritarian leader will generally only use it to counter nonviolent resistance movements if he perceives this to be absolutely necessary. We argue that this decision is based on the assessment of various factors, from the macro to the micro level, that impact the leader's resources and constraints. Other countries, as well as regional and international organizations, can impose costs or provide resources. The military, political, and religious elite can be co-opted to ensure loyalty or at least passive approval. The authoritarian leader will then have to decide whether he will use repression or try to increase his legitimacy instead. This decision is made based on imperfect information, as well as personal beliefs.

These factors together offer a difficult assessment for an authoritarian leader, one which the nonviolent resistance movement can try to influence. By appealing to international sympathies, signaling potential power change to the elites, and effectively employing responsive strategies, nonviolent resistance movements can sway the odds in their favor. As we illustrated in the case of Belarus, this can be incredibly difficult, but as illustrated in the case of Kyrgyzstan, it is possible.

In the comparative case study, we observed that, for Belarus, Russia's support was important to assure Lukashenko's regime of sufficient resources, which was needed to maintain the loyalty of his elite. In Kyrgyzstan, the loyalty of the police in particular had already been tarnished and external support was not forthcoming. The mistakes each

190 David R. Cameron and Mitchell A. Orenstein, 'Post-Soviet Authoritarianism: The Influence of Russia in Its 'Near Abroad', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 28.1 (2012), pp. 1-44.

of the individual leaders then made were detrimental to Akaev but not Lukashenko, who fought his way through the upheaval.

The comparative case study illustrates that the ‘authoritarian response to nonviolent resistance framework’ allows scholars to systematically analyse which theoretically relevant factors were influential in shaping the decision-making process of an authoritarian leader and his regime. The framework is built on a large body of knowledge stemming from different disciplines including, but not limited to, political science, international relations, and nonviolent resistance studies that encompass in-depth case studies as well as large N-studies. As such, while the ‘authoritarian response to nonviolent resistance framework’ is likely to be more broadly applicable, the two cases outlined above are not representative of all electoral authoritarian regimes. Rather, they illustrate how our framework aids the systematic analysis of the different factors that are most influential in the decision to use repression against nonviolent resistance movements.

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**Maartje Weerdesteijn** is an assistant professor at the Department of Criminology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, a board member of the Peace and Conflict Studies Center, and a researcher at the Center for International Criminal Justice.

**Willemijn Born** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Criminology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and a researcher at the Peace and Conflict Studies Center and the Center for International Criminal Justice.